

Up Here on the Roof

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## Olde English

The last time I talked to David Ramirez we were in the foyer of the Beleville Civic Center, fifteen minutes past graduation. Everyone milling about in the wholly unanticipated excitement of trying to find friends because it was sure as hell the last time you would see a lot of them. I stopped for a brief second to hug and say goodbye to my shop teacher who ended up teaching me more that semester about foosball than woodworking. And I saw David standing there looking a little overwhelmed and without a clue which way to turn.

“Luke!” David said drawing out my name into a laugh when he saw me. He dressed in white to my black robes and I barely recognized him at first. “David!” I smiled big and squeezed his shoulders. “Congratulations, man.” He was so different from the last time I had seen him. 30 pounds heavier, and 30 shades more placid, both a byproduct of whatever suppressants and anti-suppressants he was taking to struggle against the schizophrenic thoughts running rampant through

his head. My mother hugged him too and stepped back with her camera to get our last picture together. Our first photo together (probably) was in kindergarten at a Halloween party. He was dressed up like a matador and I was stuck in a tower of boxes stuffed full of pipe cleaners and painted into the semblance of a robot. We stood in a similar manner then, side to side both with goofy ass smiles but a few less teeth, chins tilted up to the ceiling. Another one for an album.

If we started being friends that day in pre-grade-school, I don't remember, but it had to have been sometime around then. In a year and we were playing soccer together in a jumbled bunch of seven year olds trying to figure out which end to run faster towards. My parents and David's parents took turns taking us to and from the fields, afternoons at one house, weekends at another. Plastic handheld barrels of cherry red sugar water and bagel bites.

We all were some creative kids. We built Lego boats and raced them in my creek or made movies in my basement with the bright blue digital camera I got for my 9<sup>th</sup> Christmas. David often took on the recurring role of Mr. Yao the Pimpdaddy (hip hop sure got its hold on us early) whether we were making a monster flick or a parody of Cops.

*I am Mr. Yao the Pimpdaddy*, he said sitting with his arms crossed staring deep into the camera. *I am afraid that Funkmaster G is...* he leaned in closer to the camera and whispered, *a pimpdaddy imposter...* Then our movie flashed over to a couple of "commercials," myself announcing: *Come on down to Ramirez Shoe Parlor! Buy one shoe get the other free!* and David presenting one of my arch support New Balances like a game show prize model, then Rylan, another of our closest friends, coming in and attacking him for a bad coupon.

Running around the fence outside David's house, his mother Martina, the biggest embrace of Spanish azucar, kept a huge garden. We were always the last to pluck the jalapeños, she saved the runts for us, and we let them get devilishly red before even touching them. His father had a big

John Deere riding lawnmower that we took out for a spin once in 5<sup>th</sup> grade riding all up and down the back roads off of Manor Avenue. David even let me get behind the wheel once we were out of sight from his house. There was one of those great big trampolines in his backyard that kids just dream of. I wasn't ever sure if my mother knew about it because she always explicitly told me not to get on my friends' trampolines every time I got dropped off. But not for David's house. We did flips and saw how close we could come to jumping on each other's heads, took trick shots on the loose hanging basketball goal fitted low on the crammed full garage.

David tossed a basketball down to me from the roof of his one story house while we were hanging in the backyard one fine 9<sup>th</sup> grade afternoon. Old and worn, brown leathery as Spalding balls always get after years left out in the weather and cold. He sat with his legs swinging over the edge of the particularly empty carport, laughing in his well-worn white and blue Real Madrid jersey.

*Get up here, man!*

I on an impulse looked over each shoulder with the ball firm in my hands. I had heard Martina a hundred times before yell at *Daví* not to kick the soccer ball in the house or do flips onto the trampoline, but especially to never climb up onto that roof. But so often I had watched David hop up onto the deck railing and hoist himself up by the gutter, a nice permanent bend left behind where his hands shaped the metal into a semicircle. He threw a wad of leaf litter from the gutter that skidded to a stop in front of my sneakers. I kicked it back towards the house and walked onto the deck not quite sure why but knowing how badly I wanted to be up there. I pulled myself up, convinced that the twisted metal gutter was going to snap. I saw David's head appear laughing as I strained myself on to the roof and came to a rest, brushing my hands off and backing away from the edge.

David thumped his silver Razr flip phone open and placed it face down on the black shingles pushing out sixteen bits of randy Californian rap. He leaned back with his hands behind his head mouthing the words to “Hate it or Love it.”

*The Game is the greatest rapper of all time*, he said then went back to whisper rapping along.

I leaned up onto my elbows. *You have to be joking, man.*

At that time in my life I looked down vaguely on most things G or dirty rap with an uppity predilection to *hip hop* (as I made sure to call it). *There are so many rappers better than The Game*, I said.

*Name five*, he shouted.

*Nas, Biggie, Murs, Tupac and Slug*, I said, *you would like Murs*, I said, *he’s from L.A.* David was lying against the roof with his blue L.A. Dodgers hat resting loose on his black curly hair, pushed forward off his forehead by the angle his back hit the shingles.

*Nas is pretty good*, he sat up cross-legged and switched to a new song then spun the phone around on its back like a top, adding a nice *wah-wah-wah* to “Ol’ English”: *Letters on my hat in Ol’ English la-lala-la-la-la-la. L.A.-L.A.-L.A.* I always wondered if that’s what The Game meant by that line, and David was a walking example. If you’ve ever drank Olde English you know The Game is telling the truth when he says *Bought my first converse, thought I couldn’t be stopped*. Just like Sandlot, a pair of Chucks will make you fly and the grip of a 40 oz bottle of moose piss in the hand can’t be beat by an aluminum can, be it glass or plastic. The Game understands.

*Nas is the king*, I said. *Have you ever listened to his first album?*

He shook his head. We traded up and I, much to my chagrin then, began to bump The Game’s most recent album in a pretty constant stream of L.A. till I die, red laces and bandanas,

paper bags, and drive-bys, *Ridin' by gettin' high, Smokin on that chronic drinkin Ol' English...* I never drank a 40 oz. with David. My first beer was a PBR in the guest room of David's house. Down the stairs into the depths of the basement where bike tires, tools and old shit piled up like the best basements do.

One of our closest buddies Rylan had snuck 9 cans of beer from his mom. It truly was a fiendish 9<sup>th</sup> grade quantity of alcohol: 4 Peebers and 4 Michelob Ultras and a Bud Light. I was little kid scared shitless when Rylan pulled them out of his backpack, he kept saying earlier in the night that he had a surprise for me. *I got something for you Luke. I gotta surprrees for you.* I super-consciously kept ticking my attention to the absence of squeaking on the stairs, just waiting for Martina to come down and catch us. We sipped them nice and slow playing Grand Theft Auto and listening to music and I enjoyed it more than I thought I could.

Round 1 o'clock we slipped out of David's back door. These were the years when sneaking out was all the rage. Can't go out and hang with your friends for the night? Sneak out around 1. Grounded for the weekend? Sneak out around 12. Wanna hang with your girlfriend or your friend's girlfriend and her friends who are girls? Sneak out around 10:30 and hope your parents are actually asleep. Put a dozen of the closest friends, all raised in the belly of North Beleville, within walking distance of each other, no more than 2 mile checkpoints, and we had made the closest knit group of midnight marauders. Hit up Keller Park and drink by the fence I helped paint in Kindergarten or go green on the 1<sup>st</sup> hole of the country club golf course. Walk nearly the whole length of Manor Ave. in the pouring down snow while the city lights brighten up the southern hemisphere of the sky, red glow and starless grey that deafens any noise but footfalls and tire skids, past the parks, past the Brew 'n' View, past the easily burgled Sav-Mor and donut skid marks in front of Stein

Mart, to that late night godsend that is Ingles Supermarket. That beacon on the corner of Candlewood road. That midway point of so many excursions.

David, Rylan, and I ran in the snow to catch up speed then jumped onto the thick stretches of November ice black in the tire tracks on the street, busting our asses so many times. Our purchase at Ingles that night was 3 Arizona Iced Teas (Only 99¢), two bags of Doritos and a can of Reddi Wip. We drew big creamy snowflakes on frozen brick walls. David looked like a true L.A. blue (not P.D.) bomber throwing up tags in wide milky wet arcs. I wanted so badly to be a graffiti kid. Start our own MOMS crew or to be a revolutionary like Dondi or Skeme or Tracy 168. A couple of my friends had the balls to tag some. I on the other hand, lacking a pair, did a school project on graffiti. We were good kids who liked to do ‘bad’ shit but the second, the instant, we got even a hint of getting into trouble, a scent of our parents finding out about our swashbuckling tomfoolery, we backed off and realized we couldn’t be little carefree shits forever.

The three of us a little bit drunk, roaming around in the nighttime, halfway to David’s house, halfway to Rylan’s, halfway from my own.

*I’m a head home*, said Rylan waving a branch around in the air.

*Me too*, said David.

I said something similar and we all left in different directions off of Manor Ave. saying goodbye and holding our first few beers as an extra bit of warmth in our cheeks against the frozen wind snapped night.

Mid high school came and went. I devoted my time and worry to grades and girls and the omni-encumbering smell of college. Through sophomore and junior year I stopped hanging with my closest friends, particularly I lost touch with David and Rylan, getting flushed away by the



speed at which school months fly. I liked to think that's just how it happens sometimes, that even the closest of friends weren't meant to forever pull each other out tall even when the thick mud of years reaches up past the shins. I usually tried my best not to think about it.

When David started slipping I wasn't around to see it. His brother had gotten mild schizophrenia in his high school years. But it hit David much harder. I only heard it secondhand from Rylan. Occasionally. They thought it was just David doing funny David shit at first. But before I really took the time to pay attention, he had already up and transferred out of school, his own mind sending him up to and over the edge.

*We were sitting watching TV, Rylan told me, and he just turned to us and said 'do you ever hear the guys on TV talking about you?' He meant it too.* Rylan dropped his eyes to his hands.

I hadn't known. Or didn't want to. And David left to be consumed by a mind I had never even met.

I was driving around Beleville early senior year with Rylan.

*What do you wanna do, bruh?* I asked. He was relaxed back cruising his forest green Ford Taurus down Manor, Rakim quietly tearing up the speakers. *Lawz and Nathan are chilling at Nathan's house if that sounds good to you,* he said. I told him I'd definitely be down.

*They might walk over and chill with David for a bit too,* Rylan said.

I hadn't even seen David in over a year. Almost my entire junior year, almost my last year spent in Beleville and I hadn't laid eyes on my oldest friend.

*Dude that would be awesome,* I said, *I haven't seen him in forever.* I stopped. Ashamed to have to ask. *How's he been?*

Rylan shrugged. *I think alright. Lawz has hung with him some.*

We cruised around a little while longer listening and laughing. We had spent a lot of time in that Taurus. In all of our cars. Late night journeys on our learners permits down back roads and driveways. Did David ever get his license? I didn't know. I remembered when he got his permit. I remembered him wanting to drive half of the trip to Carowinds even before that. And in elementary school taking me for a spin on the John Deere up and down his block with only a sniff of concern whether or not his dad caught us doing it. All over midnight Manor Ave with our feet on the dash. Brake lights shining out through the darkness once we slowed down and age responsibility and future stepped forward into the red lit intersection. But for David our days of running around streetside with a plastic bottle of pour-one-out-to-the-homies and green bags of swift diagnosis left too deep a mark beneath the black curls and blue hat and #7 Raúl Blanco jersey. Thoughts falling together like the sputtering at the end of a can of Reddi Wip but with the side effect of permanence enacted by one part aerosol mixed with two parts Krylon paint and through it all I hadn't even been around to watch the tags dry. I had fallen away from David and Rylan and Franklin and Cam and so many others like a song in the wind, while the Olde English was being cocked to pour, a homie fast and fading, drops of malt liquor writing wiry yellow cursive in the snow on the hillocks around Manor Ave, in one unison flash of steam as the snow melted away into a single word of regret, and regress, or almost goodbye.

Rylan and I pulled into the 22-hr Hot Spot and grabbed some Haribo Gold-Bears and two Arizona Arnold Palmers (Only 99¢). We sat on the hood of the car in the parking lot tossing gummy bears to each other and talking music and life going-ons and friends while waiting for the go ahead from Lawz to head on over and hang out.

Rylan pulled out his flip phone. *Lawz says they're not actually hanging tonight*, he said. So we left the Hot Spot and went back to Rylan's place and drank homemade mead and practiced ollieing on a wheel-less skateboard, both of us saying how nice it would have been to see David.

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"Luke!" David said drawing out my name into a laugh. That pure and jolly David laugh I hadn't heard in years. I still wonder if he saw the shock on my face. I hope he saw it as joy. Because it was joy. I pulled him in so tight in a hug and buried my ear-to-ear grinning face into his shoulder, he squeezed me back just as hard. He had gained a lot of weight finishing up school out in a special part of the district for troublemaking kids and kids with troubles (when really there's only the latter). He seemed soft, quiet, trusting. A lot of what I remembered to be David didn't stand smiling in front of me, but this man was undeniably my friend beneath an L.A. hat. Under the layer of white robe, suit and tie, and the packed on years, the clozapine or diazepam or lithium that had helped him come into the now, there was still a bold blue and white Bwin jersey.

"Congratulations, man," I said, still hugging him.

My mother hugged him too and got our picture together. I asked him how his year had been. He told me a bit of the goods and fines that I expected to hear. A rush of old memories about the man I was now talking to. In a sea of goodbyes at the end of graduation we stood there stuck on a hello, a little bit confused as to what to say.

I saw another fading friend pass by near me in their graduation gown. I told David goodbye or see you later, or maybe see you soon, hugged him again, tight, and left him to fade back into the crowd. Students and friends in black and maroon gowns filled up the gap lengthening between

us as I crossed the foyer, months and years stretching long as Manor Avenue and dark as the sidewalks as I opened the wide glass double doors and headed into the crowd of nighttime.

