

**Honeymoon**  
*and other stories*

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For my parents

“All discarded lovers should be given a second chance, but with somebody else.”

-Mae West

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## *Honeymoon*

Valerie comes home from the grocery store and finds the family of four on the sidewalk outside her apartment. It's raining, and they are hunched under the awning. She shoulders her tote bag, full of zucchini and onions and potato chips, and they look at her expectantly.

"Hello," says Valerie. "Can I help you?"

The wife steps forward and shakes Valerie's hand.

"Hello," she says. "We're new in town."

Valerie looks from the wife to the husband, to the kids, all in jeans, all carrying frayed backpacks. They watch her. Their faces are worn and their shoes are damp. Valerie, being a twenty-eight-year-old young professional living in Los Angeles, has not been expecting a family of four anytime soon. But they look tired. She has plenty of space and she's not using it.

"Come in," she says. "Out of the rain."

"Are you sure?" says the husband. "That would be so kind."

"Absolutely," says Valerie. "It's the least I can do."

In the apartment, Valerie makes coffee. They sit at her kitchen table and stare at their feet.

"Would anyone like coffee?" asks Valerie, pulling a French press from the cupboard.

The husband looks at the wife, who looks at the children, who are staring at the 52-inch television in the living room.

"I think we're okay," says the husband.

The parents try to keep the kids in their seats, but the kids are restless and are soon running around the apartment. Valerie prepares her coffee and keeps one eye on the children. They stumble into the ottoman and jam buttons on the TV remote.

"We're sorry," says the wife. "They've had a long day. We got caught in the rain."

"That's bad luck," says Valerie. "Rain in L.A."

"Just got in on the bus from Bakersfield today," says the husband, picking at his nails.

"We were living with my sister, but then she kicked us out."

"She didn't kick us out," says the wife, shooting a look at her husband. "She forgot her hospitality."

"And what are you doing in L.A.?" asks Valerie.

“Oh, just looking for a place to raise our kids,” says the wife, looking fondly at her children, who are wrestling on the carpet.

Valerie offers them food. Soon the family is gathered around her dinner table in their rolled-up sleeves, jaws pumping as they eat kale salad and smoked salmon.

“Where do you work?” asks the husband.

“At a distribution company,” says Valerie. “Basically we buy films and scripts and then make sure they make it onto theater screens.”

“Very interesting,” says the husband, nodding.

“Dad hasn’t had a job in six years,” says the girl.

The father gives his daughter a reproachful look.

“You have work to do,” he says to Valerie. “Of course. We understand. We’ll just digest for a bit and plan our next move.”

Valerie retreats to her bedroom and locks her door. She gets through a couple scripts, annotating them. None of them are very good.

After a few hours, she sneaks back into the kitchen and discovers the children passed out on the living room floor. The husband and wife are sitting at the kitchen table, a worn map of Los Angeles on the table between them.

“Hi guys,” says Valerie. “Everything ok?”

“Actually,” says the husband. “We’re pretty tired.”

“The kids are beat,” explains the wife.

Valerie looks at the children, curled in sleep, and can’t imagine waking them up and putting them out.

“You can sleep here,” says Valerie. “There’s a pullout bed.”

“Really?” says the husband. “That would be so kind of you. Just for tonight. We’ll have to find an affordable hotel tomorrow.”

“No problem,” says Valerie.

Valerie collects spare linens from the closet and assembles the pullout bed. The husband and wife scoop up the kids and lay them in the bed, then climb in beside them.

“Goodnight,” says Valerie, turning off the living room light.

She goes to sleep in her jeans.

\*

Her boss tries to be accommodating.

“I try to be accommodating,” he says. “You know that.”

“Of course I do,” says Valerie. “I’m so grateful.”

“Just have it on my desk by three, okay?”

“You got it!” says Valerie, halfway out the door, eager to please her boss, the man who gives her scarves at company holiday parties, and who remembers birthdays with above-average accuracy. Mark Yannis is a premier executive at Slumberland, one of the top horror distributors in North American markets. Its titles are regarded by critics and fans alike as innovative, challenging and scary. Much of this is due to Mark Yannis. Mark Yannis is notorious in the industry – he can sniff out weaknesses of a script. He knows when people are bullshitting. When they are trying to pass off mediocrity as The Next Big Thing. Valerie thinks that it’s strange that Mark Yannis never watches movies.

Then again, maybe it isn’t.

Valerie makes her way back to her desk, a partitioned cubicle that she shares with her coworker Jared. Jared looks at Valerie’s breasts at least once per day. He is also trying to beat



Valerie out of a job. Mark Yannis is planning on switching companies in the next month. Only one of them will be able to replace him as head of acquisitions.

Valerie regrets letting in the family the night before. The distraction of hosting them kept her from her work and set her behind. She can't afford to make mistakes. When she gets home this evening, she will throw the linens in the washing machine and load the dishwasher and clean up. Then she will work.

Valerie sits at her desk and rubs her eyes.

"He asked you for that report two days ago," says Jared, leaning over her cubicle wall.

"I've just been behind," says Valerie, typing and typing.

"Don't stay behind," says Jared. "I like working next to you."

The afternoon slips by and Valerie takes trip after trip to the staff room, grabbing handfuls of M&Ms and almonds. She has three cups of coffee, then transitions to tea.

\*

When Valerie gets home, the family is still in her apartment.

The wife looks at her apologetically.

"We had trouble finding a place," she says. "We'll be gone tomorrow."

Valerie is too tired to complain, and, besides, she has work to do. The kids run around her feet as she brews a pot of tea. They have been painting on her walls.

"It's not paint, exactly," says the father. "Mostly ketchup."

Valerie apologizes for not sealing her condiments better.

"It's okay," says the mother, handing Valerie the newly drained ketchup bottle. "Maybe put a childproof cap on. Next time."

Valerie spends an hour going through her refrigerator, testing the firmness of jar lids, the pliability of her celery. She wraps her onions in duct tape to prevent easy peeling. She drizzles Krazy Glue on each shelf and holds each item in place until she is certain her groceries will withstand the children. Then she moves through the rest of the house: the bedroom, the bathroom, the closet. She has read somewhere that closets are the most dangerous places for children, because of the sharp trinkets and knick knacks.

Valerie works for an hour, reading a handful of bland scripts. It's still early. She peeks into the living room and sees the family watching a movie on her TV. It's *Ghoul School*, one of Slumberland's early hits. Valerie keeps every Slumberland title in a wooden crate next to her ottoman. *Ghoul School* is a zombie teen sex comedy that was pitched to Mark Yannis as *American Pie* meets *The Thing*. He bought the rights off the pitch alone.

Valerie washes her hands and stands, leaning in the doorway, watching the movie over their shoulders. The children wince when the protagonist has his tongue cut out.

The aluminum popcorn bowl has long been emptied; the children are picking at unpopped kernels, cracking them between their teeth, sucking out the chewy cores with a loud smack.

\*

"I don't understand," says Mark Yannis. "They've been *living* there?"

"For a week," says Valerie. They are sitting in Mark Yannis's office.

"And you've asked them to leave?"

"A couple times," says Valerie. "But then I feel guilty. You should see the kids. I can't kick them out."

"Then call the police," says Mark Yannis.

“I don’t think I could do that to them,” says Valerie. “It’s not that bad, really. Just sometimes it gets tiring.”

“You have to stand up for yourself,” says Mark Yannis. “People will just walk over you in this life.”

“I guess,” says Valerie.

Mark Yannis reaches into his desk and hands Valerie a stack of annotated scripts.

“I’m interested in these,” he says. “They’re all from the same writer. I think one or two could really be good.”

Mark Yannis asks to have Valerie’s notes in an hour.

Back at her desk, Valerie tries to read. She is falling asleep. Sleep has been hard to come by with a house full of guests.

Her phone rings. It’s the husband.

“Hi Valerie,” he says. “I was wondering if you were planning on doing dinner tonight?”

“Any chance you could?” asks Valerie. “I’m very busy today.”

“I understand that,” says the husband. “But, just between us, it’d be good for my wife and I to get out. Sometimes we get a little cooped up. Our marriage isn’t the strongest, you know.”

Valerie yawns and sips more coffee.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll make something quick.”

“Great,” says the husband, already hanging up. “The kids like ribs.”

\*

The kids run through the kitchen, waving Jenga pieces in the air, each describing in hoarse shouts how they would use the little wooden blocks to suffocate and kill the other. Their parents won’t be back until late.

Valerie feeds the children their ribs - they eat a half-rack apiece - and wraps the rest up in foil. She scribbles a note, offering the leftovers to the parents if they're hungry.

The fatty meat has knocked the children out. They are asleep at the table. The boy has a rib bone in his left hand and a Jenga block in his right. The girl untied her hair midway through the meal and her lower curls are soaked in sauce. Valerie picks each one up and tucks them into their corner nests, on the far wall of the living room, below the work desk she had purchased when Slumberland first mailed her a job offer.

Her mother had insisted on the desk.

"It sends the right message," she said, holding the door open as Valerie and her father struggled to lift the desk over the doorframe.

The desk slipped neatly into the corner. Valerie filled its drawers with pens and composition books.

Her father stood in the living room, marveling at the TV and the Venetian blinds and the coffee table.

"Wow," he said. "Your first real apartment."

Valerie smiled and showed them around. They gasped at her walk-in closet. They admired the width of her bed. Valerie's father could only chuckle and shake his head. But it was the desk that they kept dotting over - the sturdy wood, the substance, the realness of it all. It was real. Valerie had a job in Hollywood. She lived by herself, graduating from the roach havens of her youth, where she had split a room with three other young women, young women who (like Valerie) worked at coffee shops and auditioned for experimental theater and stood outside restaurants hoping to get noticed. But the desk - this was something different. This was the next step.

The desk is useful because of the child-sized nook underneath. The kids fit right in. Valerie tucks them in and watches as their little fists open and close, grasping at something, pulling at windpipes, closing around throats. They mumble *Kill, kill, kill* in their sleep. It's the tagline of *Ghoul School*. The tagline had been Mark Yannis's idea, and Valerie makes a mental note to tell him this story tomorrow. He will be pleased.

Valerie clears the kitchen table and struggles through a script that is an obvious pass. But it has been written by a cousin of Mark Yannis's nephew, so she tries a little harder. Eventually her head hurts. She gives it lukewarm praise and calls it a night.

Valerie is half-dreaming when a key turns in the front door and the parents stumble in. They are whispering, and Valerie listens as they remove their shoes and prepare the pullout bed in the living room. She hears the creak of footsteps. She hears the rush of the tap and the gurgle of chugged water. Then, a knock at her door.

Valerie sits up and pulls her blanket close.

"Come in," she says.

The wife shuffles in and stands by the wall. The husband stands beside her.

"Hello, Valerie," says the wife.

"Hi guys," says Valerie. "A good dinner?"

"Wonderful," says the husband. "The most delightful curry place on Pico."

"Good to hear," says Valerie. "If you're still hungry, there are ribs in the fridge."

"No, thank you," says the wife. "We're actually vegetarians now."

Valerie nods. The couple stands there, stuck to her wall. They are breathing.

"Is there anything you guys need?" Valerie asks.

The husband looks at the wife. They nudge, whispering, each prompting the other. The wife speaks first.

“Well, it’s just that tonight’s date night.”

“Seems like you guys had a great time!” says Valerie. The husband looks pained.

“We did, of course,” says the wife. “But usually date night ends with some privacy.”

“Ah,” says Valerie.

“So maybe we can sleep in here tonight? We’ve made the pullout bed for you.”

“Just tonight, of course,” says the husband.

Valerie looks at the husband and she looks at the wife and she looks at the way their fingers are touching and they are almost shaking.

Valerie gathers her pillow and alarm clock and slips by them. They smile at her.

No one except the couple has ever slept on her pullout bed. It’s thick and downy. She has no trouble falling asleep, and is only occasionally pulled out of the blackness by the sound of a giggle or gasp, the stray whispers of the lovemaking across the hall.