As I drove home from graduation through downtown Beleville, along the broad stretches of familiar asphalt and well-walked streets, I hoped that wasn't the last time I would see David. But I figured it might be. At the big graduation party that night, the one nearly the whole senior class went to, I played beer pong with Rylan, I smoked cigars on the deck with Lawz and Nathan, I sat back and watched and laughed as a couple of my friends played Edward Forty Hands and eventually gave up. I didn't see David there. And of course I didn't. He hadn't been there for two years.

I ended up listening to a lot of The Game that summer. Bumpin the trunk of my silver Buick on white wall 17s to the sound of Ol' English while I pictured myself ten miles outside of college, bags in the back, vanillaroma trees hanging from the rearview: *R.I.P. tats in Ol' English, Westside till I die, pourin out that Ol' English, la-lala-la-la-la-la...*

Now every time I come back to Beleville, driving down Manor Avenue from one side of the town to the other, I pass by the short winding street that goes up the hill to the block where David's square brick house sits, lined by a fresh garden. I know he still lives there. I could go see him, but I convince myself that too many days have passed. I could walk up and ring the doorbell, give Martina a hug, pet their sweet curly headed yappy dog Bella if she's still alive, and sit down with David and watch a soccer match, or shoot some basketball, or sit on the deck and imagine we were on the roof watching the sun rise high in the sky, standing still and warming our faces while we wait for the nighttime to come and send us out tiptoeing through the streets.

### Rosie Septic

We had 4000 gallons of rose gold, liquefied pig shit in the back of our truck and we were in a \$10,000 rat race to get to South Carolina. My colleague (Joey Gent, as in gentleman) and I (Johnny James) picked up the job a little before sunset yesterday. Bring our septic truck, drain a tankful of this pig factory's "lagoon," and dump it in a station in little place called Ketchuptown in South Carolina. An extremely weird job, for sure. But ten grand for 60 miles? You can't pass up that kind of dirt.

Joey and I were septic tank pumpers. We worked on the outskirts of Lumberton and all down 211 clearing out people's tanks. Joey was a good kid. He chose decent music and was smart, but just dim enough sometimes to be quite an entertaining partner. I started working the truck with my father right after high school in '93, about fifteen years ago. Then when my old man had to quit a little over a year back, I found Joey, fresh out of Lumberton High, just like I had been. My

father knew Joey's father's brother and somebody said something about the kid needing both a bit of discipline and bit of money.

"You ever cleared a septic tank?" I asked him after his daddy dropped him off for his first day.

"Once with a cherry bomb," he said.

He got the job.

We met the guy with the job off of 95 a little outside St. Pauls. He was from the Smithfield plant over in Tar Heel. The best dressed and least southern farmer in North Carolina. One of those sleek types that doesn't know a thing about a pig except for how much a warehouse full of them is worth. "How much does it hold?" The man asked. Joey bragged about our 4500 gallon tank. I slapped the side of it with a dull empty echo. Bright blue with bold white peeling 'SEPTIC' painted in a block on the hull.

"That's plenty." The man peered under a paper on a clipboard.

"What do you have there?" I mocked.

The man tilted it back towards his body and let out a cough halfway between a laugh and a sigh. "We need the excrement gone as fast as possible. We were just notified about a surprise inspection tomorrow and if we're over capacity on our pools again, which we currently are, we will face all fucking hell from the EPA." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "So on top of the ten thousand we're paying you and a dozen other septic crews, we're dishing out a twenty grand bonus."

"Hold on a second," I said, "thirty grand? For a morning of work?"

The man shook his head. "That bonus is if, and that's a big *if*, you *two* are the first ones to unload your 4000 gallons in South Carolina." That sonofabitch didn't think we could do it.

“You must really want it gone,” Joey said.

The man nodded. “You have no idea, kid. We’ve got less than 24 hours and we need it far, far away from anyone who cares. So keep nice and quiet about it if you want to get paid. Smithfield might be losing a factory if someone catches wind of this.”

I really wouldn’t have minded that.

## O

This was the shit, the real shitty shit. There were a dozen other vacuum trucks in line at the gate of the lot when we got there a little before 7am. They were all clunkers, couldn’t suck the jelly out a doughnut. All but the one at the head of the line. After only a few minutes of us sitting there, a kid of no more than thirteen ran out and unlocked the gate letting the line of us through. We all circled around one of the lakes in the clearing spread out about five miles from Tar Heel. The “lagoons” were raised embankments about ten feet tall, half a football field in size, and held eight deep feet of shining maroon pig liquids. There were two, both paired with a set of longhouses squealing with stationary pork which were connected to a long row of pipes running out the side to drain into the pools. A really terrible way to raise pigs. The meat came out tasting so much worse from all the antibiotics they pumped into them. Whoever “owned” this “farm” was for sure getting screwed over by the guys that hired us.

We took a spot near the end of the closest pool and parked, fed the hose of the truck out as far as it would go, locked it in tight, then kicked the sucker into high gear. Joey hopped up on the side of the truck and grabbed two buck lawn chairs wedged in a rack attached on the side of the tank. He tossed one down to me and jumped off the side with his tucked under his arm. We

unfolded them in step, just as the sun peaked over the tops of the trees, lounging back on the crest of the gently rolling bank on the edge of our lagoon that held back a flood of shit and blood.

Our truck was old but we had just put in a new Fruitland compressor that was sucking as fast as it could dump. Got it off an antiquer in Fayetteville who was trying to get rid of a busted up vacuum truck. That thing didn't have an intact piece on it but the pump looked like it was fresh off the line. He didn't have a clue he should be asking about eight grand. I got him down to 900 bucks.

So we leisurely watched for the hose to catch something too big to swallow, it would start wiggling and gurgling louder, but it was flowing smooth as a creek. Ripples circled outwards from above the roundabouts of the hoses shoved into the lagoon. Our ripples were the biggest, Joey knew with an eager look on his face. The other guys knew too. Last ones to start, first tank full. We'd be out of there in an hour, tops.

The truck next to us was from Dogwood Drainers; the most stupid sons a bitches to ever clear a septic tank. They set a little old lady's house on fire a month ago when the boss' son lit a cigarette while leaning over the manhole. One of them had been staring at us for a good five minutes before he stuck his thumbs in his waistband and walked on over. Big, slow, dumb looking strides. Randy Owens, owner and boner: "Looks like you boys got yourself a new pump," he had to shout over the dense drone of compressors all around the lagoon.

We got up and walked down the bank no more than two yards from our chairs. "Yessir we did. A Fruitland W1600, water cooled. Can't beat it," Joey had the most perfect shit eating grin on his face. Randy was too old to be such a smug ass. He was more salt than pepper, a short, patchy, but well-hidden, beard. 55 years of being a piece of, and disposing of, shit. "We should be out of your hair soon enough," I said catching Joey's grin.



“Sure, sure you will, son.” He spit off to his side. “Me and my boy will be finishing up right soon now,” They were feeding in two hoses with two Jurop Lc420s, a great lower top of the line pump, to a single tank. Excessive, he knew it too, and louder than hell, but their truck was nice enough (brown with ugly white flowers) to run them both and run them well.

Little Randy Owens (Leslie Owens) who had been sitting against the front right tire of their truck picking at his elbow since we got there, walked on over to join his daddy in the banter. “Nice truck,” he said, “think it’ll make it all the way to South Carolina?”

“Jesus, God, Leslie, shut the hell up,” Joey rolled his eyes far enough back in his head to get a glimpse of our blue beauty. Joey graduated from Lumberton High in ’06, a year before Leslie. Before either of us even realized that I already knew for myself, Joey used to tell me about how much of a dumbass ‘this kid Leslie’ at his high school was.

“Fuck you too, Joanne,” little Randy shouted.

“With all due respect, Mr. Owens,” Joey turned just the slightest to face him, “I will not hesitate to hit your child.” I snorted and gave Randy a look that said *I mean come on that’s pretty funny*.

Randy slapped Leslie on the back of the head, I mean *hard*. “Get your ass back over there.”

“Well we’ll see you in Ketchuptown, Owens!” I said through mine and Joey’s laughter. A sharp gargle cut through the drone of the Owens’ overcompensating twin Lc420s and crackled behind us. Our hose started to pitch.

“Shit, shit, shit, Joey go kill it!” He ran over to shut down the pump.

“Might wanna get that fixed before you head down to South Carolina,” Old Randy said, “We’ll wait up for y’all once we’re there, Johnny.” He slitted his eyes, grinned, and walked back over to his truck.

I gave a strong tug on the hose, cussing to myself. It budged a little but was stuck on something. I kept a steady hold and followed it up the bank. Out there in the middle of the crimson sea was the most unfortunate pig floating along, squealing its head off, trying to stay above the surface. I couldn't hear it over the ruckus around the lake, but its mouth was wide and yelling. I gave a hard tug on the hose and the pig inched towards my edge of the bank. "Goddammit," I groaned. The hose was stuck tight around its back leg. The pump was done sucking but the hose wasn't done sticking. I started reeling it in. "Joey, come help me with this!" He ran up next to me and grabbed the hose and pulled it with me. "What's it stuck— what in the hell is that?"

"That's a pig Joey. It's what made this goldmine of a mess. And it's stuck in our hose. Come on, come on, pull the thing."

We got a grip on the hose and started walking it backwards down the bank. The pig came out of the liquid, we couldn't see it but felt when the hundred lbs. of pork slid up onto the plastic liner of the lagoon. We gave a few more big ones and then a final heave and could see the pig make it just barely to the top of the bank flailing around unable to stand up. We rushed up to it. It was a shoat, probably just barely small enough to slip out of the factory. The little thing was just squealing its head off trying to run somewhere but stuck halfway on its back and halfway on its side.

"Hold him down for me, Joey."

He tried his best to get a grip on the pig, but his hand just slid right off, wiping big wet patches of some really awful slime down the side of it. He couldn't get a hold so he just sat down on him and put the shank with the hose stuck on it in between his own two legs. I gave the biggest yank I could and I'll be damned if I wouldn't have torn the poor thing's leg clean away if the hose hadn't have come off. It gave a loud wet suction pop and I fell backwards, almost down the bank,

letting go of the hose. Unfortunately for Joey, who hadn't been working a septic truck anywhere near as long as about every guy out here, he forgot the cardinal danger of septic vacuuming: backfire. Every once in a while, when a hose goes and gets clogged, there's a pretty big buildup of pressure. Now the pump takes care of most of that pressure with some sorts of safety release valve, but not all of it. And when the blockage is cleared, the pressure takes the easiest route out.

Joey got up off of the pig, which sort of hobbled to its feet and started running in circles, and he picked up the hose. A spray of something a little too red and a little too chunky careened out of the end of that thing like it had somewhere to be. Backfire.

I tried to clench my jaw shut. I tried to keep from saying something. I really did. I nodded toward the pig. Giving a terrible attempt at holding back a smile, "How embarrassing. You two wore the same thing." I about passed out from laughing. He threw the hose out into the lagoon, flicked me off, walked down to the truck and started the pump back up. "Aww come on man, I'm just messing with you. It happens to everyone." He pulled off his gloves first and then his clothes all the way down to his white and red heart spotted boxers. We had a huge water tank above the pump for flushing jobs. He pulled off one of the hoses to it and started washing off the maroon that had covered him head to toe.

I made a clicking noise in the side of my cheek and called the pig over. He had stopped running in circles and seemed fairly calm, limping a bit, but fine. I called at him again. He slowly hobbled on over keeping his head close to the ground. I put my hand out to him and he sniffed at it. "You must be some kind of Houdini getting out of that hell hole." I patted the pig on the head, appreciating the nice layer of glove between us. I called over to Joey, "Hey why don't you clean off plover here while you're at it?"

Joey flicked me off again. I walked *her* (as I found out) over to the truck. The pig took a quick liking to him. I guess she felt a little at home, smelling something so similar. They can smell about ten times as well as dogs. We had a plump little Yorkshire pig when I was growing up. He was the runt of the litter. The classic tale of my father wanting to get rid of it and my sister and I being just the right age to plead to keep it. My dad was a pig farmer, and a damn good one. My family had a decent sized farm on the edge of Elizabethtown, about twenty miles from Tar Heel. We kept about 150 pigs on a nice big slab of land. Then Smithfield rolled up in '91. It only took two years before we had to sell the farm. Dad took his old hog feed truck and slapped a vacuum on it and started clearing septic tanks. I joined in a year later.

I checked the level on the tank. "We're at 3950 gallons."

"Nah shit. I checked," Joey said. He was cleaning the pig now, which actually was washing off pretty well. Couldn't have been out there too long.

"Man calm down. It's a rite of passage." I made a grand gesture with my hand. "Everybody gets backfired on once. It happened to me when I started working with my old man, second month on the job. And it happened to him the first fucking tank he drained," I laughed. "You'll never make that mistake again. I sure didn't."

That seemed to make him feel a little better. "This guy is kinda cute," Joey said as he scratched her between the ears. She slowly lifted her snout to the sky as he did it, in a way that only pigs do, and she looked up there for a while, even after he stopped scratching her. "I wonder why he's so calm around us."

"It's a gal, actually. It's the first time she's been outside. Pigs love people too. Let's cap it right at 4000, and get this show on the road." Her fur was stained light red fading in from her middle down. Joey was still in his boxers and drying her off now. "The Owens over there are about

done. Twenty more grand, man. That's fifteen skins for each of us." They were doing the same thing. Standing, watching the gauge impatiently. Little Randy had clothes on though.

"What should we do with her?" Joey asked. "Should we tell someone in one of the longhouses?"

"Nah they'll just toss her in the scraps. They're not gonna use anything that's been in that." I tilted my head towards the lagoon.

Joey looked down at the pig who was sniffing his feet. "We'll let her ride with us then. We can find some farm to take her on the way back from South Carolina."

I gave him my best disapproving look. "No," I said. "We're about to hit 4000. Go put some clothes on."

Both of the lagoons looked to be about a third empty now. There was a change in the air. Everyone heard it. Even through the drone of a dozen trucks pumping away. The twin Lc420s next to us had been cut off. The Owens were headed out. "Joey," I shouted to him on the other side of the truck. I followed the hose up the bank and got ready to pull it out. "Joey, what's it say?" Where the hell was that kid? The Owens were reeling in their hoses and about ready to get in their cab. I casually flicked Randy off. "Joey!" He came around the back of the truck, still in his heart boxers. He killed the pump. "We're good, we're good! 4000! Pull it!" he yelled to me. I reeled that hose in, and Joey wound it up and cinched it so fast that we should have timed it. Bits of filth flung every which way. We were climbing up into the cab soon as Big and Little Randy had started rolling away from the lagoon.

There was a pig in the middle of the cab. She looked me square in the eyes when I opened the door. "God dammit Joey!" He jumped in the passenger side and gave me a timid grin, still in his boxers. The Dogwood Dumbasses were making their way well down the road now. "Put some

fucking pants on.” I slammed the door, shoved the pig over into the middle, and jammed the clutch in way too hard.

They were a good bit out ahead of us after we left Smithfield, but still in sight. Didn’t seem like we were losing or gaining any space. Their truck might have been a hell of a lot newer, but it was way too big for that to make a difference. We were passing through the main strip of Tar Heel: a middle school, a gas station and a Subway. They didn’t turn where I expected them to. “Damn, I thought they would go through Lumberton. They’re taking 131. That’s my route.” I took my next turn a little too sharply. “Well we’ll go the other way and see if we get lucky.”

The pig had such an oddly familiar smell. I rolled my window down and told Joey to do the same. It was rancid as could be, but it wasn’t her fault. Joey, who was still in his boxers, was scratching her ear and the thing had a dumb content smile with its head cocked and mouth halfway open. “I’m gonna name her Rosie.”

I sighed. “Well shit, Joey. Now you have to keep her.”

We headed along 72 to and passed through Fair Bluff right on the border. That’s where we’d see the Dumpholes again if we had kept at the same speed. But we couldn’t tell if they were five miles ahead or five miles behind.

We pull up to a red light just on the inside edge of the border, probably the last one for miles. We couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes from Ketchuptown. Rosie had her head in Joey’s lap. I start to pull through the intersection when I heard a squeal from the pig and another from Joey.

“Rosie! She just leaped through the window, man!” Joey stuck his head out the window to look for her. We weren’t going fast, so she’d probably be all right, but that was a tall fall. “Pull the truck over,” Joey said.

“Oh no. No way. This is your own damn fault,” I said. No pig’s worth twenty grand.

“The hell do you mean? We can’t just leave her out there,” Joey said.

“Joey, we’re ten miles away.”

“Please pull the truck over, Johnny. Please.” I had never heard the kid so serious.

“Goddammit, Joey!” I grumbled. I yanked the wheel a little too hard to the right and brought the truck to a stop about halfway off the road. We were out in a long stretch of corn running on either side of us with the road sliced down the middle.

“She’s up there,” Joey pointed up beyond the truck as we climbed out, Joey still only wearing his boxers and boots. I decided to start bringing spare clothes after that. Somehow Rosie had gotten well up in front of us. She was sitting in the middle of the road looking up at the sky. “Come here Rosie! Here Rosie!” Joey called out.

“Great job. I’m sure she’s got her name really locked down by now,” I gave a little *soo-wee* and she looked down from the sky at me.

A green four door appeared at the edge of a bend in the corn up the road. It came barreling down behind Rosie with no sign of slowing down. We jumped up and down waving our arms and shouting. Joey started to run towards her but I grabbed his shoulder before he could. The car was too old for anti-lock so it skidded and pulled a ninety degree turn completely to its side. It stopped about two feet from Rosie. She cocked her head slowly then looked over her shoulder at the car, sizing up the green screech. She did a little trot over to the side of the road, then started walking back towards us. We exhaled.

“You alright ma’am?” I shouted up to the car. She waved back at me, visibly shaken, but alright. She started to back up.

There was a massive screech of tires from behind us.

The lady slammed the brakes then threw it in drive and gunned it into the rows of corn to our left, a look of absolute terror on her face as she barreled into the stalks. The Dogwood Drainers truck sped by me about three feet from knocking my hair off. It started to pitch to the right trying to avoid the lady's car as they slammed the brakes. It slid, slid, slid, and suspended in the air at the perfect angle of balance on its left set of tires, then toppled over on its side releasing the foulest rose gold liquid all across the road.

The liquid was spreading out all around us now. Joey and I ran up to the truck trying to avoid splashing around in puddles of it; Joey already smelled bad enough. We helped Bignlittle Randy climb from the cab out of the now-sunroof side door. Little Randy had been driving of course. They were fine, a little woozy, but it didn't keep Randy from smacking the hell out of Leslie. The lady backed slowly out of the corn stalks, that same look on her face, then booked it out of there, having gotten enough close calls to last her a few years.

"Y'all sure you're alright?" I said.

They both nodded. Old Randy just looked at the truck, fuming, probably pondering how his son ended up being such a dumbass. Boy I wished I could've seen Leslie's face when he yanked that wheel to the right.

"Good," I said, "that's good to hear. I'm really glad. Because it sure does smell like one of you might've shit your pants." Joey and I bent over laughing. Little Randy turned beet red, which later went down in our book as a sign of him not having understood our reference to the pig shit, meaning he must have actually shat in his pants.

We pulled in to the lot in Ketchuptown about a quarter hour later, leaving the ungodly mess behind for the two stooges. There was a man waiting on a bench at the edge of the road where it turned into dirt. He was sitting out in the late morning heat wearing black pants and a short sleeve



white button down dress shirt, heavy wet patches under his arms. We stopped the truck and he walked over to us.

“Y’all coming from Smithfield?” He called up to me. Young kid. Just a little older than Joey.

I nodded. “Got a tankful back there.” Rosie crossed over me, stuck her head out the window and grunted. Joey was holding onto her back legs, grinning at me.

The kid raised an eyebrow. “Is that one of ours?”

“Nope. Picked him up on the side of the road.”

He left his eyebrow up. “My daddy is waiting just up the road where you need to dump it.”

“Then why are you out here?” Joey called from across the seat, laughing.

We drove up the path and parked next to a little white one room house. The man that gave us the job opened up the screen door and stepped out onto the porch. We climbed out of the truck. The man gave a strange look at Joey in his boxers and boots.

“Congratulations, boys,” he said with his arms crossed and missing the customary smile that comes along with a congratulations. “Y’all are the first ones here.” The sketchy sonofabitch paid in cash of course. Joey and I each got a stack of 150 hundreds.

“Say, did y’all happen to see another truck headed this way?” The man asked us while his son was emptying our truck outside into what must have been a huge underground tank. “I was told from up there that you two and another crew left way before any of the other trucks.”

Joey and I looked at each other, grinning. I nodded at him. *After you.*

“You’re gonna be about 4000 gallons short,” Joey said.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” he spoke quietly.

“Well, they had a little mishap on the road,” I said.

The blood drained from the guy's face, I mean he went *white*. "Son of a bitch," he said under his breath. He snatched some keys off his desk then ran out the door. We followed him, trying to hold back our laughter. The guy started yelling at his son who had just finished tying up our hoses, frantically trying to get him to understand the severity of the situation. He ran off yelling something about "Call Terry! Call Terry and get his ass down here," then jumped in a white Ford and sped off the way we came. That was the last we saw of him. We hopped back in the truck where Rosie sat patiently in the cab. I tossed the manila envelope of cash over to Joey as I climbed in and we left on the highway back up towards North Carolina.

A couple months later we heard that the EPA caught wind of the whole fiasco and dropped an \$8,200,000 fine on Smithfield for trying to hide their shit. Still, the Dirtbag Dumpheads had to give up one of their older trucks to pay for the cleanup of the spill. Joey and I bought it for nice and cheap. We painted our old one and the new one a nice light red and put a big maroon *Rosie Septic* along the side with a little drawing of a pig. Rosie rode along on most of our jobs after that and the customers just *loved* her. Especially that little old lady that Little Randy almost caught on fire.

## Nimbus

The carbonation of Darren's beer flowed back into the bottom of his cup, swirling bubbles up and outward making a mushroom cloud. Smoke filled up to the brim then floated down the sides falling to the deck, filling up the floor, sliding down the hull, clinging to the polymer, out and across the water to be boiled off by the heat of the sun. This was Darren; destroyer of witbier. Alex, all smile and black bikini, with a bright gold halo hanging over her head, called him over to get in the water. He set his cup down on the floor of the boat after finishing it and peeled the shirt off his pasty back. Jumping in was wet and cool, and the salt quickly began to tighten his lips. She was swimming in the lilting water with Jeremy. Jeremy was the original mind behind the vacation: a quick boating trip off the coast of Florida at Jeremy's grandparents' beach house before their

first year of college. The three of them grew up in the town of Kenbridge, Virginia, but would be leaving for different universities come the end of the summer.

Darren forced his eyes off of the white flowers on Alex's bikini and somewhere over the halo above her curly black hair at the single perfect cloud that hung suspended in the sky above them. It was bright white and completely still. They were out a few miles off the coast boating over a long stretch of five foot deep water. This was their last day of the vacation. The last day to decompress on the ocean before returning home and facing the reality of college: the same adventures with different people. The three of them swam for a while, talking about nothing in particular.

"Have either of you ever gotten arrested?" Darren asked.

Jeremy laughed. "Well shit you know I haven't," he said and looked over at Alex.

"So you think I have then, huh?" Alex said lying back in the water. "Tell me, D, is there a vibe I give off that makes you think I have?"

"You're just *such* a bad girl," Darren said and the three laughed.

The three had been friends since preschool or even before. All the ups and downs were well played out and shared between them, and they always had been. But Darren wanted to pry a bit.

"I got caught selling weed," Alex said.

"You what?" Jeremy said.

"You heard me," she said. "Sophomore year. When I started hanging out with Trashy Kathy. You guys just weren't cool enough yet to notice."

Darren and Jeremy looked at each other in disbelief trying to figure out how the hell that bit of information flew so low under their radar for three years.

“What so we weren’t cool enough for you to tell us?” Darren said, only halfway joking.

She shook her head. “No of course not. I just didn’t want to wrap you up in it. I was kind of embarrassed. And good thing I didn’t. The school officer took me aside one day because my bag reeked something awful, he searched it and then *arrested me*,” she made quotes with her fingers. “Just community service. Nobody actually gave a shit.”

“And to think all this time we could have had a plug right next door to us,” Jeremy said which they all laughed at.

“Funny enough,” Alex said, “That’s when I got this.” She pointed at the halo above her head.

“You’re telling me you got caught selling weed and then ended up getting a halo out of it?” Darren asked.

She smiled and nodded, so very proud of herself. “Yep. I was doing some of the community service, helping an old Vietnam vet clean his house. And let me tell you this guy was a true blue *hoarder*. After three afternoons of throwing out his shit, I woke up the next morning and bam.” She put her hands together as if in prayer and batted her eyelashes.

“I always wondered why you stayed so secretive about your halo,” Darren said.

Back in the boat. There was some good roots rock about Alabama on the radio. Alex danced, Jeremy whistled, Darren punched him. She laughed and grabbed Jeremy’s hands, pulling him up off the cooler, moving him into some position of dancing. Darren watched them move about the boat in rhythm, and tried to ignore how close together they were as they danced. They were watching each other’s eyes as they moved. A black curl of hair fell in front of Alex’s face, she pushed it back and twirled. The song ended. Darren fished for a beer and dropped the lid of the cooler shut.

The cloud above them had greyed, changing from perfect printer page white to a light concrete hue. Darren watched as a small chunk of the cloud separated and barely pulled away leaving long cotton-like wisps hanging in the air.

It was quite obvious that the three of them were all children of the mountains as they swam across the surface of the ocean. The blaring sun hit him like an Appalachian mirror. When they got into the water, fish flocked to them like bugs to a zapper. Darren got a burn the shape of Minnesota across the whole of his back and told Jeremy “that’s exactly what I deserve getting Alex to put on my sunscreen.” But of course he never could have refused an offer like that from her. One fish had been rubbing up against Darren’s glowing legs and then waiting for him (a particularly average goliath grouper with a streak of shocking white cutting from head to tail), circling the boat every time he got out of the water. He flailed his legs at it, but the grouper just thought it was a game and refused to give up.

They were out diving for scallops that last day. A pretty strange experience for three Virginians. Good thing Dave had been raised as a Floridian grandson. Wear a snorkel and mask and lay in the water until a row of beady blue eyes peers back up at the surface. Fighting off snorkelfuls of salt water and a leaking mask (and that damn grouper), flailing arms downward in the hopes of getting close enough to grab one. Half the time the damn things see it coming and squeal, spinning around fast as they can, burrowing down into the seafloor. Darren was proud of the four he snagged on his first dive. Alex and Jeremy both got eleven.

So Darren fell back in the water to prove something to whoever, leaving the other two alone to throw back cupfuls of Tecate together, as the clouds pulled in a little darker above them. Apparently it was scallop season. To Darren, that meant he should have been able to reach down and grab two fistfuls of sea floor and come up with a few pearls and a scallop clapping at him in

each palm. He gave up and took a piss, maybe the filter feeders found it nutritional. He swam the warm water out of his trunks, the grouper seemed to like that, doing a little roll as he swam through the warm spot. Looking down through a cloud of sand and piss, the biggest scallop sat clapping slowly at the show. Bigger than his head; like a dinner plate. Four times bigger than anyone else's. Darren dove down, scooped it up, and swam back to the boat, struggling to carry it. He patted the grouper on the white streak down his side then climbed back on the boat attempting nonchalance. "Holy shit, Darren," Jeremy said and Darren ate up the recognition. "We're eating good tonight," he grinned.