\*

That weekend, Valerie takes the family to the beach. The skyline of the city is hazy in the distance. The boy tries to eat sand, and the girl punches him in the face. The kids run everywhere and play games where they dismember each other and make balloon animals out of their intestines. They walk to the Santa Monica Pier and Valerie follows behind, letting the family having their time with each other. The husband and wife get in an argument, and Valerie respectfully puts earphones in.

Valerie thinks about scripts she has read and how she could make them better. She is still waiting for The Script. The Script is well-written. The Script has a knockout ending. The Script

is The Next Big Thing. But The Script also has a few structural issues, surface level damages that a young aspiring executive could pick up on and bring to Mark Yannis and secure her job forever.

In their last meeting, Mark had sounded hopeful.

“I want to give you the job, you know,” he said. “But I have to see you want it.”

“I do,” says Valerie.

“Get in the game,” he says.

“I will,” says Valerie.

“Oh and by the way – that family. Did they leave?”

“Oh yeah,” says Valerie. “Left a few days ago.”

“So bizarre,” says Mark Yannis, already dialing a call. “Good you stood up to them.”

\*

The next week, Valerie stays late at the office. She eats lunch at her desk. She starts smoking cigarettes, and when that proves too expensive, she switches to chew tobacco. She hides a little Gatorade bottle under her desk and spits into it whenever her privacy is certain. She knows dip is frowned upon in L.A. but there’s no beating that nicotine rush.

Valerie explains to the husband and wife that she will be busy this week. They have no objections to her new work schedule. She comes home at nine or ten at night and finds the remains of familial merriment - a Monopoly board, an overturned popcorn bowl, a row of freshly painted canvases drying next to the sink. The kids are usually asleep, and the parents have retired to the room. Valerie tip-toes around, picking up ice cream wrappers, washing forks and spoons. She can hear them arguing late at night. She slips into the pullout bed and leaves the next morning before anyone is awake.

On Thursday, Valerie comes home to find the wife in the kitchen, alone. There is an open suitcase on the floor and the wife is folding shirts.

“Where’s the rest of the gang?” she asks, pouring herself a glass of orange juice from the fridge.

“My husband took them to the park,” says the wife. “I needed a break.”

“I don’t blame you,” says Valerie. “This is a big week for me, too.”

“I can tell,” says the wife.

Valerie eyes the suitcase.

“What’s that for?” she asks.

“Oh,” says the wife. “I’m leaving.”

She folds a tank top and lays it on the pile.

“Where will you go?” asks Valerie, nervously picking at a nail.

“Anywhere,” she says. “I’ve just been feeling stuck.”

“Yeah,” says Valerie. “I understand that.”

“Anyway,” says the wife. “Please don’t tell my husband. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

That night, there is only silence coming from the bedroom. Valerie sits at the kitchen table, working on a report for Mark, wondering what it will be like with the wife gone, wondering how things will change, wondering if things *can* change.

She tries to imagine what it would be like to leave, but she can’t. There are so many things weighing her down, and, besides, she needs to pay the rent.

\*

The next day, Valerie turns in her report to Mark Yannis, who thanks her with a smile. Valerie knows that she has been doing well. She expects good news.



That afternoon, her boss is in a meeting, discussing a potential acquisition with a prestigious Norwegian director. The ceiling fan hums overhead. Jared whistles while he works – he’s been staying late too. He matches Valerie assignment for assignment.

Valerie can hear the conversation in Mark Yannis’s office. They are arguing through the kinks of the director’s script. It’s a well-paced vampire thriller, with a sexy electronic soundtrack and plenty of neon. They argue about the script’s length – Mark Yannis wants it cut.

Valerie is trying to concentrate when she hears a sound at the office door. It’s a grunting, and the college intern at the front desk is responding politely. There is more grunting. Then Valerie hears a yell, and the husband bursts into the office.

He’s stumbling. He’s in a greasy white t-shirt and sweatpants. And he looks around the room with a fiery look in his eye, an anger. Valerie has never seen him like this before.

“What’s going on?” she says, rising from her desk. “You shouldn’t be here.”

He spins around and sees her.

“My wife,” he says. “She left.”

Jared pokes his head out.

“Who’s this, Valerie?” he asks.

“Mind your own fucking business, Jared,” says Valerie.

“She left,” says the husband. “She left.”

Valerie stands there, in the middle of her office. More heads are popping up.

“I think you should go home,” says Valerie.

“Fuck you,” says the husband. “You knew about this, didn’t you?”

He's stumbling. Valerie tries to push him away, out of the office, onto the street, anywhere but here. He's stumbling and she pushes him and he starts crying a wounded, broken cry. She has never seen this much emotion from him.

"What is this bullshit, anyway?" he says, gesturing to the office around him. "What kind of job is this?"

"It's a real job," says Valerie, shoving him now. "It's a job."

"Oh big deal," says the husband, yelling now. "Big deal, you have a job. Big deal."

Mark Yannis opens the office door. He looks with wide eyes at the husband and his greasy shirt.

"Valerie?" she asks.

"And I'll tell you another thing," says the husband. "Fuck my kids."

"Sir," says Mark Yannis, stepping out of his office. "You need to leave."

"You need to fuck off," he says.

"Sir," says Mark Yannis.

Then the husband is swinging, his big arm a whirling mass, launching and connecting with a dull thud. Connecting with Mark Yannis's cheek.

He crumples to the floor. The husband is gasping, his hulking chest going up and down, looking around like a cornered animal. Everyone is speechless. The Norwegian director is standing in Mark Yannis's doorway, and his jaw is on the floor.

Valerie looks around. The hall is lined with Slumberland DVD sets, placed on the shelves to impress visitors.

She grabs a *Ghoul School* box set: the original and all six sequels. She hefts it. It's heavy. Then Valerie swings it, swinging hard. The box set connects with the husband's head, the weighty DVDs and the plastic liner cracking against his skull.

Then he too is down.

\*

Valerie comes home to find the house dark. The kids are sitting in front of the TV, watching YouTube videos of people falling from roller coasters.

"Ouch," they say.

"Hey guys!" says Valerie. "Good day?"

"Mhmm," says the girl. "Did you buy more chips?"

"Oh shoot," says Valerie. "My bad, guys!"

The kids roll their eyes and Valerie ruffles their hair. She puts a kettle on.

The kids are yelling from the living room, asking Valerie to come check out the latest video.

"The guy loses *both* his arms!" yells the boy.

"His girlfriend totally loses it!" yells the girl.

Valerie brings her mug into the living room and they sit on the couch, Valerie in the middle and the two kids on either side. The boy hits play on the video, and the rollercoaster starts chugging up the hill (the girl squeals with excitement) and Valerie thinks about Mark Yannis at home with a heavy ice pack on his head. She thinks about the husband, detained at the police station on assault charges. She thinks about the phone call, tomorrow morning, when Mark Yannis will let her know that Jared is receiving the promotion. She thinks about the company retreat in two weeks, when she and all the other twenty-something employees will carpool up to

Santa Cruz and share a cabin for the weekend. They will do team-building exercises. They will eat catch-of-the-day seafood and charge the company card. They will build a campfire, and make S'mores, and tell scary stories, and Jared will roll some joints, and Valerie will be there too, hunched over the fire, roasting her marshmallows.

And she thinks of the wife, wherever she is, on a bus to Milwaukee or San Diego or Tuscaloosa. She thinks of her cheek, pressed against the window, staring off into the distance or the future or whatever it is that reckless mothers see on buses to nowhere. And Valerie wonders what she's thinking of, on this long night, if her kids are with her in her thoughts or she's left them too.

Then again, it's probably none of her business.

## *Old Friends*

I'm halfway done with the Peterson yard when a sock catches in the mower. I turn it off and flip it over. I pick out bits of shredded sock from between the blades.

It's June. It's hot and there are plenty of other things a fifteen-year-old boy like me could be doing besides mowing. This yard in particular is in bad shape – the Peterson kids never pick up after themselves and I have to avoid overturned toy dump trucks and Nerf bullets. The sock I failed to avoid.

Just as I'm restarting the motor, a blue sedan pulls up to the curb. There are a lot of blue sedans in our neighborhood – suburbanites love blue sedans.

The window of the blue sedan rolls down and a woman pops her head out. It's Mrs. Gleason, whose son Richie and I used to be friends, back when you were friends with all the kids on the block because – well, just because.

I don't see much of Richie anymore.

Mrs. Gleason cranes her neck out. She flips up her sunglasses.

"Nicholas?" she calls.

I lay down the mower and give her a wave.

"Hi Mrs. Gleason," I say. "Good to see you."

"Come over here," she says. "I want to talk to you."

Of all the parents of my childhood friends, Mrs. Gleason was always my favorite. I remember summer twilights, her coming out in the yard, Richie and I breathless and supine on the trampoline, a hot tray of pierogis in her mittened hand. She never cooked – store-bought only.

I wipe the grass stains off onto my jeans and cross the yard to the car. I see my reflection in the rear passenger window – sun-dazed, blinking, my grey Carolina Hurricanes t-shirt sticky and damp on my chest.

"How much are they paying you?" she asks, eyeing the Peterson house. Nobody is home. The Petersons are on vacation in Florida.

"How much?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. "How much are *they* –" she points at the house now, her fingernail trim and unpainted – "paying *you*?"

"Oh," I say, and though my father always stresses the rudeness of talking about money, I tell her:

"Fifty dollars."

“Per week?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” she says, reaching over and unlocking the passenger door. “I’ll double it.”

I look at her. She looks at me.

“For what?” I ask.

“Get in,” she says, already starting the engine, “and we’ll talk.”

I look back at the half-mowed yard, the scraps of sock in the grass and the overturned mower.

The door of the blue sedan swings open. The interior smells of air freshener and, impossibly, store-bought pierogis.

I get in.

\*

We are seated at Waffle House, plates of hash browns and pancakes stacked between us.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“It’s very simple,” she says, cutting off a wedge of pancake and dabbing it in syrup.

“Richie has no friends. And I don’t want him in the house all day. So you’re going to be his friend.”

“I’m not sure Richie and I would get along anymore,” I say. My friends at school are the kind of guys who go down to the bridge during lunch period and take turns stapling each other’s forearms. Not Richie’s scene.

“What does he even *like* to do?” I ask. “These days?”

“He’s into architecture,” says Mrs. Gleason. “Bridges, tunnels, stuff like that.” She takes a swig of coffee. “It’s boring to me but somehow he likes it.”

It has never before occurred to me that adults shit-talk their kids with others, but now, hearing this, it makes the most perfect sense. I see Mrs. Gleason with an imaginary therapist, explaining to her that Richie is ruining her life with his weird hobbies and blocky haircut. I see my father, complaining to his work neighbor, one cubicle over, about my long hair and the staple marks on my arm and my unwillingness to get a summer job.

“You need the money, don’t you?” says Mrs. Gleason.

“Yes,” I say. “For my college fund.”

“I see,” she says. “So is that a yes?”

I could go back to the Peterson yard, I guess. I could finish mowing and head back there the next week and collect my fifty bucks. My father expects fifty dollars a week in the jar marked College Fund, although he pretty frequently grabs cash from it whenever he’s on his way out to visit his girlfriend in Greensboro.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll try it.”

She smiles.

“Well,” she says, pulling her pocketbook from her purse, “You’re doing me a favor. And Richie finally has a friend. What a surprise! You won’t regret it.” She parses out a ten-dollar bill and lays it on our check:

“I promise.”

\*

Two days later, Richie and I are playing mini-golf down by the Food Lion. Mini-golf was his idea. Richie is clumsily knocking his ball into the rotating windmill. It bounces back at him. He shakes his head.



Richie Gleason is every bit as I remember him – his blond hair is cropped high and round like a British Invasion rock star. He’s thin, too tall for his own good. His shirt hangs loose on him and I think he looks like a bird.

Big Bird, he’s called at school – when he’s called anything.

“So you really don’t like music?” I ask, trying to continue conversation as he hacks at the ball.

“No,” he says, “Not really.”

“Maybe you haven’t found the right music,” I say.