The day went on with beer and music. More scallops and Darren and Jeremy caught a fish. They decided it would be more fun to drunkshell the scallops on the boat before they headed back than to drunkshell them in the kitchen. It was a wonderful mess. A palms worth of guts and a thumb of meat. Crack the shell at the base to bust the tendons and scrape the meat off with a spoon. They caught an entire cooler before they decided to stop. Jeremy popped every fourth one into his mouth raw as he shelled them and grinned at how grossed out Alex was. Every, single, time. "That's really cute of you two, you know," Darren said in a flat voice, taking a sip of his beer. They both unsurprisingly gave him a confused look.

They found a few things as they shelled, one of Alex's had clamped down on a gold ring, and Jeremy found a matchbox corvette and a five cent Peso. They dumped the gutted shells over the side of the boat and a flurry of bubbles rose to the surface to carry them down on seafoam, hit the bottom, a cloud of sand formed and the boat drifted lazily away. Darren saved his mondo scallop for last and they watched while he opened it. He couldn't crack it with his knife, it was clamped down for dear life now. After he and Jeremy tried to pry it open together, Alex had the idea to shove the spare anchor up its ass, which was small, shorter than a forearm, but they stood

it up on the deck and shoved the side of the scallop down on one point, push, push, shove, hit, and it cracked and closed up clattering to the deck. They all whooped. Darren tried once then twice to get a grip on it, lifting it up to sit on a cooler and something bright and metal tumbled out onto the floor.

“Is that a watch?” Jeremy asked. It was bright gold with a black face. Darren sat the scallop down and picked it up. “Yeah it is. A Rolex,” Darren said. There was seaweed wrapped around the band. He picked some off and noticed that it was ticking. “And it still works.”

“I think that’s mine,” Jeremy said.

Darren laughed at him, “Like hell it is.”

“Look on the back. Does it say ‘For J.B.’?” Sure enough it did. Darren handed it to him and he eyed it like a silver spoon of caviar. “My grandfather gave it to my dad, Jeremey Braun, and he gave it to me. Remember in ninth grade when we went on that beach trip to Newport News? I lost it while I was in the water. God my dad was so pissed at me.” Jeremy was smiling, holding the watch with both hands. He sat down on the side of the boat.

“That’s crazy. It really says J.B.?” Alex asked.

Jeremy raised his eyebrows. “Yeah. It does.” He slid the watch onto his wrist and wound it to the correct time, hands turning in circles across the ten thousand tick marks etched into its face. One tick as Jeremy put his feet up in the boat and read a book on Marx. One tick as Darren got back in the water. It had cooled quite a bit. The grouper was happy to see Darren climbing in the water. He rolled over to float on his back and his grey underside rose up a bit out of the surface. He gave the fish a solid pat on the belly. “I like your friend.” Alex said, one tick climbing down the ladder into the water, her halo bobbing in time with the ocean. “Those things will eat your hand if you’re not careful though.” Darren smiled. “Nah he’s nice. Aren’t you, boy?” The fish wiggled



his head side to side in the water. One tick each time he circled around Darren. The fish bumped into his butt pushing him away from the boat. Alex swam towards them. The grouper stopped, quick. It backed up, slow at first, then turned around and disappeared faster as Alex got nearer. "Aww you spooked him." Darren looked out away from the boat trying to spot him in the water. "He'll warm up to me," she said.

Darren noticed Alex had a school of little jet black sea bass swimming around her legs. Their fins were ragged. Darren shrugged and lay back in the water, closed his eyes, and drifted in the rocking of the ocean. Alex bumped into him. She was doing the same, eyes closed, head back, floating in the water, hair splayed out around her and mingling with her halo. A few of the tired black fish were dancing on her stomach, right above her bikini bottoms. Her legs were bent at the knee, dangling just below the surface. Something bit Darren on the ass cheek. He jumped in the water and yelped. Alex laughed and pulled her arm out from under him making a pinching motion with her fingers.

"Dammit I was in the zone, Alex," Darren said.

She laughed. "Yes I know. I had to do something about it."

One tick and they floated about in the water.

"Will you tell me something, Alex?" Darren asked.

She could hear the concern in his voice. "Yeah of course, D. What's up?"

Darren felt he should just keep his mouth shut and stop there. "Do you and Jeremy have a thing?" He could feel Alex's uncomfortableness transfer through the water into his body.

"What do you mean *a thing*?"

"Like a flirty thing. I see it all the time," he said. One tick as the clouds above them transitioned into a wet ink blot grey and the cluster stretched outwards.

“You’re joking, right?” She was pissed.

“No I’m not joking,” Darren said. He couldn’t stop himself from diving deeper.

“Do you think that we’d keep something like that from you?” she said. They were both floating upright in the water now, facing each other.

“I don’t think you’re keeping it from me-,”

“There is no *it*, Darren,” she said it outright.

“I just don’t know if the three of us will be the same after college, you know?” Darren said.

She shook her head. “Well Jesus Darren. Not if you’re not going to trust us,” she let her words fizzle out.

One tick Alex did a summersault in the water, her halo shining in the dimming rays of sunshine, and breaststroked back towards the boat. “Come on, the water’s freezing,” she called back at him.

The grouper did come back as they got out of the water, idly waiting from a distance watching, then coming closer as they climbed out. Darren patted him on the side and told him he’ll see him someday and the fish gave his butt a nudge as he went up the ladder.

“What were you kids up to?” Jeremy asked mockingly.

“Chatting about college,” she said.

The started to make back for land, the clouds were getting too thick for comfort. Jeremy drove the boat, Alex next to him, Darren well behind them in the rear. Alex said something quiet to Jeremy that Darren couldn’t hear and Jeremy smiled a radiating warmth then kissed her on the head.

“That’s bullshit!” Darren was up and walking towards them.

Jeremy backed up as if Darren was about to start swinging at him. “Whoa what the hell man, chill out!”

“Jesus Christ Darren,” Alex said, “Will you just cut this shit out?”

“No. I know you guys have been screwing around. I’m not gonna sit by and watch you ruin our friendship like this.” Darren was in Jeremy’s face, pointing at him.

“Alex just told me she’s going to missing going on adventures like this with us all the time,” Jeremy yelled back at him, pushing Darren away.

The black clouds had completely choked off the sun now and it was getting dark fast. A crack of lightning came from not too far off.

“Darren, you have to believe us,” Alex pleaded. It was almost pitch black, but Darren could just barely make out the sparkle of her halo.

Darren felt it first, a slight lift in the bow of the boat as they rocked gently towards the back. Then the boat bucked backwards from a dark violent wave. Darren caught a last glimpse of Alex and Jeremy clutching onto the same railing before he stumbled over the edge of the boat and into the blackness of the sea.

Darren thrashed around in the choppy water trying to keep his head above the surface, gasping for breath, but he breathed in mouthfuls of saltwater. He tried to find the boat, find anything to swim towards, but there was only darkness. He went back under, unable to find his way upwards.

Deep beneath the surface, it was calmer, not much darker, quieter. There was no grouper, no twinkling scallops, no ticking, just a timeless silence and cold that would never change as long as Darren let himself continue to drift downwards into that deep black absence of sky.

A pair of arms circled around Darren's waist and pulled his head above the surface. Jeremy kicked against the waves as hard as he could, dragging Darren behind him. Alex helped them both onto the boat, hoisting Darren, coughing and sputtering, up by his arms.

They made it back to the beach house.

Jeremy came out of his room the next morning as Alex and Darren were packing up silently.

"Huh, look at that," Alex said. "You got a halo."

The brightest golden circle floated above Jeremy's head.

The ride back was silent for the most part. Some chit chat about college. Darren apologized for acting like such a dick. They forgave him as he knew they would, as they always would. But when they got back to Kenbridge, they dropped Darren off at his home first. They said a sweet goodbye, made plans to see him before they all left in a week or so. Then Jeremy and Alex drove off, driver and passenger, with a pair of halos shining at Darren in the rearview mirror.

### Flying North

James waited in a room at the front of the ship, a blanket draped over his shoulders and a cup of warm water gripped between his hands. He sat at a small table built into the corner of the room and watched out the windows on to the deck of the ship as a sudden drift of uneven rain puddled in the dents and tilted panels of the metal floors outside. The door from deeper within the ship opened and a man came in, sitting down in the chair on the other side of the room. The man looked somewhere in his late thirties, just a few years younger than James himself.

“James, I’m Arthur Klossner. Do you remember? We met earlier,” the man said.

*They had half dragged, half carried James from his stranded frozen boat, Arthur among them, as James spat at the men with the absence of strength left in his body. My daughter is still*

*in there, James told them as they dragged him away. My wife and daughter have to come too. They will die if I leave now. Please get my family too.*

James nodded.

“Good, good,” Arthur said. The two men watched the raindrops roll down the panes of glass and slide away from the Atlantic wind. “It’s nice seeing rain for a change,” Arthur said. “We haven’t seen rain in months. Just snow everywhere north of Florida. You’re American, right?”

James nodded.

“Me too. Well I grew up there, in Wyoming. I moved to Mexico after the freezing,” Arthur said.

The world was barren. Huge chunks of land became covered in ice in the first few years of the freezing, about fifteen years ago. The ice caps extending further and further until people had no choice but to leave. Europe was slowly deserted as people left for the equator. Canada, Russia, the UK, anything north of the Mediterranean was abandoned. People moved tighter and tighter in on Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, anywhere it was still warm enough to grow food. Now there was very little food left, people unable to grow crops, struggling to survive. All the while the world kept getting colder.

“How long were you stranded out there?” Arthur asked.

James looked down at the small amount of water in his cup. He took a sip and felt the warmth slide down into his belly.

“I understand if you don’t want to talk yet,” Arthur said, getting up. He placed a hand on the blanket around James’ shoulders. “Please understand we’re friendly.” Arthur stepped towards the door.

James rasped out a piece of a syllable then swallowed. “A few weeks,” he grunted.

Arthur nodded. He stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, leaning against the threshold. "How did you end up out there?"

"We left from Virginia, headed down to Florida. Hit a blizzard."

"How many of you were there?"

"My wife and daughter," he started to bring the cup to his lips and stopped. "Fatimah," he said. "Fatimah was my daughter. And Alice my wife."

"I'm sorry," Arthur said.

James had only lasted a few days longer than his wife and daughter, and wouldn't have made it another if they hadn't pulled up to James' frozen boat bobbing aimlessly in the ocean. James told him how they ran out of food first then water. He had refused to eat towards the end, saving it for his family, but they were unable to hold out any longer.

"I used the life raft and floated them out to sea the morning after they passed away," James said. "A rainstorm came through a couple hours later. First one in weeks. Probably saved my life." He stopped at that, not saying any more.

Arthur reached over from the doorway and patted him on the shoulder, then walked out, closing it behind him.

James finished the last few drops of lukewarm water from the bottom of his cup. He was too used to savoring it. He watched the spot of the door where Arthur had been and listened as the twin diesel engines beneath him generously propelled them forward.

The ship was large but not too big. It slept about 10 it seemed. James felt a familiarity to it, having worked on a similar sized boat before he moved to Virginia and got married. The bunk James slept in smelled like kerosene. A small hole of a window peered out just over the top of the water. He sat on the edge of his bed and watched out the window as dim blue moonlight illuminated

the darkness of his legs. He was wrapped up in a wool blanket but wore nothing underneath even as he blew clouds of chilled breath out into the room. He didn't sleep the first night on the ship. His entire body pushing him to close his eyes and forget. He just sat watching and listening as the water tilted up against the ship.

James was lying in the bed watching the sky through the window when Arthur knocked on the door. "Would you like some lunch, James?"

"Come in."

Canned peaches, two slices of toast and a glass of canned milk on a tin tray. James moved slow but ate quick, cramming multiple bites into his mouth at once. "I'd give you more," Arthur said, "but you shouldn't eat too much at first."

James found himself nodding slowly with the last bite of peaches in his mouth.

"The rest of the crew would like to meet you if you're interested," Arthur said.

James stopped nodding. "Yes," James said. "In a little while."

He came up the stairs to the bridge a few hours later where Arthur was sitting with the captain.

"Captain Morie," The giant man introduced himself. Well over six feet tall with a thick grey beard. There were a number of stars on his sleeve which he still proudly displayed. Another man in the room came over from the corner. A tall Mexican, Jorge, who turned out to be Guatemalan. He was fascinated by James' survival. James talked a bit with him, finding it nice to be around another sailor rather than the stiffness of Arthur. Jorge explained their route to James.

"What's in Iceland?" James asked, his voice still rasping. James liked most that Jorge wasn't bothered by his long pauses, patiently letting him process his new surroundings.

"*La esparanza*," Jorge said and Captain Morie laughed. James looked at them, confused.



“There’s a settlement forming around a seed vault in Iceland,” Arthur said. “I’m a botanist, and they’re going to need all the help they can get. Apparently the country wasn’t hit too hard.”

“Seed vault?” James said.

“There’s tens of thousands of different kinds of seeds all held in this vault,” Morie waved his arm through the air.

“There’s so much we can do, so many lives we can save with that amount of biodiversity,” Arthur said.

James could only imagine a cup of coffee when Arthur said that. It had been years since he had made coffee, splitting an entire pot with Alice before he left for the docks and she left to instruct her Tae Bo classes. It must have been before Fatimah was even born, the last time he had coffee.

“Let me help you,” James said. “I know my way around a boat. Let me stay. I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Arthur, Jorge, and Morie all laughed when he said it. “Well I’m glad you’d like to stay,” Arthur said. “I’m not sure where else we’d put you.”

James went another night without sleep. He dozed for maybe an hour during the day, sitting in the bridge watching the gray expanses of clouds around them. But now the dull ache of exhaustion kept his joints stiff and upright. He sat at the small table in his bunk with a pen and paper that he had asked Arthur for. He held the pen an inch from the paper and watched as the shadow from the single bulb of light in his room swayed over the top of the blank page. He needed to draw something. He drew a cloud, paused, and then scratched it out digging the nib deep into the paper. He had always drawn birds. He drew them so often when he first started sailing. Gulls and boobies, and the massive flocks of albatross off the coast of California. He hadn’t seen a flock

of birds in years. He started drawing the tucked in wing of a gull, but it ended up looking like a dark length of curling hair. As he brushed the pen across the page, Fatimah's skull appeared beneath the wing. He let the pen pause on the page and ink flowed out over her mouth and nose. He cut off the light and lied back down on the bed watching the ceiling.