“Maybe,” he says, “But I’ve tried. My mom plays a lot of jazz. I don’t really like that, though.”

“I remember that,” I say. “The jazz.”

Richie takes another swing. This time, the ball shoots right on through the bottom of the windmill.

A double bogey.

We walk to the next hole. I am trying to keep it competitive, but Richie is hopelessly bad at golf. I figure that for a hundred dollars he at least deserves a good game.

Richie was never very good at anything. I always beat him, whether it was on Nintendo or in Scrabble or in make-believe *Lord of the Rings* quests in which I always managed to dodge invisible goblin arrows with greater skill than he.

I tee up.

“You know, Nick,” he says. “I’m really glad you came by.”

“Of course,” I say. I swing. A bum shot.

“I guess I thought we weren’t friends anymore,” he says. “I mean, you always have friends at school.”

I sink the putt.

A birdie.

“Plus you never talk to me at school,” he says, as he lines up his next shot.

“Look, Richie,” I say. “The other day I was thinking about you. How we used to be friends. So I came by. Don’t you think old friends can get back together?”

“I guess so,” he says, and swings. “I never considered it.”

A double bogey.

On the walk back to our subdivision, we pass by a used CD store. I tell Richie to wait outside and I buy him four CDs.

They’re only \$1.99 each. It’s a bargain.

\*

That night, there’s a text on my phone from Mrs. Gleason:

*Richie had fun today. He enjoys golf. Not very good though – ha. Thx again.*

Downstairs, in the college fund jar, is fifty dollars. In my wallet is fifty more. At least with the fifty wallet-dollars I can be sure that they won’t be spent on shoes for Eileen, who lives in downtown Greensboro and has had her hooks in my dad pretty much since my mom died. At the rate things are going, financially, my college fund jar will be able to support the cost of a single science textbook and maybe a frozen dorm room burrito.

If that.

I get in bed. As far as summer jobs go, I guess I’ve got it pretty good. All my school friends are off working at summer camps or babysitting or bagging groceries.

My phone buzzes again.

Mrs. Gleason:

*You there?*

I respond:

*Yes. Had fun with Richie too.*

A few minutes later, another buzz:

*Okay. Because you didn't respond. The first time. Just making sure.*

I turn off the lights and roll onto my side.

Buzz.

*Goodnite, Nick.*

\*

Per my contract with Mrs. Gleason, who has asked that I refer to her as Debra, I swing by Richie's place the next day.

She answers the door.

"Hello, Nicholas," she says, ushering me in. Her hair is in a bun.

The smell of pierogis fills the house. I follow her into the kitchen. There's a laptop on the center island.

"Richie's upstairs," she says. "But could you help me with something first?"

She smiles me over and I look at her screen. She's on a social network for parents, on a page that says *Sign Up Today!* in big letters across the top.

"I want to sign up," she explains.

"Okay," I say. "I mean it's pretty easy."

She smiles and slides the laptop over to me.

I fill in the necessary information. I hand her back the laptop and she scrolls through her new account, clicking at random. I walk her through the mechanics.

“Now I just need to add some friends,” she says, laughing thinly.

I nod and look at the stairs.

“Oh, go on up,” she says. “And here’s your money.”

She hands me an envelope. I slip it into my pocket.

Upstairs, Richie is building a bridge of popsicle sticks on his desk. There’s music on the stereo, and beside it I can see an open jewel case with a \$1.99 sticker on it.

“Very nice,” I say, and sit on his bed.

He’s hot-gluing cross ties to the top of a rail bridge. He’s into his work and I take a look around his room. It’s all the same as I remember – a boyhood room. Glued Lego sets along the dresser. A Batman poster above the bed. The old Nintendo 64 tucked in a nest of cables by the hamper. Socks everywhere.

I remember spending days and nights on the floor of this room, my elbows dug into the carpet, trying to beat a particularly difficult boss in *Ocarina of Time*.

“So what’s going on here?” I ask, nodding at the bridge. He explains. He hot glue guns a few more trestles and then tests the bridge to see how much load it can bear. The idea is to get the strongest bridge while using the fewest number of popsicle sticks.

“I see,” I say.

“Want to try?”

I do. So I try. With the music in the room and the pierogi smell I feel good. It feels like before the staple scars and calling people pussies all the time and lying about getting hand jobs to my friends because we all know we can’t talk to girls.

It feels nice.

I remove some sticks from the center of the bridge and place three weights on it. I grab a fourth.

“That’s gonna break,” whispers Richie.

“No it won’t,” I say, and I drop the last weight. It breaks.

We’ve got a second bridge built when Debra comes in with a tray of pierogis.

“Going well?” she asks, laying the tray on the bed.

“Yeah,” says Richie. “Nick’s pretty good at this bridge thing.”

“Oh?” she says. “How interesting.”

She grabs a pierogi and eats it.

“Why don’t you ask Nick what *he* likes to do?”

“Oh, Mrs. Gleason, this is fine,” I say, reaching for the tray.

“Debra,” she says.

“Yes,” I say. “Sorry. Debra.”

“I mean it, Richie,” she says. “Don’t you think you should learn from him? Learn how to be normal? And cool? Don’t you think Nick is normal?”

“Of course,” says Richie, his eyes on his feet.

“And he has lots of friends.”

“Not that many,” I say.

“But lots,” she says, giving me a look. “Richie says so. He says he sees you around school with lots of kids, girls sometimes too. Isn’t that right, Richie?”

“Yes,” he says.

“So,” says Debra, picking up the half-eaten tray, “take advantage of having a friend here. Nick can help you.”

She leaves the room, chewing and humming.

Richie stares at the floor.

“I’m fine to stay here,” I say.

“No,” he says, his voice small and quiet. “She’s right. I don’t want to do bridges anymore. Or mini-golf. I want to do what you and your other friends do.”

There is a shuffling in the hall, and I realize Debra has been listening at the door.

Buzz:

*You’re on the clock.*

Richie’s self-improvement isn’t part of my job description. But he’s looking at me with his Big Bird face and Big Bird hair and those sad, deep Big Bird eyes.

“Okay Richie,” I say. “Let’s see a real bridge.”

\*

I take Richie down to the old rail line, which used to run tobacco back when that was still a thing. It’s a bit cooler today – the wind blows high in the pines. The sky is blue and deep.

We walk down the line.

“Sorry about my mom,” he says, kicking at the gravel. “She can be a bit much.”

“I think she just wants the best for you,” I say.

“I guess,” he says.

We walk. A squirrel crosses the track and shoots up a tree.

“So, what do you and your other friends talk about?” Richie asks.

“Lots of things,” I say. “Bands. TV. Girls, mostly.”

“Hmm,” he says. “I don’t really talk to girls.”

“Yeah,” I say, laughing gently. “I’ve noticed.”

“So,” he says, “Let’s talk about girls.”

I’ve walked this rail line many times, and upon it many times I have lied. I have told my friends that I have touched girls and they have touched me. We pretty much all lie about this kind of thing, and nobody calls anybody out because the whole illusion would come crumbling down. It’s a pretty good system.

“I guess it’s hard to talk to girls when I don’t think I have anything to say,” continues Richie, his arms pulled into his t-shirt sleeves and balled up across his chest. Without arms, the bird impression is almost total.

“Here’s the thing, though,” I say. “It’s not about talking *to* girls. It’s talking *about* them.”

“What do you mean?”

“It goes like this,” I say. “Make up something distant, like a summer camp or a family vacation on the West Coast. Something people can’t verify. Then just tell a story.”

“About a girl?”

“Everybody thinks I made out with this Cuban girl in Miami. I tell them we got to second base.”

“Wow,” says Richie. “That’s really all it is?”

“I’ve never even been to Miami,” I say. “All it takes is a good story.”

“So you’ve never actually kissed a girl?”

“But officially I have.”

“Huh,” says Richie. “Just like me, then.”

The thought of Richie comparing us in his feathery head irks me but I can't dispute him on that point.

The railway rounds a bend and we are at the high old bridge that spans the river. The downtown skyscrapers are visible in the distance. The afternoon sun cuts low into our eyes and you have to squint to see them.

"A bridge!" says Richie. Looking at him, you'd think he never saw a real bridge in his whole life.

From under a pine I collect a plastic bag that my friends left here during the school year. Inside is a pack of Camels, an old Gameboy, a deck of cards and a stapler.

Buzz:

*How's it going? How's Richie doing?*

I join Richie on the bridge. I hand him the bag and he digs through it. Our feet dangle off the edge. Below is the riverbed, high and dusty from the drought. An ambulance horn punches through the summer heat.

"So you're telling me," says Richie, "that the only difference between you and me is that you lie and I don't?"

I don't answer.

"And you wear cooler clothes and grow your hair out? And you ignore me at school?"

"No, Richie, that's not the only difference," I say.

"Huh," says Richie. He leans over and looks down at the bridge. "Good design. Very clean. This thing'll probably get torn down, though. Sooner or later."



I imagine that in Richie's engineer mind, a thousand trains are passing over this bridge, railing fast and wild, and to save the bridge from collapsing he hot glues popsicle sticks all over it until it's good and sturdy and safe.

"Most bridges in the South are —"

"You want to know the difference between you and I?" I say, pulling the stapler from the bag. "I'm not fucking scared, okay?"

And, as I have done countless times before, on this bridge, in circles of jeering boys, I press the flipped-open stapler to my forearm.

I raise my fist.

I staple.

Blood runs down my arm. Richie looks at me like I'm crazy.

I hand him the stapler.

"Don't be a pussy," I say.

Richie takes the stapler and cradles it like a gun. He's pale. He has stopped swinging his feet.

He presses the stapler to his forearm.

"Do it, pussy," I say.

He staples.

Every boy I have ever passed the stapler to has kept a steely look in his eye, and wiped the blood on his jeans like it was spilled ketchup at the Sonic. Not Richie. He doesn't pretend. He yells, and tears well up in his eyes, and the whole walk home he's cradling his arm like a sacked quarterback.

He doesn't look at me, and when we get to his house he walks inside without a word.

\*

I can hardly sleep that night. It's 11:30 and my dad is still out. I sit in the living room and turn on the stereo and pop in a CD. I look at the staple wound on my arm, picking at it like a loose tooth.

The doorbell rings.

It's Debra. She's wearing a floral-print dress and her auburn hair is brushed and wavy.

"Hi Nicholas," she says, "Mind if I come in?"

I'm certain she's going to reprimand me for the whole stapler business, and I stand there dumbly, grabbing for words.

She glides past me and into the living room. I sit across from her, in my t-shirt and sweatpants, and wonder what I will say if my dad walks in.

"Richie was pretty hurt today."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me, I just thought —"

"You thought it would make him better?"

"Yes. That's what I thought."

"Well?" she asks. Her eyes are tired. "Did it do him any good?"

"I just don't think he has it in him."

Debra nods. She crosses to the stereo and flips through my dad's CDs.

"I guess I thought having you around might help," she says. "But I should have known that he's a lost cause."

"He's not a lost cause," I say. "He's just a bit different."

Debra rejoins me on the couch. She grabs a pack of cards from the coffee table and shuffles them.

“Mind if we play a game?”

I look at the door. Still no sign of my dad.

“I can pay you,” she says. “If you want.”

With shaky hands Debra reaches into her wallet and pulls out fifty dollars. She presses them towards me.

“Please,” she says. “I don’t mind paying...I know you’re busy...”

The bills shake in her hands.

“It’s okay,” I say, pushing the money back towards her. “We can play one game.”

“I appreciate it,” she says, leaving the money on the table. “You know how it gets sometimes, out here. It’s lonely in the suburbs.”

I nod and deal out cards for a game of speed. I explain the rules to Debra and then we’re off, slapping down cards, grabbing from the deck, running through a game I’ve played countless times in the school cafeteria and in friend’s basements. Here, now, playing it with my old friend’s mother – well, even here it’s a good time.

Debra sneaks in a jack and wins, throwing up her hands in victory.

“I won!” she says, laughing.

“Beginner’s luck,” I say, and shuffle again.

Over the course of our six games, I win two and Debra wins four.

“You’re good at this,” I say.

“I used to play a lot of cards. Back in college.”

She slaps down an ace and flips another card.

“That’s the thing about living in a place like this,” she says. “There’s never anyone to play cards with.”

“What about Richie?”

Debra laughs.

“He never plays. He’s so hopelessly into his little hobbies. It’s okay, you know? I know Richie’s a unique kid and I should cherish him and he’s my only son and all that stuff. But sometimes? Sometimes I wish, I don’t know, I wish I had a kid more like you.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh.

“Trust me,” I say, “I know Richie’s a little weird. But there are worse things.”

“True,” she says, flipping back her hair and pulling out a stick of gum from her purse.

“You did staple him, after all.”

The CD times out and I replace it with some jazz.

“I’m sorry about that,” I say. “You wanted him to have the authentic experience, so, there you go.”

“Yes,” she says. “I forgot how nasty that can be.”

We sit there for a while longer, finishing out our card games. Debra taps her feet to the music. My father is still nowhere to be seen but for the time being it doesn’t matter; we play and play and for the first time in a long while there’s more than one person occupying our living room.

“Well,” says Debra, collecting her things, “I suppose I ought to get home.”

I follow her to the door.

“Thank you for having me,” she says, giving me a hug. She’s still got that shakiness to her, and I wonder if she’s always like this late at night.

“Of course. It was a good time.”

“Thank you,” she says, genuinely pleased. “And feel free to come by soon. I’ll pay you the standard rate.”

“Tell Richie I’m sorry about the stapler.”

“I’m sure it’s okay,” she says. “But I’m sure he’d like to hear it from you.”

“Don’t tell Richie this, but you’re probably the more fun Gleason.”

She gives me another hug and then she is off, walking down the drive. Her car starts and the fading red taillights round the corner.

\*

I shower and steal some wine from the basement. My dad still isn’t home.

I make myself a ham sandwich and sit at the kitchen table. Our refrigerator is strictly bare-minimum; I’m talking vegetables and milk and ham and cheese.

I wish I had some pierogis.

Before going to bed, I turn off all the lights in the house and double-check that the doors are locked. As I pass by the living room something catches my eye. Something on the coffee table. Something green on the coffee table.

It’s the money.

I collect it, the fifty dollars. Fifty dollars, for a few rounds of speed and some jazz.

I start feeling nauseous so I down some more wine and shower. I climb into bed, listening to the rhythm of the ceiling fan, the fifty dollars sitting atop my dresser drawer, along with my earnings from my time with Richie.

Sometime soon I get drowsy, and as I fall asleep I think of Richie playing mini-golf, whacking the ball into the windmill, again and again, while I stand inside in the air-conditioned

lounge, having already finished my game, and Richie takes so long to finish that the employees take his club and kick him out for being so bad.

\*

The next day, I sleep in until the late afternoon. Still no car in the driveway.

I make a frozen pizza and eat it on the front porch. Then I walk over to the Peterson house. I finish mowing the yard. This takes about an hour. The bits of sock are still in the grass, and I collect them in a plastic bag. The lawn is buzzed clean.

I bike home and do some laundry. I haul my hamper downstairs and sort out the colors. I dig through the pockets of my shorts before I throw them in, pulling out spare coins and the occasional stick of gum. I reach into a pair of shorts and feel something unusual. I pull it out.

It's a small stick. One of the bridge supports from Richie's bridge.

Then I get an idea.

\*

Two hours later I'm biking over to the Gleasons', a package tucked under my arm. The sun is going down. It's windy.

The thing about model bridges is that they don't come cheap, at least if you want the good ones. The guy at the store recommended this one highly, if you have the money to go in for it.

Fortunately, I did.

Between the fifty bucks from last night, the money from my hangouts with Richie, and the couple dollars left in my college fund jar, I had enough to afford the bridge. My dad will

probably chew me out from taking money from the jar, but since he does it all the time, I don't really think he has grounds to complain.

I pull into the drive and lean my bike against the garage. I heft the package. I wipe the sweat from my eyes; biking in the summertime is a hot business.

Debra answers the door. Her eyes go wide.

"Nick! Surprised to see you."

"Hi Debra," I say.

She sees the bridge set.

"I didn't know you were coming today," she says. "I don't have any cash, but I can get some from the bank while you all are upstairs."

"That's okay," I say. "Don't worry about it."

Debra smiles and ushers me inside. There's incense burning on the coffee table and she's got some jazz on.

I drop the model bridge on the kitchen table and start opening it up.

"Oh you can bring it upstairs to him," she says. "He's just reading."

"I was thinking we could do this one downstairs," I say. "If that's okay."

"Is that okay?" says Debra. "I don't want to crash your time."

"We could use the extra hands," I say.

"In that case, I guess I should help right?" says Debra. "It's always good to have help."

And join us she does, but first she goes upstairs to get Richie. She stops by the stereo and puts on a jazz CD. The music fills the house with a brassy warmth.

I sit there, my hands on the laminate tabletop, the unassembled bridge in a tangle before me. It sits there, in a pile, all bent and in pieces, waiting to be built, waiting to be made whole, waiting for all the connections and attachments to be made until it's sturdy and strong.

I press joints against each other, hoping that if I press hard enough it'll stick, and the whole thing will stand on its own, independent and free, and it could bear so much weight that nothing could ever collapse it.



## *Heidi*

Mattie and I are passing Hickory when we hit a bump and my cigarette drops from my fingers.

“Shit,” he says, taking his eyes off the road, glancing at the little cherry of burning upholstery at my feet.

“Sorry, sorry,” I say, kicking at the cigarette, mashing it out with my boot. It leaves a little hole. I readjust my feet to cover it up.

“Did it burn through?” he asks.

“No,” I say, “No problem.”

We’re balling down I-40 towards Asheville. Mattie’s my boyfriend. That’s him, driving, sunglasses on, long blond hair rippling in the wind. It’s late October and the leaves are changing. And there, in the passenger seat – that’s me. I am twenty-five years old. If you live in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, you may have seen me around. I am shortish. I have curly hair. I work at a coffee shop. I look like that one sitcom star – you know the one.

Since you’ve just met Mattie, you probably like him. That’s usually the case. He’s got broad shoulders and he’s good at making eye contact. He’s a good boyfriend. Big skies and bright futures for him.

Mattie ashes his cigarette and asks me to change the music.

“Sure thing,” I say. I spin the radio dial.

“Are you okay?” he asks, pulling another cigarette from the pack. “You seem kind of weird.”

“I’m just tired.”

Truth is, I’m nervous.

Check out my body language. I’m curled up towards the window, wrapped in my travel blanket, chewing on hair and a piece of gum. Sometimes the gum and the hair get caught up together and I pull up the blanket so I can fix my mess in private. If he wasn’t watching the highway and the leaves and his speed, he might look at me, and he might know.

We’re on the way to Asheville to visit his friend Mailer, who plays in a punk band. Mailer’s got a booming voice and is a hell of a drummer. You can look him up. He likes to stand behind the drum kit, throwing his body into every crash of cymbal and snare. I met Mailer once,

last year. He came to Winston to play a festival, and right after his set we shook hands and he gave me a big wink and later I saw a text on his phone that said *she's a keeper*.

Mattie loves punk rock, and so do I. We go to a lot of shows together. He's a sound guy, which means he gets to hang around with the bands, and if shit goes wrong, they blame him. Most bands like him, though, and they like me too. We hang around backstage because there's free beer, and we steal small but expensive pieces of equipment that nobody will miss.

I never said we were saints.

\*

We're ten minutes from Asheville and Mattie asks me to give Mailer a call. I turn down the music and grab his phone.

"You on the way?" asks Mailer, his voice a thunder-kick in my ear.

"Ten minutes out," I say.

"I'm still setting up. Just go straight to my place. I'll get someone to pick you up."

I relay this to Mattie and he nods.

"Will do," I say, and hang up.

Mattie takes the next exit. We slide right past downtown Asheville, blocky and alive in the evening light, and head for West Asheville. Mailer lives with the artists, out in the sprawl. Rent is cheaper.

The sun's low in the hills as Mattie pulls into Mailer's street. It's one of those Asheville roads – mostly hill. It curves up into the yellow mountains. Somebody's burning wood.

"We're here," says Mattie.

\*

He told me about the voicemail from Heidi in his innocent, no-big-deal type way. We were in our apartment, on the couch, getting through the final rounds of a three-night game of Risk.

“You should see her!” I said.

“I think I will,” he said. “It’ll be good to catch up.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Catch up.”

“She has a kid, you know,” says Mattie, sensing the edge in my voice. He knows I get jealous, but he can’t, for the life of him, understand why.

He’s about to squash my garrison in Brazil. If this happens, it’s game over.

“Maybe she’ll bring her kid,” I say. I roll the dice. I lose Brazil.

Heidi is Mattie’s ex, and she’s coming to town.

I have a right to be jealous, I think. She and Mattie dated through college. Then she was a roadie for a while, got pregnant in Baton Rouge and decided to stay. He hasn’t seen her in years, but if you heard him talk about her, you’d understand. If you saw the photos of them, you’d understand. They spent six years together. That never goes away.

So when Mattie walks in one afternoon and tells me that Mailer’s got a show in Asheville, I log onto my Facebook account and look up anyone and everyone I know who lives in Asheville. And I find Bobby Vasquez, who had a crush on me in high school and teaches middle school English.

I don’t want to hurt Mattie. But I can’t shake the feeling that he’s going to hurt me.

Because I know that they will get dinner, and I know, as surely as I’ve ever known anything, that they will hook up again.

I know it.

\*

I've never been good at meeting people. Most of my friends are my coworkers at Kyle's Koffee. When we are off-duty, we write screenplays together. This is a habit I picked up in college – it's the only kind of writing I like. I like how it looks. After closing, my coworkers and I sit around and host little workshops. We pass around experimental cappuccinos with experimental ingredients in them, like basil or cumin or peppercorn.

Besides my co-workers, Mattie is the only person in my life. It's kind of a miracle we met. It's a Friday night. I'm at an underlit house party. It's dark and sticky, and somebody's spilled their beer on my tights. Whoever is handling the music is making a series of bad choices. I'm somewhere between the sixth and seventh layer of Hell.

I'm with my friend Frankie. She's also a barista. She goes to the community college, and, right now she's trying to give everything a positive spin.

"This party's not that bad," she says.

"You're just trying to get laid," I said, and I said it because it was true. There was this guy she was after, a guy in her business class. A real front-row type, a total hand-raiser. She was all over it. I told her he kind of looked like a Chad, but I wasn't going to stop her.

In the ledger of my sins, let it never be counted that I was a bad friend.

We're standing out by the keg and she sees Chad across the lawn. It's game over for her, so I give her my blessing and a breath mint and she runs over to give him a big, busty hello. I watch them. I lean against the wall, killing time – Frankie's closing the deal, but it's going to take a while. She's not a fast mover.

I wander up to the second floor and find a bathroom with the door half open. I stumble in and try the lock. Then I realize there's a guy already in the bathroom, just standing there.

"Hello," he says.

"Oh," I say. "This is not the right place to be."

"I guess not," says the guy, giving me a grin. He's got long blond hair. He's got one foot propped up on the toilet, and the entire lower third of his leg is soaked in something that is either vomit or chicken noodle soup.

He sees me staring at the leg.

"It's not my vomit," he said. "Some guy downstairs couldn't handle his Rolling Rock."

He's still looking at me, running a damp towel up and down his jeans.

I staple on a smile and give him a half wave.

"My name's Leah," I say.

"Mattie," he says, and he asks if I can try to find another towel under the sink. I dig around and decide that I better find one, because no good story starts without the vomit getting cleaned up.