James felt a constant throb between his shoulder blades the next morning, and a burn running down the muscles in his legs. He left his bunk and sat down as soon as he made the climb up into the bridge.

"Good morning James," Arthur said looking up with a smile from a sheet on a clipboard. Next to him sat a girl of about seven or eight with long black curls falling onto her shoulders. She was playing cards with Jorge, trying to teach him Go Fish, getting flustered whenever he made a mistake. But it was clear Jorge knew exactly what he was doing, smiling up at James whenever she got frustrated.

"James this is my daughter Camilla," Arthur said "I'd have introduced you sooner, but she's had a bit of a cold."

James could tell Arthur hadn't wanted him around her, but he understood. She had deep brown eyes. "Hi Mr. James," she said. "Do you know how to play Go Fish?"

James nodded. Jorge laughed, stood up and gave James his hand of cards.

"Hmm, do you have any queens, Mr. James?" She scrunched her face up and slitted her eyes, trying to intimidate him. He pulled the single queen from his hand and slid it over to her. She yelped and slapped down four queens on the table.

"Sevens?" He grunted. He cleared his throat. "Do you have any sevens?" he said a bit softer.

"Go fish," she said with a bright smile.

James slept sixteen hours that night.

\*

They were still a few days out from Iceland. James had very little to do. Both Jorge and Morie could pilot the ship. Arthur was busy doing who knows what in preparation for the seed vault. So James spent most of his time being entertained by Camilla. They played more Go Fish and he taught her Crazy Eights and Gin Rummy.

“Do you have a family, Mr. James?” She asked him as they played cards in a room near the back of the ship.

He didn’t know how to respond. He looked out the small window behind her onto the aft deck. A lifeboat sat tied down to the deck. He hoped it had never been used. “Yes, a wife and a daughter just about your age,” he said.

She threw down her hand of cards and jumped up. “Can I meet her?” Her eyes were wide with excitement.

“Maybe someday. But they’re all the way back in Virginia.” he said.

“That’s okay! It’s a deal,” she said, sticking her hand out to him. He smiled and shook it, wishing he hadn’t lied in the first place. James realized Camilla and Fatimah both had never had a friend near their own age.

“She’d love to meet you,” he said.

James explored the ship with Camilla, playing hide and go seek, looking for interesting nooks and crannies. He told Camilla about the world before the freezing and about how many birds there used to be. You could never look up in the sky without seeing a flock of birds soaring by. James often wished he didn’t feel so at peace.

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They reached the port of Reykjavik. Not a single boat floated in the noiseless harbor, just empty sections of dock with spaces waiting to be filled. The vacant concrete slabs jutting out into the bay were covered in a meter of snow and ice. James watched from the bridge with his forehead pressed against the glass, peering out, looking for any signs of life, but the only motion was the light push of the ocean against the docks.

Arthur was frantically talking into the radio trying to reach someone. James sat down across from Camilla who had given herself the overwhelming task of building a card house while at sea.

“No, it’s going to be a card *boat*,” she told him as he grabbed two cards to try for himself.

“Where is everyone?” Arthur snarled, letting go of the broadcast button. “Is anyone there? This is the UNV Svalbard. Requesting docking and escort to the nearest settlement.” He switched up to the next frequency. “This is the UNV Svalbard, does anyone read? Requesting docking. I repeat, this is the UNV Svalbard, requesting docking and escort to the nearest settlement.”

Camilla stood up on her chair. “Maybe they’re out fishing!” she announced with a smile.

“Camilla will you please be quiet,” Arthur snapped at her.

James had never seen Arthur so angry. But the rest of the crew paid him no mind, watching the snowy flats float by. She sat down, pouting and picked up two cards but didn’t do anything with them.

James leaned across the small table and said to her in low voice “They’re probably hiding from your grumpy dad.”

She squeaked out a laugh then clapped her hands over her mouth, slowly moving them to reveal her grin in secret to James.

They were approaching the center of the port. Camilla ran down the stairs and out onto the deck. Arthur gave a worried look at the back of her head as she disappeared from the bridge, but continued to yell into the radio. James dropped his cards and motioned to him that he'd go get her, then climbed down out of the bridge.

The window on the door to the deck was covered in ice. He pushed it open and a swell of wind careened around his head. He pulled his neck down into his coat against the almost unbearable chill. Camilla stood against the railing on the side closest to the shore. The wind was whipping her black curls towards James. He walked up to the railing and stood next to her, placing his feet in the small gap at the bottom of the rails and hanging his toes over the edge above the water. There was a complete stillness only broken by the cutting of their ship through the bay. It sprayed up and around the ship. James closed his eyes with a smile and anticipated each time a bit of the uncomfortably cold but familiar mist sprayed against his face.

They watched the houses and buildings as they floated by. They were painted in bright greens and yellows, all lively colors dulled by the mask of the surrounding ice. There was snow piled up around them, the lowest doors and windows almost completely covered.

"Where is everyone?" Camilla asked.

Some of the roofs had caved in from the weight of the ice, concrete walls reduced to rubble. "They're somewhere out there," James said to her. He said it in a way that made her eyes sparkle with excitement.

There were abandoned belongings in some places next to the docks in the areas where boats should have been. Families had dropped everything in the rush to leave that wasn't food or keeping the warmth under their skin. Fatimah had just been born when the second freezing had started to spread downwards from the North Pole. It came five or six years after the first, people already

starting to move south. James and Alice considered leaving Virginia then, just taking the boat and going for it, but they didn't want to risk the uncertain with Fatimah so small. James heard rumors that the storm coming would freeze you where you stood, turning you to ice from the outside in. Rumors that the oceans would freeze down past the US this time. He didn't believe them, but there was a lot they thought would never happen. The people in Iceland must have believed it too he realized, scrambling to get as far away as they could while it was still possible. Drag your family onto something going south while there was still room, then hope you ended up somewhere far enough away to survive.

"Look James, look!" Camilla pointed out over across the bay at a figure dressed in all black standing at the edge of one of the docks. The first thing James noticed was the burning cigarette hanging from his lips. He had his hands in his pockets and would take a drag every so often, just holding it in his lips, the red pinprick of light glowing through the thin fog. The man watched their ship float by, acting as if it was just another ship entering the port, though they were probably the first people in months.

"Hello!" She yelled out.

The man just took another drag of his cigarette. James waved. The man slid one of his hands out of his pocket, stopped, then gave the smallest turn of the wrist in greeting.

James moved between Camilla and the railing. "Come on Camilla let's go inside," he said peering across the water at him. The man flicked his cigarette away and climbed onto a snowmobile and sped off away from the boat.

They retreated to the warmth of the ship and hurried up to the bridge.

"Arthur, there's a man. Out on one of the docks," James said.

Arthur nodded, "We saw him." he still had the radio in his hand.

“Did you get in touch with anyone?” James asked.

“No, nobody’s out there. Well no one with a radio that is.”

James sighed. Everyone was watching out the window in the direction the man had been.

“It looks like there’s a good place to dock up ahead. So we can stop there and try to figure this out.”

As they floated closer to the dock they started to make out two figures in all black waiting for them as they approached. There were no other boats or people, just the men ready to tie up their ship. Jorge left the bridge and went down to the docks to help him. They steered the ship over against the dock and cinched it up tight.

“Camilla I want you to wait here while we’re gone” Arthur turned to James. “Will you stay here with her?”

“Of course,” James said.

Arthur smiled at them and he left with Captain Morie. Camilla jumped up in the captain’s chair and James stood next to her as they watched down onto the deck. Jorge extended the gangplank out onto the dock and one of the men crossed over. They both shook hands with him. James couldn’t hear what they were saying, but they seemed friendly enough.

About ten men in all black appeared from behind a building on the dock and walked coolly onto the boat. James could see the look of surprise on Arthur’s face as they walked by him, disregarding his presence and marching up onto the deck. Arthur yelled in confusion at the men, Morie did so as well, as they formed a wall behind Arthur and the captain, keeping them from leaving the boat. One of the men had pulled out a gun and was waving it nonchalantly at Arthur as he talked.

James grabbed Camilla’s hand tight in his. She was trembling.

“Come on Camilla. We need to go,” He tried to sound reassuring but it only made him more anxious. He pulled on her arm but she wouldn’t move from the window.

“What are they doing?” She asked near a whisper.

He pulled her hand again but she yanked it away. “It’ll be alright, Camilla, but we have to leave now.” James said.

She shook her head.

James picked her up in his arms and put her over his shoulder. She yelled and beat her fists against his back, starting to sob wildly. He descended from the bridge and ran down the corridor of the boat away from the bow and the black-clad men and into his cabin. She was still yelling and crying as he sat her down on the bed. He squatted down in front of her holding her head in his hands.

“Listen Camilla,” he said it strong enough to make her settle down. “Everything’s going to be alright. You have to stay here. Get under the bed and hide. You have to be quiet.”

“Where are you going?” She managed out.

“I’ll be right back, I promise. I have to go help your dad. Go on now. Get under the bed.”

James felt she was looking at him like it was the last time she would see a friendly face. But she got up and climbed under, moving as far back as she could into the corner.

“I’ll be back soon, Camilla. I promise.”

James shut the door to the bunk as soft as possible as he left her behind. The corridor was silent. He thought he heard Camilla cry out, but realized it was coming from the other end of the ship. He could hear voices yelling and talking frantically as he neared the door to the deck. He was squatted down beneath the window of the door, but slowly rose to look out. He could see about a dozen men in black and could just make out Arthur, Morie, and Jorge standing on the dock.



They were close to the door. James could barely hear what they were saying.

“I bet you have a lot of food in there for a journey all the way up here,” said the lead man in black. He was tall and lanky with short blond hair barely sticking out from under his black cap.

Arthur shook his head no. “Barely any,” he said looking at the ground.

The man scratched at the stubble on his chin. “Tell you what. In exchange for your boat...” James couldn’t make out the last part, but it caused Arthur to muster up some bit of courage because he yelled out in protest in a voice that assumed control.

The man smiled, pointed his gun at Morie’s head and fired. Arthur and Jorge watched as his body slumped over backwards. “There’s your food! Eat the fuck up!” The man aimed at Jorge who pleaded for him to stop, saying a prayer in Spanish, then was flung backwards as a shot rang out.

Camilla screamed from behind James. He whipped around to find she had crept up the length of the corridor to him.

He heard the blonde man shout something and people start to hurry towards the door.

The sound of another gunshot reverberated through the hallway, and James could only imagine the scene of the three men bundled up against the railing of the ship that was supposed to save them. He scooped up Camilla and sprinted down the corridor. Her dark curls splayed out over James’ arms, bouncing as he ran. He heard the door open up behind them as he burst through to the deck on the back of the ship. He sat Camilla down and pulled the rope tied to the lifeboat off of the cleat. He heaved the raft over and into the water.

The door behind them burst open and two of the men ran towards them. James grabbed Camilla around the waist and lifted her and himself up and over, falling into the water.

The sea swallowed them up, the chill knocking the wind out of their lungs before they could even take a breath. Camilla cried out as they hit the water, James moving too fast for her to follow. Her head went under the surface and he quickly pulled her back up as she sputtered and gasped for breath. The lifeboat was floating nearby and James began to paddle towards it, dragging Camilla along behind him.

The two men stood at the railing on the back of the boat watching them float away. Neither one made a move to follow after them, and stood there dumb and watching.

James slung his arm over the buoyant wall of the orange life raft and pulled himself up and over, then dragged Camilla in as well. Her brown eyes were black and lay bolted open in shock. He laid her down in a corner of the boat, and her unblinking stare rested upon the grey sky above them, her body heaving.

The rapid flurry of motion died down into complete silence. James watched one of the men spit over the side of the railing then turn and go back into the ship. The other stayed watching them. James looked around on the raft: no motor, just two small paddles velcroed to the walls of the boat. He ripped one out of its bindings and started to paddle. The freezing water began to set in burning through his muscles as he paddled, his hands frozen in place, clutched tightly around the oar.

After about a minute he heard the door to the ship open back up. He saw the blonde man come out with a look of fury. He raised the gun towards the raft. James threw the oar down and rolled on top of Camilla, curling his body around her.

James heard four shots. He didn't move, staying curled up as a shield for Camilla. She was silent beneath him. After a minute, James looked up. He hadn't been hit, neither had Camilla. Or the raft. They had floated a ways from the ship. The man was waving his arms around yelling at

the men, who both turned and went inside. He turned to look at Camilla and James, some distance off. He yelled at them and threw his pistol in their direction, out into the depths of the water. He turned and went inside.

“Camilla,” James placed his hand on her shoulder. She was still balled up at the edge of the raft. “Camilla, they’re gone,” he said. Her eyes fell down from the sky and onto his face, but she stayed quiet.

James picked up an oar and began to paddle towards the shoreline as far as possible from the ship. He didn’t want to land anywhere near them, but they couldn’t stay out on the water. The shore continued to fall away from them however. His fingers were frozen clutching the oar, fighting the burning in his back. The shore fell further and further away.

By night they could no longer see land.

It was clear enough in the morning that the men weren’t going to chase after them. They awoke to the light of a dull grey sky.

“James?” Camilla spoke for the first time. He was looking every which way trying to catch a glimpse of something that indicated land, trying to remember where they had come from, if they had gotten turned around, how the wind was blowing. The endless expanse of dark water was too familiar for James.

“Yes, Camilla?”

“I’m thirsty,” she said.

A storm rolled through on their second day stranded. More rain, luckily. Just warm enough to not be covered in ice. James realized it probably didn’t matter either way though. They were shivering ceaselessly now. The chattering of Camilla’s teeth was the only sound for long periods

of time. He rubbed her shoulders when he could, trying to share his warmth. They drank the rain water that ended up in the raft. But they were frozen where they sat.