\*

Get out a blank sheet of paper and draw a long horizontal line. Mark off the ends, and write "Vomit Party" on one. That's the beginning. Now mark the other end "Infidelity". That's today, right here, in Asheville (I'm in Mailer's driveway, by the way, helping unpack the car) and between Vomit Party and Infidelity, there's a lot of blank line just filling space. Stuff happened, of course. There was Halloween night, when we dressed up as Manson girls. There was the afternoon we had sex in a movie theater. The trip to the Outer Banks. I have plenty of

this stuff, really, and if I laid it all out you'd have to get another sheet of paper and then some. The stuff I told you connects the dots.

That's all we're really doing here anyway.

At this point, we've unpacked the car and are sitting in Mailer's kitchen. He's got a little box of weed in his freezer. He says it keeps it fresh. Mattie's having a beer and talking about the show. He's excited; I can see it in his eyes. His high school band played here once, opening for a now defunct outfit from Atlanta.

It was Heidi's favorite band, he says. She loved them.

I'm using a knife to chip away at the frozen weed and I'm really hoping he stops talking about her like this, like it doesn't bother me, like it's just the past, like he's not going to see her again in a week.

I want to say something to him, but I can't. I know he'll say the same thing he always says: that Heidi was a big part of his life, that he can't just erase her, that he loves me now and that's all that matters.

Mattie has always treated me well. He took me to my first punk show a few weeks after we met. I was nervous – I liked music but punk was never my scene. I didn't have the right clothes so I biked to a thrift store and bought a ripped Dead Kennedys t-shirt. Mattie loved it. He gave me a tour of the venue and introduced me to all of his friends. They were all in bands. Mattie had recently decided he would never cut it as a bass player and started working with sound tech instead.

During the show, a guy crashed into me and elbowed my face. I started punching him, and Mattie had to convince me it was an accident. When we left the bar, I heard one of Mattie's friends mention that I certainly wasn't a Heidi.

In the parking lot, I asked him what that meant.

“It’s a good thing,” he said, laughing. “Heidi would have stabbed that guy if he had elbowed her.”

It was too early on the timeline for me to really see Heidi. She was still too vague.

But I wished I had a knife.

\*

The sun is setting and Mailer’s got a prime view off his back deck: the valley, houses, picket fences, and the yellow leaves. I sip my coffee. Mailer’s done pretty well for himself, for a punk drummer, but I guess the fact that his boyfriend’s a lawyer has a lot to do with it.

Mattie slides up behind me and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m leaving,” he says. “Show starts at 9.”

“I’ll be there,” I say.

Then he’s off. He leaves the car keys in a little bowl on the coffee table and gets into the waiting car, one of his old friends, another sound guy named Drake, who wears too-tight shirts and can’t sing.

It’s a simple plan, really: Mattie gets there early, catches up with the boys, hooks up some amps and runs some sound checks, chases the ghost of Heidi round and round backstage until 9 o’clock and then it’s show time.

But I’ve got a plan of my own. It’s also pretty simple. I finish my coffee and the sun goes down and there’s no light out in the valley except for an occasional car on the highway. Along the distant ridge thin clouds slide by. I like Asheville.



At 8:30 I will call Mattie and tell him I have food poisoning. Last night I got take-out for one at the sketchiest Chinese restaurant in Winston-Salem. This will corroborate my story. He'll fuss over me and suggest that I drink some tonic water.

Then he'll hang up and promise to be over soon after the show.

Take your time, I'll say. Enjoy it.

I grab my suitcase from the guest room and unzip it on the living room floor. I pull out the essentials – underwear, jeans, toothbrush, my pill organizers and medication reminders – and I dig to the good stuff underneath. I've got them all wrapped in plastic bags: photos of Mattie and Heidi: their college graduation, the road trip they took to Portland, Fourth of July parties and Christmas Eves. I lay them out, six in all, next to the suitcase. But that's just for decoration. I also have lingerie – Mattie would laugh if he ever saw me wearing it, and I don't blame him. It looks stupid, but the attendant at the store recommended the set highly, a wink in her eye that told me that the only thing standing between me and the man of my dreams was this thin, skimpy layer of sweatshop sexycloth.

Forgive me, okay? I've never done this before.

I have other things, too. Candles. Incense. A bottle of wine, though it was two dollars and I've torn the label off. A bordello-style red-tinted lightbulb if need be. I'm hoping I don't have to use it, but I don't know what Bobby Vasquez is into.

I won't bore you with all the setup, because it takes a while.

In the meantime, I present Bobby. He's average height, with longish hair. He's got big almond eyes and his left-hand index finger is crooked from a childhood accident. He crushed on me pretty bad in tenth grade, back when I had bad hair and an overbite that would have made any orthodontist cringe. Somehow, Bobby had it bad for sixteen-year-old Leah.

To this day, he still likes my Facebook photos and wishes me a happy birthday. In our messages, I told him I'm housesitting for a friend in Asheville for the night. I asked if he wanted to come over and catch up.

I'd love to catch up, he said. It's been so long, he said.

Then he sent me a smiley face.

\*

The doorbell rings. I puff the pillows and smooth out the comforter.

I've done a pretty good job for myself. There's incense in each corner of the room, a couple of candles on the bedside table, photos of Mattie and Heidi lining the tops of the dressers and a few on the wall.

I check my boobs in the mirror. For a second I hesitate. I figure I could just go hide in the kitchen and wait for Bobby to go away and put on a movie and drink some wine. That would be easy to do. I could do that.

I back away from the door.

Then the doorbell rings again. It cuts through the room like an alarm bell and it's saying Hei-di, Hei-di, Hei-di.

I unlock the door.

"Hello," he says. He's got a little beard, the same narrow shoulders. His eyes are bright at the sight of me. He's smiling.

I give him a hug.

"How have you been?" I ask, leading him into the living room. I hand him a glass of wine.

“Working a lot,” he says. “Seventh graders take a toll on you.”

“Yeah, I saw on your Facebook,” I say. “Sounds tough.”

“It’s worth it,” he says. Most people I know who are teachers say some variation of this line.

He asks me about my job and life. I fill him in. We sit on the couch. Talking comes easier than I thought. It’s pretty flirty, and I’m not surprised I can tell he’s still in love with me. I give him a little bit of eyes, a big smile. I make sure a few locks of hair are running down my face and down my chest.

Bobby finishes his wine. He coughs.

“To be honest,” he says, “I’m kind of surprised you got in touch.”

“Why?” I ask.

He refills his glass and mine. “You know. You weren’t exactly into me in high school.”

“High school was a long time ago,” I say. “People change.”

He laughs. I can tell he still doesn’t have experience with this stuff. Once, after class, he walked home with me and I could tell he was hiding an erection the whole way.

I move closer to Bobby. He is trembling a bit. He spots a photo on the mantel and crosses to it. He picks it up.

“Is this your friend?” he asks. “The one you’re housesitting for?”

I join him at the mantel. It’s a photo of Mattie and Heidi, the Christmas Eve one. They’re standing by the tree, hugging each other close, as if they would fall if they let go.

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s her.”

“She looks really happy. They married?”

“Engaged,” I say.

“A really nice couple,” he says, putting the photo down.

“They deserve each other,” I say.

Then I kiss Bobby.

I kiss him and he comes alive. He is forceful and gentle. I maneuver him towards my candlelit lair. On the way, I pull off his shirt. He grabs me and lets out a little sigh of surprise.

We sit side-by-side on the bed.

He pulls back and looks at me.

“Wow,” he says.

“Can I ask you a favor?” I say.

“Anything,” he says, struggling with my bra strap.

I stand up, pulling away from him. I grab the two copies of a script from the nightstand. I hand one to him.

“Read this,” I say.

He looks up, confused.

“Read it,” I say.

He skims through it.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Can’t we just —”

“Please,” I say. “I need you to do this.”

He sees something in my eyes and nods. He reads from my workshop-written pages:

INT. HEIDI’S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Mattie and Heidi enter. Mattie removes his jacket.

MATTIE

I'm glad you finally invited me in.

HEIDI  
I thought you'd never come.

MATTIE  
(huskily)  
I've been waiting so long.

HEIDI  
Baby, don't keep me waiting.

Mattie and Heidi KISS. Heidi TOUCHES Mattie's hair. It has been a long time.

HEIDI  
(pulling back)  
What about your girlfriend?

MATTIE  
(grinning)  
What about her?

Heidi laughs. She presses a manicured hand against Mattie's chest.

MATTIE  
She's jealous of you, you know.

HEIDI  
Well, she should be.

MATTIE  
I tell her she's crazy, but there's really nothing crazy about it.

HEIDI  
Hasn't she heard the way you talk about me? Of course she should have worried.

MATTIE  
(caressing Heidi's leg)  
It doesn't matter now.

HEIDI  
I'll never leave you.

MATTIE  
That's all I've -

Bobby stops reading.

“Keep reading,” I say.

“I’m not an actor, okay?” he says. “Why do we have to –”

“Read it, please,” I say.

Bobby looks like he is about to cry. I pat his shoulder.

“Please,” I say.

And he does:

HEIDI  
I want you to say it.

MATTIE  
(removing Heidi’s bra)  
I’ll never leave you. I don’t love  
her anymore.

HEIDI  
(gasping with pleasure)  
Again.

MATTIE  
I’ll never leave you. I don’t love  
her anymore.

Bobby takes his pants off. We are both naked.

I can’t stop thinking about the show. The opening band’s probably wrapping up. The moshers are wiping sweat from their bodies, lining up at the bar for more beer, lighting cigarettes and joints in the parking lot. It’s too much, so I start running through the mental list of grievances I’ve prepared to taking this whole thing easier.

There’s the time he forgot to pick me up at the airport. The time he scratched my car and lied about it. The time he called me a psycho and slammed the door in my face. But it’s not

really enough, so I think about the way he still smiles when he hears her name. I think about that bad gut feeling I have and how it doesn't go away no matter how hard I try.

Bobby looks at me and asks if I'm ready.

"Yes," I say to Bobby. "I'm ready."

One of the candles sputters out.

"Say the lines," I say.

"I'll never leave you. I don't love her anymore," he says.

He's right. He's not much of an actor.

\*

If you're ever traveling through Indianapolis, pay a visit to the Lizard Lounge downtown. See a punk show. There's no cover if you're over 21. If you've never been to a punk show, don't worry. Everyone looks scary, sure. You've got the image in your head, right now: tall big bald guy, the one with the razor beard and biceps made for strangling children. That guy's not so bad actually. I know him pretty well. He's a dad.

If you go to the Lizard Lounge, they'll treat you well. The bouncer will give you a smile and the bartender will slide your beer across the bar at you like you're a movie star out for a night on the town. The bathrooms are pretty clean. And the crowd itself: don't let it intimidate you. They're mingling, over there, by the stage. When the show starts, they'll be jumping and screaming. You might get caught in the mosh pit. Don't worry. Just keep your elbows up and don't ever, ever, fall down. If you do, though, someone will grab you. That's what I mean: They're a bunch of softies.

If you get to the show early enough, you might be able to snag a corner spot, right next to the bass player. He's pretty great, isn't he? The singer's not bad, though he screams a bit too much. It's alright though; this is your first punk show, after all. You probably can't tell.

And over there, behind the drummer, there's a sound guy with short blonde hair. He's probably fiddling with his ear in that stupid way he always did. Make fun of him for it – he deserves it. And when the show starts, when the drums start pounding and your eardrums are collapsing and you can scream at the top of your lungs with no one to hear – maybe give him a yell, call out to him.

Take him back in time.

Tell him that I was there, the next week, when he met with Heidi, when they got dinner and I was parked across the street, watching them through the window. Tell him I was waiting for them to kiss, and instead he came home that night and said that Heidi was getting married, and she had been excited to tell him. They hugged in the parking lot. Tell him how I screamed and screamed and screamed.

Tell him.

Tell him about Bobby Vasquez, all those years ago, when we were young and stupid. When he came home from the show that night in Asheville, smelling of cigarettes and mountain air, and saw me in bed, alone.

He asked about my food poisoning, and I looked up at him and smiled and said yes, Mattie, I'm better. I'm feeling better.