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A seagull sat perched on the side of the life boat watching them. James had barely opened his eyes. It was some point in the third day. Camilla lay motionless balled up next to him in the floor of the raft. He tried to say her name but he was too weak to speak. The seagull looked at James and called out at him. It was a huge herring gull. James hadn't seen one possibly since before the freezing. He wanted to shoo it away but couldn't find the strength to move his arm, tell it there was no food for it here, tell it to go find some land to settle on.

“Camilla,” he managed out, wanting to wake her. “Camilla, look.”

Camilla didn't respond. He fell silent.

## Delta P

We were runners in the Gagarin District. The first of three districts built on the Moon. The oldest and by default the shittiest. Some of the oldest Earthborn joked that it was named after a Russian so everyone was just waiting for the blemish to crumble into a heap of carbon in the dusty bowl of Mare Serenitatis. I was a young Earthborn, Daniel Nardin, 28 years old and three years removed from the black and blue seas of Terran fertility and jet fueled through miles of emptiness to a rock that could contain my insignificance. The Moon is the last stop. Where the sick and the depressed and the moderately poor come to find happiness or to finish off their lives or to prematurely end them.

“Up front,” said Senior Lead Johnson, head of the Gagarin runners. Runners were important on the moon. We might as well have been the only symbol of strength in a glass bubble of 300,000 cash carting miners and suicidal dust mites. Runners fixed holes. The carbon glass

geodesic domes around the Districts were exceptionally tough but got shelled daily by asteroid bits, sometimes the occasional full on meteorite. Aldrin District; shining, buzzing, fancy Aldrin district got rocked by a four footer a few years before. The rock punched straight through the first two domes and cracked the third, the fourth and final dome untouched. Laika District had three domes and had never been hit by anything that big.

Gagarin District only had two shells around. It housed the junkies and the sick, whoever had made it the 238,000 miles but would never make it back, the once rich and the suicidal, the same thing, the helmetheads like me who lived in squalor but made a huge grab of cash, about as much as a Laikan Helium miner. Gagarin had been waiting seventeen years for a third dome. In that time, Aldrin got a fourth, Laika got a third and around 20,000 Gagarians had offed themselves. The leading cause of death on the moon was explosive decompression. A fancy way of saying vacuum assisted suicide.

Sr. Ld. Johnson went down his list of the day's runs and eventually said in my direction "Nardin, Bomba, Crespo. C8 got an outer shell punch and a life shell split about eight inches long. Don't know if it's cracked through yet. Go find out."

Bomba grumbled next to me. "That son of a bitch. He hates my ass, I swear to god," he said through his teeth with a smile and thumbs up pointed at Johnson. "He sends me out every day on life splits." He quit smiling and spat at the concrete floor between his feet. We were in a huge gray box of a room with about fifty other runners.

Runners got paid a lot because runners died a lot. When the outer dome got a crack in it: no big deal, hop outside, do a patch, done in an hour. Now if the inner "life" shell got a hole, that's when you were in the shit. Delta P ( $\Delta$ pressure): the pressure differential. The Districts and everything inside, were highly pressurized, and everything outside was pressure-less. The air

moved naturally from an area of high pressure to an area of low pressure. And if a runner got too close to this natural flow of air through maybe a 3 inch hole in the glass, the runner was sure as hell going to get sucked right through those 3 inches too.

“Come on, Bomba,” I said, standing up while Johnson was still calling out assignments. I punched him on the back. “Where you at, Crespo?” I yelled out across the room, shutting up half the disquiet. Johnson stopped speaking long enough to throw his arms out in a *what the fuck, Nardin?* and then pointed at lanky, timid Crespo on the side of the room. Crespo was two weeks a runner and probably stupid and probably got stuck on an assignment with two old guys like us so he wouldn’t get himself killed. But who was actually keeping track?

We were old timers there, Bomba and I. He had nine years under his belt, by far the oldest, been around three years longer than Sr. Ld. Johnson. But he loved running, turned down three promotions. In another two months I was up for promotion to Rookie Lead. Most guys that made it three years in running took their savings and went into mining management in another district, or some safe plan like that. That’s what I was thinking as well.

We got to the locker and suited up. Crespo didn’t say a word.

“How old are you, kid?” I said. His suit was big on him. He was small even for his age.

“Fifteen,” Crespo said, looking down at the oversized gloves sagging heavy off the frame of his wrists.

“I bet you’re lunar born, aren’t you, kid?” Bomba said. The lunar kids look kind of stretchy. Growing up in the lighter gravity makes them a little lankier, sunken muscles.

“Yep. Gagarin born and raised.” He said it with pride. He said it as I imagined his father always told him to say it. Chest out, eyes to the dome, with a lion’s heart.

“Alright, Crespo,” Bomba said. “Me and Nardin here love us a fucking pure blooded Gagarian. You’re in. We’ve been looking for a third member for the Bomb Squad for a while now. What do you say?”

The kid’s eyes sparkled when he heard that. Runners were akin to superheroes in our world. Faceless helmeted supermen holding up the glass dome of the sky. And the Bomb Squad was the poster child of the work (Bomba and myself). We were well known even up to Aldrin District. Every district had runners. Laika and Aldrin, kilometers away from Gagarin, well over the horizon, each had their own set of runners, but they almost never had life splits. Never had to worry about a Delta.

Crespo just nodded with a full faced grin. Bomba winked at me when the kid was turned away. A bit of encouragement can hit you just as warm in the gut as a shot of Ballantine’s. Enough to keep your hands the slightest bit steadier as you’re scrambling away from the suck of a Delta.

“You’ve been out a couple times, right?” I asked the kid as we left and made our way to the C airlock.

He nodded. “Twice. Never a life split though.”

“More cash, kid!” Bomba chimed in, making a big bound in front of us.

“It’s a piece of cake. We’ll walk you through it,” I said. “Bomba, you wanna take the outside? I’ll show the kid the ropes on the inside.”

“Sounds good to me.” He disappeared through an airlock on the side.

I put my helmet on and motioned for him to do the same. I checked his suit out. And let him look at mine, not expecting him to catch anything even if it was wrong. Through a metal door. A big red light. My keycode. A click, a click. Another door down. Another door open. And a loud rush of air as the pressure dissipated into the walls and the outside door rose upwards.



The dome was made of huge triangular sections connected by metal tubes of scaffolding, the glass rising a few hundred meters or so above the city beneath us. As we traversed the dome along the thin metal walkways, we were “hanging” from the ceiling. We took our time getting to triangle C8 and eventually caught sight of Bomba making his way along the outside scaffolding to our destination, deft as an acrobat.

The city was almost dark beneath us, the sun at full apex above our helmets, the shine swallowed by the dark transitioned glass. Gagarin looked like a home from this high up. It looked strong. I caught the boy staring down beneath us. Maybe at his parent’s apartment. Maybe at someone else’s.

“We’re almost there, kid.” I said and could hear my radio softened voice barely crackle an echo back at me in my helmet.

He nodded.

“It’s beautiful from up here, isn’t it?” I said.

His loose fitting gloves gripped the railing with as much strength as he had, 200 meters of empty air beneath him and the dust below. “Yes it is,” he said.

“How’s it looking, Bomba?” I said into my headset.

There was a bit of static and an uncertain groan. “Shit Danny,” Bomba said. “It’s pretty fucking bad.”

The hole in the outer shell was big but not anything too bad to handle. But the inside crack was about 3 feet long, a few inches wide, and raging. The district shells were extremely tough. It wasn’t a matter of the shell crumbling to the ground and the whole city getting blasted out into space, it was a problem of a leaking atmosphere. And this was the kind of hole that could drain Gagarin’s air supply in a couple days.

“Son of a bitch,” I mumbled. The three of us were stopped at C6, about a hundred feet away. I radioed Johnson and told him the typical bad news.

“Alright, god dammit. I’ll send Donatelli out with a diamond patch.”

We sat and waited and watched as particles of dust glinting in the sunlight flew to the face of the crack then spewed out the other side.

Donatelli must have booked it and was there in about six minutes with a five foot diamond cap.

“This good?” He said, extending it to its full size.

“That’s good,” I said.

He ran off back down the scaffolding before anyone could ask him to get anywhere near the hole.

“How’s it hangin’ out there Bomba?”

“It’s chill. Ready whenever y’all finish up.”

I took a deep breath of stale and swift atmosphere inside of my helmet. “Alright kid, we’re gonna start making our way to the split. You do not move unless I say so, got it?” I forced the words at him.

He blinked harder than he nodded.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Follow me, slow.”

We started walking along the scaffolding to the split one easy step at a time. Having been out here long as I had, I could feel when the delta started to tug. Get too close over that horizon and it would suck someone straight to the sky. I gave one end of the diamond sheet to Crespo and we stretched it out to about five feet square and a centimeter thick then continued approaching the hole.

“Y’all are looking good,” Bomba said. We were about twenty feet out.

I felt the Delta. Twenty feet out and I could feel the pressure sucking me towards evisceration.

“Fuck, Bomba, I don’t know how much closer we can get. That Delta is raging.”

“Yeah Danny, you aren’t kidding.”

“Alright Crespo, let’s get three steps closer.” He nodded and we inched our way towards the hole in the glass. I’m sure the kid could feel it by then, oxygen flying past his helmet at the speed of an atmosphere, rattling the loose fabric around him.

That was as close as we could get. “You know how we do this now?” I said to Crespo. “Course you don’t,” I continued. “We throw it.” He looked about as confused as I could have expected. “Yep when you’ve got a hole the size of this one you just chuck the plate and hope it gets caught in the vacuum of the split and sticks.”

“He’s serious, kid,” Bomba said.

“Sounds as good a plan as any,” Crespo said and smiled. We laughed.

“That’s Bomb Squad material right there if I’ve ever seen it,” Bomba yelled.

We set up about fifteen feet out from the hole, holding the glass like you would a kid by the wrists and ankles, and started to swing it as I counted down, back and forth and back and forth and back and we let go, the square diamond plate spinning and flying out and then by an invisible grasp plucked from the air and slammed against the glass, the gust of atmosphere around our helmets coming to a sharp halt, the hole neatly covered.

“Hell yeah! Good throw you two,” Bomba shouted.

“Nice shooting, Crespo,” I said.

“Chalk up another for the Bomb Squad,” the kid said with his squeak of a voice and a bright smile. Bomba and I howled with laughter. Crespo did too. Grinning, the kid ran over under the plate to see the hole and before I could yell at him, was silently plucked from the surface of the scaffolding, his body thrown against the glass. Three or four inches of crack left uncovered by the plate tugged and tugged at his suit until it ripped open, a thunder of static entering our headsets as the rush of vacuum drained every last breath of air, flesh and water inside of him, a quick yelp, and then silence. His body hung from the ceiling, filling in the last few inches of the split.

Δ

“People keep coming and people keep quitting.”

Bomba told me that when I first met him. I came here to breathe a few last breaths, get closer to the stars, before I ended my life. Girlfriend left me. Family didn’t acknowledge me. The promise of one last chance on the moon. I spent about every dollar I had to make the trip, and truly left nothing on Earth but footprints. I was born at 25 years old into the cold sterility of a vast metal spaceport, the air saturated with dust and the copper stench of jet fuel, a single bag by my side with one pair of shoes and a change of clothes. The first quarter century of my life liquidated down into a few digits worth of credit.

My bed was the only piece of furniture in my room. My room was the entirety of my apartment. The blankets were grey. My walls were grey. The paint across the door to my apartment was red:

*The Moon is a shithole.*

*The Moon is where you die.*

*Welcome to Gagarin*

Some new junkie had gone through and painted it down the door of every single apartment on my floor. It had been around for weeks and not a single person had taken the time to scrub it off.

It was a few days after Crespo got squeezed. My earpiece glowed blue in the darkness of my room. It gave a warm hum and said Bomba's name. I rolled over and snatched it off my bedside table and put it in my ear, closing my eyes and rolling back over.

"Get up, Danny," Bomba said.

I mumbled no.

"I'm not coming over there."

He only lived five minutes away. "Good. I would prefer that," I said.

"Dammit, will you cut the shit, man?" He yelled. The earpiece compressed it down into no more than a crackle.

"I told the kid. I told him don't move an inch unless I tell you to," I said.

"I know that. Johnson knows that. Everybody knows that it wasn't your fault. You're the only one stuck on it. Quit thinking so much."

This wasn't the first time I had been with someone when they got killed by a Delta. Or the second or third time. But Christ, the kid was only fourteen years old.

"Fourteen, Bomba. Fourteen years old," I said.

"He was fifteen, Danny. See? You're even making it seem worse in your own miserable head."

I was making it seem worse.

"Am I?"

“Yes. It’s rough. I liked the kid too. His parents probably did as well if they’re still around. I’m getting a drink downstairs. Come get a drink.” He ended the call.

I was making it seem worse.

I sat up in bed and clapped and the lights came on. Black jeans and a dark grey turtleneck. I pulled on a coat as I rinsed with mouthwash. My eyes were blue. I pulled at the loose skin above my cheeks. Dark and bruised beneath my eyes. More bags than I owned.



It was never warm “outside.” Relative outside. Gagarin was in a perpetual state of cold, because cold was cheap. Cold was natural. I pulled my neck down into the collar of my coat. The air around me pulsed in a change of pressure as I opened the door and walked out of my apartment building. Almost every building in the district was 5 stories tall and uniformly rectangular.

The first floor of Bomba’s apartment building was a crowd of bars. He was sitting at his favorite one talking to the bartender, an attractive young blonde. The bar was a bit empty, just a few junkies and jobless types. I sat down next to Bomba who already had a beer for me.

“Scuse me, Danny,” he said and hopped up towards the bathroom.

I chatted with the bartender. She was excited to meet the other half of the Bomb Squad. She was Earthborn just like Bomba and me. She had come to the moon after trying to kill herself, just like Bomba and me. She had been working in the barhouse (the building) for a while and was one of the very few in Gagarin that had built a happy life for herself in the face of the droning pull of the lunar dust.