## *Stayin' Alive*

*“Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother  
You're stayin' alive, stayin' alive  
Feel the city breakin' and everybody shakin'  
And we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive”*

-The Bee Gees

*“This is now officially the world's largest anti-disco rally! Now listen—we took all the disco records you brought tonight, we got 'em in a giant box, and we're gonna blow 'em up real good.”*

-Steve Dahl, during the 1979 Disco Demolition Derby

At age eighty-four, there's not much that Hank Phipps has left. He lives alone. He has a house and a car. He shops at the Harris Teeter, once a week. He is trying to live without meat and without carbohydrates. He is quiet about his past and one suspects that he is trying to live without that, too. What he does have is his skating.

Looking at him, you wouldn't peg him for a sportsman. His head is bald, except for two tufts of hair that poke out from behind his ears like horns of a satyr. His body is round around his middle; an inner-tube of fat pokes out from under his shirts and gives him the look of an octogenarian Michelin man. He wears his khakis high, the pleats draping down his thighs like color-drained waterfalls.

On the skate floor, he is someone else entirely.

"I've never seen anything like it," says Hank's neighbor, a widow named Sue Beth Woodson who has seen Hank skate only once, at his rink, Skate Haven. "He's got such grace. Most days, he can barely walk straight. But on those skates - wow."

When I first meet Hank, it is on a thin Saturday morning in March. He greets me in the parking lot of Skate Haven, slapping my shoulder and shaking my hand. He is glad to see me, a thirty-four-year-old reporter for the News & Observer. I have been assigned a story on Hank and his failing rink.

Hank is quick to hurry me inside, almost embarrassed, and I know why. The parking lot is in a sorry state; the white lines have long since been ground away, and the thin grass around the fringe is peppered with empty beer bottles and crushed dip cans. A sign on the far side of the lot reads:

PRIVATE LOT

VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED

The sign's presence is curious. This lot would be of little value to freeloaders looking for a cheap park. There is simply nowhere to go. On the far side, down near the highway, there's a small industrial park which houses the local offices of a plastics manufacturing firm. Looking the

other direction, by the service road, there is a small bait and tackle shop. Everything else is overgrown lot and wild waste. Out here, in the undeveloped fringes of Martinsboro, Skate Haven is an oasis of diversion. From the highway, you can see its neon signs blinking, the central “H” faint and flickering, in urgent need of replacement.

\*

“They built it in ‘77,” says Hank Phipps, sitting across from me in the cafeteria section of his rink. “Just before disco went under.”

He sips his coffee as we sit under the bright lights. Though it is early in the morning, Skate Haven is eerily nocturnal. In the windowless dark, the only lights are the flashing green and orange and red streaks that line the upper reaches of the walls.

Upon first entering Skate Haven, one finds the elliptical skate floor directly in front of them. To the left is the skate rental room, rows and rows of metal shelving that houses skates of all sizes (“Never had a shoe that didn’t fit,” brags Hank) and, behind the shelving, a small maintenance room for skate repairs and cleaning. To the right: the cafeteria, snack bar, and a little enclave against the back wall that houses a few arcade games and gumball machines.

Hank is nervous. He keeps leaning in close over the tape recorder, worried that his voice will be too faint if captured at a distance. I remind him that his normal speaking voice will be fine.

Here is Hank, speaking on the decline of roller culture in the United States: “The thing is that people don’t just stop doing things. Did roller skating just become not fun? Of course not. It was the music. The music changed. You ever tried dancing to Mötley Crüe? Good luck.”

Though Hank only got into the roller rink business in the late 1980s, he holds a robust grudge against hair metal and other genres that came to prominence after the collapse of the

disco craze. In Skate Haven, disco never died. Hank has plastered the walls with creased and worn posters of rinks gone by, places like Oaks Park in Portland and Northridge Skateland in L.A. In the photographs, the hair is large and so are the smiles. Skate Haven has never seen crowds such as these.

Hank, again:

“It was such a culture, man. All people could come and skate and nobody cared what you looked like or if you were hot. I was almost in my 40s when the disco thing took off, but it felt like it was as much for me as anyone.”

“You felt safe when skating?” I ask.

“Safer than pretty much anywhere else.”

Hank shows me the snack bar, tucked in the corner behind the cafeteria tables. Behind the laminate bartop, there is a small kitchenette where Hank and his employees prepare frozen pizzas, hot dogs and popcorn for customers.

I leave the tape recorder running as we wander, looking at little details of the place that he wants brought to light. I always leave the tape recorder running. Yet, for all his willingness, Hank is reticent when I ask how he’s managed to keep this place going. All he will say is that he bought it in 1988.

I ask him again. I ask him why he bought a roller rink so long after the industry peaked, a roller rink in an area of Greensboro built on the promise of a suburban expansion that never came. I ask him why he never got rid of it and how he still keeps it going:

“It’s just my place. It gets hard sometimes. But this is my life.”

\*

According to The National Roller Skating Association, it's advisable for potential rink owners to build in high density urban areas. This is because they are low-margin businesses and depend on high attendance if they are to see real profit. And, even then, most rinks only see a growth rate of 5% in their first year of business. All the data on roller rinks points to one truth: they're bad business. Even the good ones.

Hank's public history is revealing for its scarcity and frustrating for this same reason. He was born in Fayetteville, the eldest son of a military family. He moved, for a time, to Danville, where he worked in an auto body shop and was briefly married. From there, things are thinner: a stint on the West Coast, and a sudden return to North Carolina. Twilight years spent in Greensboro.

Though Hank's finances are private, it is certain that he is bleeding money. Elena who works the snack bar, swears that they sell from \$10-15 a day worth of snacks, and that's it. According to the National Roller Skating Association, concessions sales typically amount to 14% of a rink's income.

I will let you do the math.

\*

Hank is minimally involved in his community. Running a failing business is a full-time job. His neighbors know him fondly as a kind, well-kept man who mows the grass on Sundays and puts a Santa hat on his mailbox each December. His barber sees him on a monthly basis, but they discuss only weather and the performance of the Greensboro Grasshoppers. Even his employees, who are all in or just out of high school, have little to say about him:

"Hank just kind of keeps to himself," says Elena Gutierrez, a junior at Eastern Guilford who commutes to Skate Haven three days a week to run the snack bar. "He's nice to us. Asks us

about school. Mostly he's just in his office, and he sometimes comes out to skate. He loves to skate."

All of Hank's employees agree that his skill at skating is his most notable feature. On Elena's Instagram page, there are a series of short videos, captured in subtle blurriness, depicting Hank in his flights of fancy, doing gentle loops around the skate floor as a faded disco track thrums in the background. Attached to these videos are comments such as "That oldie can dance!" and "Let's get him to prom!". Hank cannot use the internet, but if he could, and if he found these videos, he would likely blush and shake his head:

"Do I look like *that*?"

\*

I meet with Hank four more times in the coming weeks. All of our meetings take place at Skate Haven. We have an easy confidence with each other. Hank gets used to the tape recorder being on. In these visits, I encounter a total of nine customers, three of whom Hank lets in for free because they are children and he has a soft spot for children.

"Check these out," says Hank, handing me a pile of disco records. "This is what I'm talking about."

Listening to these records, later, on a borrowed record player from my downstairs neighbor, I think I can hear what Hank is talking about: a vitality, an energy. I was too young for disco. It has since become a pariah-by-default, hated on instinct because disco is cheesy and there's nothing more unfashionable than cheese.

"The thing people forget," says Hank, "is that disco was always unfashionable. It was always fighting to exist. Until it didn't."

Twice, I ask Hank if he will let me watch him skate. He refuses, shy in his old age. He only skates late at night, when only his employees are around, high schoolers who he trusts with his life.

“It will help my story,” I say.

“I’m sorry,” says Hank. “Maybe later.”

In my empty kitchen, a track by KC & The Sunshine Band spins round and round on the hot wax.

I try to hear what Hank hears. I try to hear what’s kept him going, all these years, running a failing business built on music that’s long gone out of style.

“You don’t have any regrets?” I ask.

“None,” he says.

“But it must get hard sometimes.”

“It does,” he says. “But I have my ways.”

“What are they?”

“That,” he says, “is personal.”

\*

The construction permit for Skate Haven was issued in 1977 to a developer named Bob McMannis. McMannis, who in photographs is dark-eyed and lean, broke ground on the property less than six months later. McMannis had taken note of increasing rates of white flight in Martinsboro and had bet big on land out towards Brookridge, on the eastern fringe of the city.

“Bob wanted it all,” says his old golf buddy Jim Sturgill, who lives in a retirement home near High Point and fills his days with online stock trading. “He just needed to build.”

McMannis's vision was of a suburb all his own. He intended to build housing developments, a small shopping mall, and a series of entertainment centers of which Skate Haven was the first, and ultimately, the last.

On July 12, 1979, over 50,000 people descended on Comiskey Park, in Chicago, Illinois. The event, ostensibly a double-header between the White Sox and the Tigers, devolved into a riot in which angry rock fans took their revenge on disco. At 8:40 PM, in between games, Chicago shock jockey Steve Dahl rode onto the field in a jeep. He was dressed in army fatigues. And, as promised, he blew up a crate filled with disco records, giving fans an opportunity to storm the field and smash records of their own. Critics saw the event as violence against a genre of music widely associated with homosexuals and people of color. But for many, it was simpler. One angry rock fan, on tape:

“Disco sucks, man!”

It was officially known as the Disco Demolition Derby. Colloquially, it is known as “The Night Disco Died.”

It is difficult to imagine how Bob McMannis felt in those late days of disco, when his rink was completed and opened to crowds who would soon, within five years, burn their Bee Gees records and swear off skates forever. But it would happen, and, at the same time, other developments were sprouting up in more appealing parts of the city. McMannis was unable to secure enough investment to begin breaking ground on the holy neighborhoods of his imagination. Like so many real estate developers with dollar signs in their eyes, Bob McMannis bet big and lost.

By the time Hank Phipps came to the property in 1988, Bob McMannis was long dead, due to a self-inflicted gunshot wound in the parking lot of an Asheboro Denny's.



On closing day, Hank Phipps paid \$750,000 for the Skate Haven property. His signature, kept under lamination in the Hall of Records, is withered and weak, as if he was already losing his strength in those years.

\*

Hank greets me at his home, a grey-shingled bungalow fifteen minutes north of Skate Haven. He looks pale, tired, older than usual.

The light inside is thin and angular, cutting jagged edges on his furniture and television. The home, like the man, is withholding and bare. He offers a drink from the bar - bourbon only. We sit in the living room and drink from highball glasses. Hank looks old today. His cashmere sweater hangs loose on his shoulders like a bedsheet. In old photographs, his shirts are unbuttoned midway down his chest, revealing a robust hairiness that would have rivaled even Travolta's.

He turns on a lamp to see me better. Along the far wall, there are seven pairs of skates in varying states of disrepair.

Hank holds the newspaper gingerly. In the dim light his eyes scan the page.

I can tell he's pleased with the article because when he finishes reading it he sits there in the afterglow.

"Thank you," he says. "This is really nice."

"Thank you for letting me follow you around all the time."

Hank smiles.

"The company's been nice. Especially now."

"What do you mean?"

"Eighty-four is pretty old. That's all I mean."

Without the tape recorder he sits easy in his chair, regarding me warmly.

“Maybe I can still see you?” he says. “You should still come by. I’ll let you in for free.”

I tell Hank that I’m sure I’ll be around. When we part, he gives me a shaky hug. He offers me more bourbon but I tell him it’s getting late.

“Okay,” says Hank. He stands, his back crooked as he rises to his feet.

“You once asked me how I kept myself going,” he says.

“Yes.”

“I think I want to show you.”

He hands me a slip of paper.

It’s an address.

\*

Despite the beliefs of his neighbors and employees, Hank Phipps is not in bed by ten every night. In fact, he’s out quite late, sometimes until three or four in the morning.

The Brookridge Cemetery is located twelve miles north of Skate Haven. Originally a church cemetery, it has since expanded into an independent operation, one that encompasses a four-acre area of rolling hills and pine stands.