“Alright let’s get out of here,” Bomba said from behind me. “Sweet as ever, Daisy.” He kissed the air and put an exorbitant tip on the counter, pulled me by the shoulder as I finished my beer, and we stepped out into the chill of the high noon.

We began walking towards the side of the dome.

“She’s a cutie.” Bomba whistled. “I’m telling you, she’s got a thing for me,” he said.

There was no wind inside of the dome. There was only pressure.

“I don’t know how much longer I can do it, Bomba,” I said, “I’m losing my grip.”

He stopped walking. Hands shoved deep in his pockets, looking down at his feet, he sighed. “I really want to tell you to grow a pair, Danny. But I can tell you’re serious.” He took one hand out of his pocket, pointed at me, opened his mouth to speak, but curled his index finger back into his fist. “In the decade I’ve been on this rock, I’ve been right where you’re at right now, maybe three, four times? Remember when Porter offed himself?”

I nodded. It was about a year before. A guy that had been a runner for five years. Closest friend Bomba had before I showed up. Tall guy. Fell to the pressure. There’s always a tipping point.

“I was in it deep then, man,” Bomba said. “Don’t know how many times I about gave up and spaced myself.” Let the cold vacuum of dust rush into your helmet and carry your body to the ground.

We sat down on the concrete walkway, backs against the wall of an almost featureless apartment building. Bomba pulled out a chewing stick, smokeless cigarettes, and handed me one, then tucked the package back down in his jacket pocket. We sat with our knees pulled into our chests, both of us grinding the end of a stick between our teeth, the gentle drip of nicotine and

THC pooling beneath my tongue, and a slow crawl of warmth settling in at the base of my neck and the tips of my ears.

Bomba finally figured out what to point at.

“That,” he said, finger extended to the sky. “That is my bastion. That is why I am still alive. Do you see all those marks out there? All those patches across the domes? That is my purpose. I figured that out after Porter died.”

I thought about faking ignorance and telling him *no shit that’s why everyone in Gagarin is alive*. But I knew what he meant. Hanging 300 meters above the city, we were carbon studded invincible. We were the protectors of the thin shreds of home that coursed through the streets beneath us. The Gagarians covered in the filth of Lunar dust looked up at the worker bees keeping their sky from crumbling down in shards of diamond and emptiness, and held their breath. Down here we were nothing. All the runners, even the Bomb Squad, only existed as pinpricks of light and legend in the cold glass sky. On the ground we were just one of the endless faces that made a Gagarian feel closer to a hero. It didn’t connect. *I’m a runner*. The person you told would smile and look up to the sky, only able to imagine a helmethead in a silver and orange suit punching away meteorites. A conversation became an expression of righteous gratitude and the moment you left, your seamless face floated back into the slumped sea of Gagarian posture, while your body was forever adorned to the plate diamond vault of the heavens.

But in the sky we endured.

“I thought I could make it here,” I said. “I knew this place would be the end of me, hell that’s why I came. But I always kinda thought maybe I’d end up making it.”



“Hell, making it three years out here ain’t bad, Danny. I mean my ten years is fucking tremendous, but three years ain’t the worst.” He gave a sideways grin at me and I laughed and spat my now stale chewing stick at his smug face.

“People keep coming and people keep quitting.” He put his hands behind his head and spat his stick to the sidewalk. “You know, I think people think they’re going to be happy when they get here because when they’re on Earth, they look up in the night sky and see how goddam bright and beautiful the moon is, and think *that’s where I need to be*. Then when they’ve finally landed their feet here on the dust, they look up at the Earth all big and bad taking up half the sky and say *wow man. would you look at those blues and greens.*”

We walked back to my apartment. *The moon is a shithole* written in blue now across the entrance.

“Can I get another stick? I’m out,” I said.

Bomba handed me the carton.

“Listen Danny,” he said. “I know you’re up for promotion in a couple months, and as appealing as that may sound, you have to turn it down. Broken guys like me and you aren’t cut out for that managerial shit. That’s what happened to Porter. Two months as a Lead, and,” he made a floaty motion with his hand, “that was all he could take.”

“I dunno,” I said. “I don’t know if I can make it either way.”

Bomba nodded. “Coming to work tomorrow?” he asked.

They gave runners a couple days off after an accident, which in our case was probably counterintuitive.

“Yeah I am,” I said, pulling a stick out of the carton. “I’ve got nothing else to do.”

“That’s that Bomb Squad spirit,” Bomba smiled. “Just give the promotion some thought,” he said. “Let me know. See you tomorrow.” He turned and drifted down the stale air of the hallway to a staircase and out of sight.

# Δ

Pressure exchange. The airlock blast doors made a well-timed opening and Bomba and I journeyed away from Gagarin on the outside of the dome. The silence outside was notable. The only sounds were my footfalls sending waves up through my suit and into my helmet.

I was less than a week out from the promotion. Bomba was probably right. I wouldn’t last very long stuck on the inside of the dome. But I was going to take the job anyways. Try out something new. If I couldn’t stand it, I could always go back to being a runner. And if I ended up getting ripped through by a Delta, so be it. I’d permanently be a part of the sky.

We were moving around on the dust on the outside around the base of the dome to A13, about as far from an airlock as possible. Our steps sent little clouds of dust up into the air that shimmered in the sunlight and settled back down in ripples.

We made it to the section of shell. A small thin crack on the outer pane. About fifteen minutes of work. Bomba dropped the bag of tools and made a leap forward, planted his feet in the dust then did a front flip, stuck it and threw his arms up and his head back towards the sun.

“Careful now,” I said, “Don’t jump too high or I might have to fly out and get you.”

This was maybe our last run together before I took the promotion. Bomba hated the idea, I could tell. But he said he had faith in me anyways. He did another front flip.

There was a sharp brief moment of static on our headsets then a long sine wave. Bomba stopped. That wasn’t normal.

Johnson's voice came through loud and amplified in our helmets. "Every runner, get your ass back to an airlock, immediately."

I shrugged at him. Bomba sent a message over. "Johnson this is the Bomb Squad. What exactly is going on?"

We waited for a minute on a reply.

The radio screeched then crackled. "Bomba, I've got no time for your shit. We've got a six footer incoming, get to a bunker, *now*."

We sprinted back the way we came.

In the moment of intense survival, my disquiet was overcome. There was something innately human in the way unhappiness could be quelled by the swift pressure of existence.

There was an explosion of glass above us where the meteor slammed into the shells and through the dome we saw a fireball burst forth from the center of the city, a swirl of hot oxygen and flames and debris rocketing outwards through the newly born hole and into the emptiness above.

We stopped and watched as pane after pane of the shells fell to the city below. Gagarin rapidly rushing into existence as a wasteland. Bomba placed his orange suited hands on top of his helmet. I grabbed his shoulder.

"We need to get back," my voice rang out dull in my helmet and without the familiar static echo. "Bomba?" The radio was out. I tapped on his helmet. He dropped his arms and turned to face me, pointing at his ear. I nodded.

We made it to the airlock. It too was cut off. No way inside.

Bomba slowly got down on his hands and knees and drew in the dust: *O<sub>2</sub>*?

I checked the meter on my arm. About two hours of oxygen left. Two hours to try and find a way not only inside the city, but to a bunker we could access. I motioned for him to follow and began moon jogging off to circle the base of the dome.

Gagarin was finished. The hole that had been punched through the shells had cascaded into the top third of the dome collapsing in on itself. A layer of plate glass and concrete dust had already settled over the city. There would have been fires all across the heart of the district if all of the oxygen hadn't have been sucked clean out into the sky.

I tried my best to keep my eyes from wandering inside of the dome as we walked through the endless gray dust. Did anyone make it? They must have had some kind of warning. Johnson was sure to have contacted the runners from a bunker. Daisy might have made it out of the barhouse. Or she just has easily could have been slumped over the counter, a quick decompression releasing the air from her lungs and the glasses from the shelves.

One hour left.

I wrote in the dust: *Ideas?*

He shook his head no.

We continued to wander. The silence had grown into a steady hum gnawing at the back of my scalp. The sun pointed down on us with a vicious fluorescence that penetrated every shadow and dent on the surface. Miles of dust, all circling around in a continuous monotonous loop, distance only marked by the changing angle of tragedy within the glass.

A square box illuminated in the sunlight, a few hundred meters away from the dome. Bomba pointed and jumped up high as he could in the low gravity. He landed and wrote in the dust: *maintenance outpost / pretty old / maybe O<sub>2</sub>?*

We ran towards it, somewhat in a race, Bomba just a bit faster, always a step ahead.

An oxygen line ran along the base of the outpost with about a dozen or so ports for connection. We reached it. My wrist said twenty minutes of oxygen left. I pulled a valve on my suit which sprang out a long coiled hose, Bomba did the same. I plugged it into the base of the outpost and my suit expanded with the pressure of a fresh stream of air, and I breathed as deep as I could, letting the oxygen linger in every crack of the material.

Bomba was also stretching in the new breath of air. He smiled at me. He knelt down in the dust and wrote: *Now we wait.*

Δ

Sixty hours? Seventy hours? I felt the ground trembling the slightest bit beneath me. All I wanted was a glass of water and to lay down in my grey bed with my grey blankets. The ground trembled more and my eyes snapped open. A truck was headed in our direction, a big one with at least a dozen wheels, plenty of room to carry us back to whatever shelter was now home to the Gagarians that were still alive.

I looked over at Bomba. He hadn't woken up, his back against the metal box of the outpost, facing away from me. Our games of tic-tac-toe and minimal conversations laid out written in the dust between us. There was something new scrawled out beside his left leg.

I stood up and made sure the truck saw us. I walked over and grabbed Bomba by the shoulder. I stepped on something. His air hose was unplugged and coiled up beneath my foot. I gripped his arm and yanked him towards me by the fabric of his suit, a vacuum of its own space, and Bomba's orange and shining silver clad body slumped over onto the ground, his helmet sending a plume of dust up into the air.

*Gagarin is gone.*

*I've decided to leave too.*

*You are the Bomb Squad.*

*People keep coming.*

I stood over him watching the dust fall around his body. Through Lunar silence and piercing sunlight it settled evenly, a thin layer covering his suit. Burial in the fine powder that enabled his release. I crouched down and opened the lock on his helmet and pulled it off slowly, laying his head on the ground. He looked asleep. I sat the helmet down next to him digging it into the dust. Someone had to climb out of the truck to walk me away.

The truck was almost too full to get on. I didn't fight to bring Bomba with us. He was lucky enough to at least be on the outside of the mass grave of Gagarin. We were being carted over to Laika, around the deep bowl of Mare Serenitatis, the Sea of Tranquility. I tucked myself in tight in one of the corners. A family sat across from me, mother, father, and son. The kid was lunar born. Tall and lanky for his age, four or five. He looked like Crespo. I realized everyone was staring at me. A runner in the middle of a crowd of desolates and unfortunates. I popped my helmet off into a slight change of pressure. Did they blame me for the death of their city? The air inside the truck tasted staler than the air in my suit. Everyone eased back into normalcy and their own heads once they could see my face.

The kid moved towards me. The mother wanted to stop him, but didn't or wasn't quick enough. He stopped and looked down at my helmet with a forgetfulness and fascination that only a child could muster up.

I picked the helmet up off of my lap and offered it out to him.

“Here.”

He took it and held it in his arms, wider around than his chest, and wiped a hand across the dust on the face of it. He put it over his head, a big silver dome perched precariously on his shoulders. I straightened it for him and he reached up to hold it in place.

### The Leaves in the Tracks

Carter stood on the porch of the only church in Nairemont watching the rain spill over the clogged gutters and splatter on the grey wooden railings which were almost falling apart in the dampness. There were two white rocking chairs on the porch that he ignored and two small dark stained glass windows that obscured his view of the funeral. So he leaned against the awkward white support, which held up the roof in the very middle of the porch, smoking the most expensive pack of cigarettes he could find at the Exxon down the road. He smelled the toadstools. Earthy tones that came off acidic and damp like old cardboard in blue recycling bins.

Nobody ever talked about how wet it was in Virginia. The Appalachians always reeked of fresh moss and molting fungus crawling up over soggy wet fallen tree trunks. This was Carter's first time back in Nairemont in almost two years, where it rained 150 days out of the whole. He had put the dim chill of Alaska to his back.



Aunt Patricia made a silent slip through the white antique French doors of the church, paused as she saw him and gave him a glance downwards. She parked her feet next to his and held out two fingers hidden by her late winter leather gloves. She kept her gaze steady on the dozen or so parked cars crammed into and down the sides of the small gravel parking lot lined with pines. Carter placed a Parliament between her knuckles and she leaned her mouth down to it, craning her neck out for a light. He offered the butt of the lighter to her, and she snatched it away.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” she said as she roasted the cigarette dangling from her lips. “You look ancient.”

Carter’s Aunt was probably in her early sixties, he was pretty sure, almost four decades older than him. “And you have diabetes,” he said.

“Less years I have to worry about. Good on you. You remember.” She took a second long deep drag and held it then tossed her cigarette out over the railing and a sharp distinct hiss trebled as a quick raindrop popped it in the air. Carter’s knuckles were bent frozen so he did the same and shoved them into the pockets of his pea-coat. She gave him a quick hug.

“It’s good to see you,” she said.

“You too.” Carter didn’t like how gruff his voice sounded and how much of a squeak his Aunt Patty’s voice had become and he still didn’t like the rain. “How is the funeral?” he said.

“How long have you been standing out here? It hasn’t started. But everyone’s here.”

“Five minutes.” Fifteen minutes.

“Come inside.” She grabbed his hand and led him toward the doors, persistent, with energy, but slow. He felt at home for the first time in the two hours he had been back. This familiar force of warmth led him through the double doors to his family.

The church was very warm. Some of the thirty or so people in the pews turned to see what presence unleashed the torrential resonance of rain into the sanctuary, but some kept their eyes forward, his mother one of them.