At Brookridge, I find Hank’s car parked at the far side of the gravel lot. From down at the bottom of the hill I can hear faint noises.

Brookridge management prides itself on the cleanliness and simplicity of their cemetery. Managing caretaker Lorraine Hodge describes it as “the cleanest cemetery this side of the Mississippi”, although her claim is virtually impossible to verify. It is indeed clean, however, and as I walk down the hill I am struck by the smoothness of the headstones, their power-washed blankness. They are devoid of the dirty mossy quality that afflicts so many old graves.

Down at the bottom of the hill I make out Hank's figure. There is something unusual about him, and as I approach I realize what it is: he's in different clothes. Instead of his khakis and polo he wears what can only be described as a full-on disco get-up. A silk shirt. Leather pants. His shirt is tucked into his pants and the form-fitting look does no favors for an eighty-four-year-old body.

He doesn't see me.

There is a portable speaker system at Hank's feet. As I approach he bends down and hits play. Then he starts dancing, moving his body in weird gyrations. The delicacy and grace he possesses on skates is absent on two feet. Instead he's an old man dancing around in a cemetery on a July night.

As I watch, Hank dances from grave to grave. At each one he bends down and kisses the gravestone. He moves down the line, following the beat, mixing it up, hugging the next headstone, running a finger down the side of the next.

Then he sees me. He keeps dancing.

"Hi there," he says.

"What are you doing?"

"Dancing."

"Why?"

"It's what helps."

What I learn is this: for the past eight years Hank's been dancing in this graveyard. He admits this freely, proudly, as if he's stumbled across a secret that was plain as day.

"I can't really explain it," he says. "But it lightens things up. It helps me remember that I'm still here and I can still dance, even if things aren't going my way."

Hank takes me down to the tree line at the bottom of the hill. At the base of a pine is a camouflage tarp.

“Pull it back,” he says.

I pull back the tarp. It’s a coffin.

Hank drags the coffin out into the grass and opens the top. It’s empty.

“What do you do with this?” I ask.

Hank smiles. Then he climbs inside. I stand there, watching him, this old man play-acting at being dead.

“This puts a perspective on things,” he says. “It helps to imagine being dead.”

Hank lies there for a couple of minutes, his eyes closed, breathing contently, playing at non-existence.

“Want to try?” he says.

I try, folding my arms on my chest like a corpse, imagining that I too am as dead as everyone else in this cemetery. Still in the coffin, I ask Hank:

“Does this make things easier?”

He smiles.

“It makes everything easier.”

On the drive home, the highway lights flash by. It makes sense, I suppose, that Hank would find so much solace in the cemetery. But does it explain his life? Does it explain what he chose to make of it? Does it mean that he’s happy?

Before I left the cemetery, I asked Hank if he would finally let me watch him skate. Though he hems and haws and plays at shy embarrassment, he agrees to show me.

I don't know the answers to these questions. My time with Hank only made me more and more unsure, more uncertain of why and how we do what we do and what keeps us going.

For Hank, it was skating. That, and not being dead. It was good enough for him.

\*

The next couple weeks are busy ones at the paper and I keep reminding myself to call Hank and schedule a time to watch him skate.

I'm working on a new piece about an Italian restaurant near the airport when the phone rings.

It's Elena.

All that playing dead must have done Hank good on the night he finally died, three weeks after our graveyard rendezvous. The coronary that killed him seized his chest in the early morning and left him dead before dawn. I am certain that when he met all the ghosts of the deceased they faintly remembered him. I'm sure they remembered him as the old man who had danced on their graves all those years, keeping them company when most people just brought flowers and cried.

Elena is going into her senior year at Eastern Guilford and is working on her application to UNCG. I offer to read it. It's a brief call, but she tells me they're having a little ceremony for Hank at Skate Haven that Saturday.

Hank Phipps died intestate, which means that the state takes responsibility for all his assets and real estate. Skate Haven had reached its third and final owner. Acting rationally, the state will sell the property to the highest bidder. This bidder will likely be another development company, which will demolish the building and begin shopping around for new clients.

Industrial parks are taking off throughout the area. Bob McMannis's dream would be unrecognizable to him.

On Saturday night, there are twelve cars parked outside of Skate Haven. Because the property is now owned by the state, the gathering technically constitutes breaking and entering. But Elena has kept a spare key, and so here we are, witnesses to the last days. The lights of the highway glitter and pop in the distance, and a warm summer wind rattles in the pines.

Inside, the guests are gathered around a cafeteria table, fifteen in all. High schoolers, mostly. A couple ex-employees who are now in college or working jobs around town. A few neighbors, old and well-dressed. Those who are going nowhere and those who have nowhere left to go, all together, hunched under the bright lights and sipping tea.

The talk is good and friendly. Stories of Hank are exchanged all around. I sit there, with my tape recorder running in my lap, unknown to everyone else.

I can't help it.

Later, as the conversation burns low, we decide to skate. As we are lacing up, I have a pleasant chat with Hank's neighbor, Sue Beth Woodson, about magnolias and magnolia maintenance. She has only recently found this hobby. I tell her that, according to the United States Arboretum, there are about 80 species of magnolia native to the eastern U.S. and southeastern Asia. Soon we are all ready, stumbling around in our new eight-wheeled state, and Elena climbs into the DJ booth. She queues up a playlist that was Hank's favorite: "Disco Boogie".

As Elena hits play on Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff" and we take the floor, I feel that here, in this building, something different happened. Steve Dahl and the fans of the Chicago White Sox never conducted a public burning of disco records. Public taste never shifted away from the

groove and the funky funk. Disco never died. This is an alternate timeline where those photographs on the wall aren't snapshots of the past but windows into another present, another present where the groove never stopped, where the pants stayed flared and the hair stayed big. I can't help but imagine this was Hank's world, even if he rarely wore anything but khakis. I can't help but imagine that he was trying to dance something to life even as it lay still and long dead.

I stumble clumsily around a turn. I am no good on skates. The beat pounds overhead and I try to keep time. Surprisingly, Hank's neighbors aren't bad - they smile at each other under the flashing lights, kicking their feet forward, rolling on.

I never saw Hank skate, except in pixels. I try to be like Hank, as I imagine him to be, lost on the skate floor, in defiance of the decay and the failure that hang outside these walls like a shroud - the empty lots, the dusty freeway. the I skate faster, gaining my feet, trying to preserve something, to keep some memory alive. I see Hank, blurry as he was in those videos, kicking his feet like an octogenarian rooster of dance, rolling with the groove, clinging to like it was all he had.

And maybe it was all he had, towards the end, when he had done his best and was still an old man who lived alone and danced a few nights a week. An old man who tried to cut down on his carbs and gave free admission to kids whenever he could. An old man who danced for the dead because he could and they could not.

And so we dance too, because we can, on this elliptical floor and the flashing lights. Here, in this room, skating faster and faster, all of us tied to a silent rhythm and a simple beat. We are circling, for now, while there is nothing else we need, and nowhere else we need to go.

### ***Fourth of July, Burrell County***

I couldn't see too well because I lost my glasses in the river.

Uncle Bert had said that I was a real dumb boy if I swam with them on. I told him I wanted to see the shiny fish in the deep parts of the Burrell. He said only dumb boys cared about fish. Then he went inside and I went in the river, and then I lost my glasses and I never saw any fish.

Without my glasses, everything was blobs and dark patches. I sat down at the picnic table and dried myself with a towel. I looked down at the river, tapping my fingers on a paper plate. The plate was a red, white and blue blob. I waited for my swim trunks to dry.



There was a splash down by the dock and I saw our boat pull up. Voices yelled about tying up the boat, about finding Uncle Bert. It was my cousins, Wyla and Dina. I knew my cousin Lewis had gone boating with them, but I couldn't hear his voice. Lewis was the one who told me I couldn't come on the boat in the first place. Lewis never spoke to me unless it was to tell me not to do something. But Lewis wasn't talking, which was strange.

"Quincy!" Wyla called, loud.

"Wyla!" I said.

"Get your uncle! Lewis is hurt bad!" I heard splashing in the water and the boat pressed up against the beach.

"Quincy!" Wyla yelled again. "Go!"

"Is Lewis okay?" I asked.

"I said go!" Wyla said.

I turned and ran up to the house. But I forgot about the screen door and ran right through it. I stood in the sunroom, sorting through the broken tangle of screen, which was see-through and not a very visible thing without glasses. I worried about Grandma getting mad but Lewis was hurt and I was in a hurry. She might forgive me and I might even get some strawberries. I only get strawberries when I'm extra good.

So I ran through the sunroom and into the den to look for Uncle Bert.

"Uncle Bert!" I called. The TV was loud and white and I heard what sounded like the 5 o'clock news with Cam Powell. Sometimes when I'm happy I wish that Cam Powell could talk to me on the TV about something, and he would smile and nod at whatever I said. He might give me advice on my hangnails and getting along with Uncle Bert. He might tell me where Mom and Dad went.

I turned down the TV and went into the kitchen to look for Uncle Bert.

“Uncle Bert!” I called, running through the kitchen to Grandpa Keith’s old study, where Uncle Bert sometimes looked for expensive books to sell. I didn’t find Uncle Bert but I did see the brown of the whiskey bottle. The whiskey I should never drink because dumb boys can’t drink whiskey. I told Uncle Bert that I was fifteen years old and maybe I would lose my dumb when I grew a bit. He laughed. He said the day I’d lose my dumb would be the day my Daddy and Ma showed up back in town. He explained that Lewis was a smart boy and Wyla and Dina were smart girls, so they got to drink whiskey sometimes. They’d sit in the study and laugh and make jokes until somebody - usually Uncle Bert - passed out. Then Wyla would carry him upstairs and put him to bed.

One time, after Uncle Bert was asleep, Wyla let me have a sip. It tasted like fire and I spit it out. I decided I wasn’t missing much.

Still, I was glad Wyla let me try some. I like Wyla.

I left the study and went to look for Uncle Bert upstairs.

“Uncle Bert!” I called, and this time I heard someone open a door.

“Quincy! What the hell!” said Grandma’s voice. Grandma was a white blob with a purple bathrobe and her slippers were purple blobs too. She ran out of the bedroom and grabbed me by the ear.

“What did I tell you about tracking water all over this house?”

“You said never to do it.”

“So you heard me!”

“Yes, Grandma. It’s just that I need to find Uncle Bert because Wyla said -”

Grandma pinched me tighter.

“Do I look stupid to you?”

“Actually I can’t see too good, I lost my gl-”

Grandma wasn’t listening and pulled me down the stairs. I hopped two steps at a time to keep up with her. She pulled me right through the kitchen and through the den and into the sunroom and she threw me to the floor and stood above me.

“I am absolutely tired of you,” Grandma said.

“Grandma!” Wyla’s voice said. Grandma turned.

“Wyla! What happened to that screen door?”

“Lewis is hurt bad!”

“What happened to him?”

“Firework messed up his hand. Where’s Uncle Bert?”

“God damn it,” said Grandma. “He’s next door.”

I turned to Wyla.

“I’m sorry Wyla,” I said. “I tried to find him.”

Wyla ran back outside.

I like Wyla, a lot. She says nice things to me. When I was little, she read to me some nights. She’d come to my room and apologize for Lewis when he was mean. He was just a big silly bear, she said. He didn’t have an evil bone in his body, she said.

I said that even bears with nice bones could still kill people. Like that bear that killed a hunter near I-90. Wyla laughed.

Sometimes I imagine Wyla and I running away together. Wyla has a lot of bad boyfriends and she’s always bent out of shape about them. I imagine us getting in Uncle Bert’s car and driving off to the ocean or the mountains or the moon.

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Grandma ran by me and down into the yard. I guessed she had forgotten about the screen door, or at least didn't care about it now that Lewis was hurt.

I followed Grandma out into the yard. Down by the sandbar was the boat and I saw a Lewis-shaped blob spread on top of it. I could hear his voice now, but he wasn't saying words, just sounds like *umpgh* and also *fuuuuck*. I was worried because this was an emergency situation, like the ones Cam Powell sometimes talked about on TV, and in emergency situations the heroes were always the people who helped out or rescued someone.

"Dina!" I said.

"What?" Dina said.

"Do you need help?"

"Fuck off Quincy!" Dina said.

I thought about going back down to the river and finding my glasses but I didn't want to get yelled at for being in the way. I ran back up to the house and stood in the sunroom where I could think better.

The last emergency situation I saw on the TV was the one where an old man went to Wal-Mart and parked his car next to a car that had a dog in it. The windows were up in the car and the old man was worried about the dog melting or dying because it was so hot.

The dog probably had to wait in the car because dogs and dumb boys don't get to go inside for grocery shopping.

But the old man called Sheriff Gundry and Sheriff Gundry came with other policemen and they broke open the car window to save the dog. The old man came into the TV station and Cam Powell told him he was very brave and did the right thing by calling the police. The old

man smiled and got a gift card for Gene's Grill, which is a restaurant. On their TV commercials they have pretty waitresses and a smiling manager holding a plate of steak fries.

I had never been to Gene's Grill. They might have ribs. If I called the police and this turned out to be an emergency situation then I could be on TV, which meant I could go to Gene's Grill with Wyla and Grandma and Dina and maybe even Uncle Bert and Lewis.

I liked the radio songs Dina played because they were all about taking chances on dreams, even if she didn't let me sing along. Dumb boys didn't get to have dreams, she said.

Wyla said Dina was wrong. I could dream just like anyone else. Then Wyla told me I'd be a big hero someday. Wyla said that brave people had to act fast in hard times.

After the Wal-Mart emergency situation, I asked Wyla at dinner if breaking that car window was the right thing to do. Wyla put down her fork, took a sip of her beer, and smiled.

"Yes," she said. "It was the right thing. The police did a good job."

Uncle Bert didn't like the police because of that whole business with Sheriff Gundry's wife. A few weeks ago I was sleeping on the floor in Wyla's room and she told me the whole story:

Mrs. Gundry had been coming around the house to see Uncle Bert. Then Grandma put a stop to that so they switched it up and tried fooling around in Sheriff Gundry's house. Then that got too risky. And eventually the fooling caught up to them, all hot and heavy in the woods behind the Hess, Sheriff Gundry shining his flashlight all over them while they got dressed.

Uncle Bert came home all shook up, no shirt on and one shoe in hand. I would have been scared too - Sheriff Gundry was tall and wore sunglasses that reflected your face. You couldn't see his eyes.

It didn't matter that Grandma had an authority problem or that Sheriff Gundry was scary. This was an emergency situation, and you had to be above silly things like love or hate or fooling around. Lewis needed help. Grandma would give me some strawberry and maybe Wyla would start standing up for me in front of other people and Uncle Bert might say, "Well, you *are* a dumb boy, but not as dumb as we thought!"

Cam Powell would agree. People had to be smart to react quick in emergency situations.

I went back into the den and looked for the phone. The numbers were easy to remember. 9-1-1. You had to crisscross on the number pad to dial them.

A policewoman voice came on the other end.

I told the policewoman about Lewis and the fireworks and I even mentioned that I lost my glasses. I told the voice my address and she said that help was on the way. I said goodbye and put down the phone.

I ran back through the house and hid the whiskey bottle in the study. A police once told Uncle Bert that he had a drinking problem and should dry himself out. I didn't want Uncle Bert to look bad in front of Sheriff Gundry. Sheriff Gundry already had enough to be mad about, what with the fooling around and the fireworks.

I started practicing my TV speech in my head. I'd have to thank Wyla for teaching me to be good and I would end with a line about how dumb boys can do anything. That's right, Quincy, Cam would say. They can do anything.

Then maybe Wyla and I would run off and be happy. We would go to Gene's Grill first, of course.

But then we'd run off and be happy.

\*

I ran back out into the yard to see what was going on. Because Dina had told me to fuck off, I stayed up by the picnic table. Wyla had come back with Uncle Bert. He was angry and loud. They all circled around Lewis, who was still on the front of the boat. Dina wrapped something white around his arm, which I guessed was a rag. Grandma stood next to the boat in that purple robe. Then Grandma said *fuck* really loud and bent to pick something out of the water.

“Quincy!” Grandma said.

“Yes?” I said.

“Are these your glasses?” She held up something I couldn’t see.

“I hope so,” I said, and hopped down from the picnic table. I was extra careful to not get close to the boat and Uncle Bert. I went the wide way around to reach Grandma.

“Somebody could have cut themselves on these things,” said Grandma. She pressed the glasses into my hand. “You’re lucky I only stepped on one lens.”

“Thanks,” I said, and put on the glasses. The right lens was a cracked spider web, but I could see fine out of one eye. It was better than nothing. From where I was standing I could see Lewis’s right arm, which was black and twisted towards the end. Uncle Bert held a rag over it. The rag was dark red.

“Is Lewis going to be okay?” I asked.

“He’ll be okay,” Grandma said.

This was bad news, because in emergency situations people weren’t okay. They needed to go to the hospital, or was at least taken there just in case. If Lewis didn’t need to go to the hospital, that meant this wasn’t an emergency situation, which meant that I was indeed a dumb boy. I was the dumb boy who cried wolf. And got eaten at the end.

I heard the sound of police sirens and Sheriff Gundry and some hospital men came running down the hill. Uncle Bert saw them and swore.

“You,” said Uncle Bert to Sheriff Gundry.

“You,” said Sheriff Gundry to Uncle Bert.

“Everything’s all right here,” said Grandma.

The hospital men pushed through Uncle Bert, Dina and Wyla. They made a circle around Lewis.

Dina and Wyla stood off to the side and looked at the ground. Dina scratched the back of her head, like she did when Grandma caught her smoking cigarettes in the house.

Sheriff Gundry started asking Bert questions.

Was the boy intoxicated? Was he aware that fireworks were illegal in the state of North Carolina? Was he also aware that shooting off fireworks on a boat was double-illegal?

Uncle Bert said no to everything.

Wyla explained how the three of them had been celebrating the holiday on the boat. Lewis had brought fireworks and was standing on the back of the boat, lighting bottle rockets and letting them shoot out of his hand. Then the boat hit a sandbar and Lewis got knocked back into the boat, with a lit firecracker in hand.

One of the hospital men turned to Sheriff Gundry and called him over to the boat. The man and Sheriff Gundry talked quietly for a few seconds. He called Wyla and Dina over.

“Hector says Lewis has drugs in his system.”

Dina coughed, and Wyla kept looking at the ground.

“Well, to tell you the truth, officer,” Wyla said, “we were drinking.”



Sheriff Gundry laughed. “Well of course he was drinking. I could have told you that without dragging my ass all the way down here from the station.”

He laughed again.

“We’re not talking about beer. Hector says we’ve got hard stuff on our hands.”

“Hard stuff?” Dina asked.

“Hard stuff,” said Sheriff Gundry, and now he was circling the boat, running a hand along its frame. “Hard stuff. Pill hard. Felony hard.”

Grandma ran over and grabbed Sheriff Gundry’s shoulder.

“Just a minute,” said Grandma. “You can’t go accusing my grandson of that -”

“You think pills are an insult to you people?”

Grandma looked like Sheriff Gundry slapped her in the face. She pushed by me and back towards the house. She sat at the picnic table and held her head in her hands. I had never seen Grandma look like this, but I also had never heard anyone talk to Grandma that way.

I was worried. Pills were the most serious-sounding drug Cam Powell talked about, worse than murder even. Once a month there was a “Channel 4 Investigation” where Cam would go to hospitals and talk to doctors about people abusing prescription drugs. Then they’d go to trailer parks and show people hooked on pills. The pill people never got interviews.

I guessed they never got gift cards to Gene’s Grill, either.

Sheriff Gundry leaned over the boat and dug through the towels and beer cans. He started laughing again and said something into his walkie-talkie. He turned around and showed us a little Ziploc bag filled with blue pills.

Uncle Bert pushed Wyla out of the way and ran up the hill.

Sheriff Gundry chased him and it wasn't much of a race because Uncle Bert drank a lot and his face got red even from climbing the stairs. He was putting the cuffs on Uncle Bert when other policemen arrived.

I ran over to Wyla and gave her a hug. She looked scared.

"Wyla?" I said, "The policemen are just doing their jobs, right?"

She didn't answer. I didn't feel like a hero anymore.

I felt real bad.

They found pills in Wyla and Dina's pockets which meant they had to arrest them, too. The policemen pressed Dina and Wyla against the police car. Lewis was arrested too. A policeman read him his rights while the hospital men finished bandaging him up.

I was crying and Grandma put me in the sunroom. I kept waiting for the news van to show up but it never did. I burst outside and asked one of the policemen if it was on its way. He looked at me funny and said no.

Then the vans drove off and it got quiet.

I didn't think the chances of Wyla and I running off together were that good anymore.

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After everyone left, I cleaned up the paper plates on the picnic table and tied up the boat on the dock. The river was high tide now which meant it was extra deep and extra fast.

I was kicking my feet in the water when Grandma came back down the hill, still in her bathrobe. She sat next to me. On the opposite shore there had been some neighbors watching but when the policemen left everyone went back inside.

I asked Grandma if this meant we were pill people now.

"No," said Grandma. "No, it doesn't mean that."

“Are they gonna talk about Wyla and Uncle Bert and Lewis on the news?”

“They might.”

“And they’ll call them drug addicts, won’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“And aren’t drug addicts dumb people?”

“Yeah.”

“So Uncle Bert is a dumb boy?”

Grandma laughed.

“Dumb as a doornail,” she said. “But we’re not in jail, are we?”

“No.”

“Then we’re okay.”

I guessed that I had maybe done something wrong by calling the police. I guessed that if I hadn’t called the police Lewis and Wyla and Dina and Uncle Bert might not be in jail. I guessed that Wyla and I might be playing cards right now, watching the river and telling made-up stories.

“Grandma?” I said.

“Quincy?” Grandma said.

“You ever been to Gene’s Grill?”

“Once.”

“How was it?”

“Fine.”

We sat and watched the water. The sun was setting.

“There’s one thing I can’t figure, though,” Grandma said. “Is how the police even showed up here in the first place.”

“Lewis was screaming pretty loud.”

“Maybe. Guess that Sheriff had it out for us.”

“It was unlucky.”

“Quincy?” Grandma said.

“Yes?”

“You *are* a dumb boy. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Grandma,” I said.

Grandma and I cleaned up the yard and had a dinner of strawberries and hot dogs.

When it got dark, someone down the river set off fireworks and I lay down on the picnic table and watched them. In the cracked lens of my right eye, the lights danced and splintered and made me a little dizzy. When the show was over I came back inside to the den, which was really quiet on account of everyone being in jail.

I sat in Uncle Bert’s big armchair. I turned on the TV. It was on the news channel. The opening theme song came on. I had never seen the 10 o’clock news before. Everything was the same except Cam Powell and his co-host Wanda Stewart were a little more slumped in their seats and their jokes weren’t as funny. I felt bad for them, sitting in that TV station, fireworks going off by the river and in backyards across the county, and they were sitting there with bright TV lights in their eyes. Tonight, there were no emergency situations, and Cam mostly talked about how people celebrated the holiday. There was video of people laughing on boats and a family grilling in the park.

I went upstairs and into Wyla’s room. I thought about Wyla, taken out of the house, getting booked, our chances of running away pretty much zero.

I lay down on her floor. I liked her room the best because of the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars and planets on her ceiling. Sometimes when she let me sleep in her room we'd play space explorers. We'd explore the galaxy and find new planets to invade. We named the planets after her ex-boyfriends so then we could invade them and not feel bad. I asked Wyla what love felt like. She said it felt like a hurting in your chest, but a good hurting.

I held my breath extra-long until my lungs hurt.

I didn't have any planets of my own. Usually I fell asleep first and in the morning Wyla was downstairs cooking breakfast or off driving around. I woke up slow, my eyes heavy, and by the time I went to brush my teeth the planets didn't glow anymore, sunk back into the ceiling and pale again.