Patty whispered up to his ear. "Why don't you just sit with me." They walked about four pews forward and slid in near the back where her small purse and second husband sat. He smiled at the both of them. A nice man, round belly, flannel fixation, who must have moved to town recently because apparently he didn't know Nairemont or Carter or his family or maybe even who had died.

Carter's kid brother Barth was the reason in the casket, why a piece of Nairemont had gathered into family lines along the cracking oaken seats. Barth was alive and then he wasn't. An unknown hole in the lining of his heart left him slumped over in the middle of an empty hallway, wheeling his way back from the bathroom to class. Carter eased onto the boards next to Patty and crossed his hands in his lap. His closest family sat in the front row, only his mother and Grandma now and his mother's head had sunk lower towards her knees.

The pastor began to speak to them. Words and blessings and tears. Carter kept his head down. He could picture his brother through the polished maple, a brown silk cloak with glowing curves. His brother would have an easy time hoisting himself up into a seated position using the padded sides of the coffin, dragging his lifeless legs across the cushion telling Carter to come here come here I've got a secret to tell you, Barth leaning in close to Carter's ear and cupping his hands "My pockets are full of Lemon Drops" he whispered and said to Carter that could have one if he'd like. Leaning against the coffin Carter gave the wrapper a quick pull on each edge twisting the plastic straight and placed the yellow rock in his lip rolling it into place like a pinch

of dip. Barth was still 13 and lanky and sometimes he could even walk if Carter thought hard enough.

The pastor spoke. “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope- we believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him- according to the Lord's own word we tell you that we who are still alive who are left till the coming of the Lord will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.”



“Are you awake, Carter?” Barth peeked down over the bunk bed railing.

Carter gave a content sigh. “Yep,” he said with his eyes closed. He could feel just a hint of sunlight on his eyelids creeping into their room.

“Do you think we’re leaving soon?” Barth whispered.

“Dad’s probably not even awake yet.” Carter hummed. He was fifteen years old and starting to look like his father, a good bit of hair sprigging out on his chin. Barth was seven years younger but the two held on to each other like hands in a rainstorm. Barth learned all the things that maturity had to offer, the fun and the independence, and Carter remembered the unmistakable goodness that was bundled up in childhood.

The door to their room cracked open letting a sliver of hallway light into their room. “Are you boys coming or what?” said a hushed voice.

Barth threw his legs over the side of the bed and dangled from the railing like a monkey, grinning. “Come on, Carter!” he said.

Their father Eddy took the two boys in his four door pickup out on the trail near the driveway to their home. Deep through the pines and moss and fallen leaves of late autumn until the trail was no longer a trail and the branches scraped the windshield as they drove. Out and out, miles out to a broad pasture where some kind of cattle must have grazed in some past. They pulled to a stop right at the edge of a big clearing, the sun still low to the pine tops and rising. Eddy hopped out. Light blue blue jeans, black shaggy hair and mustache and thick brown jacket. Eddy opened the door behind him for tow-haired Barth who jumped down into the grass grinning a toucan's smile.

A long split rail fence lined the closest edges of the pasture. "That's locust, boys" Eddy told them, "They call it stone wood, doesn't rot. This fence is probably a hundred years old." Eddy lined up a row of beer cans all along the fence probably fifty cans down and down and down the rails. "Today you two are going to learn how to shoot," Eddy said matter of fact, like they were going to stand out in the dampness of the forest until they could hit a Budweiser in the u from a hundred yards. "Remember, if your mother asks, we're fish-ing. I even brought the tackle."

He put the .22 pistol tight in Carter's hands, standing behind him, Eddy held his own hands over Carter's to show him how to hold the gun. "Here's the safety, see that?" he snapped the safety on and off "Now turn it off and back on," he said releasing Carter's palms. "There you go. Alright you see that bud light sitting on the corner there? Closest to us. Are you watching this Barty? Your brother is about to split it down the middle. Go ahead, Carter."

Eddy stepped away from him and they stood watching. Carter held the cold metal as steady as he could while his father and brother stood behind him letting small white clouds of breath hang in the air. He squeezed down and a sharp ping followed the crack of the gun. A can flew off the fence about five feet away from the one he had aimed at. Eddy laughed and told him to put the

safety on, waited for him to do so then patted him on the back. “A couple more shots Carter, then we’ll let your brother try.”

They stayed out there until Carter could hit a can every fifteenth shot or so, a few hours. Barth didn’t have as much luck. “Alright that’s about it, boys. Finish this last clip, son,” Eddy said as he reloaded it, the sun high in the sky, “and then we’re gonna head back.” He handed it to Barth. “Just take your time, breathe slowly.” Barth pointed at the can nearest him, they had pegged down about twenty or so since they had been out to the pasture, a long line of them still stood down the fence. Barth shot once, waited, shot again, shot a third time. “I can’t hit it,” he whined.

“It’s alright!” Eddy said. “Just try again. You’ve got four more shots.” Barth shot two more times, one of them hitting the leaves just behind the can he was aiming at. “Close, Barty! Two more.” Barth breathed, exhaled, aimed and a crack and a ping as the High Life flew off the railing. “Did you see that!” Barth yelled and he swung around and the pistol let out another crack and the .22 buried into Carter’s side hitting a rib and breaking apart, half of it stopping and half bouncing up higher in his back missing his stomach and his lungs and everything vital, lodging itself between Carter’s spinal cord and his vertebrae.

A cold steel room. “We removed the two fragments near the surface but we’ve decided it’s best to leave the final fragment in, at least for the time being. We’ll see how he does as he recovers. If there’s no problematic effect, it’s best to not attempt a surgery in such a tight proximity to his spinal cord.” Three X-rays were slapped up on the light boards with two indicative circles, a small sawtooth round chunk of white sat between vertebrae T10 and vertebrae T11 and for the rest of his life caused Carter to feel static in a 3 inch radius around his belly button.



Carter flicked a two thirds burnt cigarette out into the soaked grass after Barth's funeral. Most everyone had already left and offered him their prayers as they walked out under the murky sky. His mother and grandmother were still inside and he had slipped out before he had to face them. Soon enough. Most likely Patty would make her way out again and drag him through the doors back into the green apple embrace of his family. They were the last four relatives of Barth — grandmother, Patty and mother, and Carter. He lit another cigarette. Smoked it, soaked it, and walked inside.

They were sitting in the front pew receiving some final condolences from the pastor. Carter sat down across the aisle and waited. The pastor nodded to him as he left. Carter stood up. "Hi, mother."

His grandma, who perhaps had forgotten who had passed away and probably didn't even remember they were at a funeral somehow reached into the lowest sinks of her withered mind to recall, "Well bless my buttons," she said, "Carter you come over here right now and give your Grammy a hug." She opened her arms wide for an embrace, staring him down, and even Carter's mother showed a fleeting smile at her mother's innocence. Carter went and embraced his grandma with warmth. "It's been so long. How's that sweet girl of yours?" Probably his high school sweetheart from years before, but at least her memory was sparking.

"Please come have dinner with us," his mother said.

"Of course," Carter said. He sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. She didn't say anything else, but didn't shy away either. Almost two years since he had embraced his mother, the same since he had laughed with Barth and now ultimately infinitely longer. After his father died, Carter left for Alaska to work for BP on the North Slope. Every holiday he said the same rounds. "A flight home right now is too expensive, I'll come for Thanksgiving."— "We're

already ten guys short here, and I haven't been around long enough to muscle a vacation. I'll mail Barth his Christmas present." A three pound tin of lemon drops from Anchorage Candy Co. and a model oil rig kit, a new hobby Barth picked up from his chair. "I'll come sometime in March," Carter said.— "This winter, I promise," he told them. And now it was November. And Carter had meant it. In July he bought the flight for this coming Christmastime. He was coming home. But no size mountain of lemon drops or checks in the mail could laugh at one of Barth's jokes. Waving a four month old plane ticket under his mother's sunken eyes wouldn't make up for a death's worth of absence.



Their father skidded out of the driveway down the long dirt road from the house, his Toyota kicking up chunks of dirt and gravel. Carter and Barth were alone at the house, their mother gone for a few days visiting a friend in Charlottesville and now Eddy was off to Cherokee in North Carolina for as long as he could go, gambling country. "Don't tell your mother," he smiled beneath his mustache. "I'll be back, not too long."

At age ten, Barth had just developed a fascination for baseball. He wanted everything Cincinnati Reds, the whole state might as well have been Yankees fans, but Barth wouldn't have it. Even in the midst of Pete Rose getting shit on from every direction in the heat of the '89 season (Carter tried very hard to explain this situation to him), he decided it would be the Reds or no baseball at all. He started playing little league, and was decent in the field. Likely enough, he was fast out there. So when their dad left they played catch for a while. The bullet left Carter with the slightest hitch in his step, but if you didn't focus on it you couldn't notice. Barth could keep up with him.

Carter was used to taking care of Barth when their father was supposed to. Eddy would disappear for half days at a time and almost always show back up within an hour of their mother coming home. Now he'd be gone for two days and nights. Ten bucks for food, he gave them, and as always "don't tell your mother." A few years beforehand Carter and Barth let it slip that their father had left them alone one night and their mother almost knocked Eddy out through the door. Their father wasn't mad at them, just sad. Sad and quiet. He explained to them "there's just things that I don't want to let hurt your mother."

"Let's make some lunch." They sat on the roof of their home. Two stories and white peeling wood at the top of a long hill that wound down in gravel through a mile of pine before connecting with a paved road. They ate a lunch of carrot sticks red apple peanut butter Wonderbread on the sunny shingles of their house. They tossed the dirty butts of their carrots at various fixtures in the yard. Barth cocked back his arm behind him, rolling the carrot around in his palm like the stitches on a baseball. He aimed at a fence post about a hundred feet away. The swing and release sent his momentum over the edge of the roof. Stumbling forward, he fell, then hit the ground and was moaning then silent, carrot butt landing softly in the grass beside him. Barth's spinal cord was pinched into a divide, legs wholly intact, but now untethered from the will of his body.

Their mother made it to the hospital in about three hours, Eddy made it there at about four in the morning, coffee heavy on his breath. Barth lay asleep in the sterile bed when he walked into the room. Their mother lay snoring in a chair next to the bed, one arm resting on the sheets. Carter sat in a chair in the corner keeping his eyes closed enough to be convincing.

Eddy walked further inside and grabbed the railing of the bed carefully, staring down at sleeping Barth. His grip tightened around the bar. He shook the railing once and let his head fall forward.





There were five bodies at dinner after the funeral. Carter and his mother, his grandmother, Aunt Patty and her husband in flannel. The spread of consolation dishes across their house was overwhelming. It had been since Carter was last in Nairemont that he had seen a meal like this. Alaska was a beautiful place, but the North Slope was unforgiving and barren. Sweet potato casserole, green beans, many cooked birds, loaves of bread, spaghetti bake, lasagna, mashed potatoes, baked beans, pumpkin pies, pecan pies, meat pies, pot pies, hams and sausages, baked carrots, pigs in a blanket, hamburger meat and hot dogs.

“I’m moving back home,” Carter said.

His mother stared at him across the table.

“I’ll just need to go back and get a few things, and then I can move back in here in a few months.”

His mother stood up. She walked around to the side of his chair, looking down upon him, then wrapped her arms around his neck.



Two months before Carter’s graduation could have been a coil of rope or a bottle of pills in a burnt out study where nobody no longer read and nothing was recounted. Recitation like sparked memory could have been two bottles of cheap whiskey or a spark and vodka. The study where the shag carpet felt like grass, or when the winter was hidden, the half inches of precipitation soaked in through the cracks and left a fresh bed of moss across hundreds and hundreds of oak boards stretching that long stretch from entrance to desk, threshold to paper. Carter’s feet felt the

carpet like oil and water. The study was obscured in darkness. The only lamp was off. Could've been a hose from the muffler of his truck, driven off along a deep wooded trail where pines were thicker than just pines and the saturated leaves were halfway into mud once the branches touched the windshield. Deep in the woods like hubcap mushrooms, deep like silent deep, to a pasture or beyond, where it would take at least a day to find him, perhaps more. Oxygen turned to a quick melatonin so it could've been slow but quick, so they could've taken longer to find him, so it could've been someone other than his son. It was the same 1911 .22 that split Carter down the middle only three years before. Where the bullet dug deep into Carter splitting spine from spinal, now it had buried itself deeper into his father splitting stem from cerebellum.

Carter's feet felt the carpet like oil and water. The only lamp was off. He could only just make out the slump of his father in the armchair but the acidity of blood hung heavy in the air. He shut the door as soft as he could against the unfurling mossy shag so as to not disquiet Eddy from his slumber and ran back downstairs to find his mother.

They held Eddy's funeral in the only church in Nairemont, a building their family had only stepped foot in to appease Carter and Barth's grandma on Easter. Their father's mother. Carter was a pallbearer along with Aunt Patty's first husband, three family friends, and a friend of the church. Carter and another carried Barth in his chair up the front steps of the porch. The lameness in Carter's left leg pulled at the ornate carpet as he wheeled Barth inside to a rest next to the front row of the pews.



Carter returned to Nairemont four months after Barth's funeral, working the rest of his rotation to bring back a few more solid paychecks to Virginia. Alaska was no longer helpful in the

battle to keep his family intact. His mother welcomed him into the fading white home as if nothing uncertain had ever happened. Barth's room was just as it had always been: baseball and cars and wheelchair resting bedside.

Carter and his mother ate dinner in the dining room, usually the only point of the day they saw each other, often not even then. There was no drip outside, the rain was tired tonight and would leave them alone, let them eat in the silence of a breeze. Carter gathered the few plates, picked up his mother's, kissed her on the head, and went the kitchen to wash them and clean up. His legs gave out beneath him halfway through the threshold, dishes clattering to the floor. Somewhere upstairs in the oaken study a dry gust of wind brushed long forgotten papers over and off the desk onto the crumbling bed of moss, arid and motionless. The sheets settled.

The fragment of bullet was finally pushing into his spinal cord, something everyone was always afraid would happen. Pinching long expanses of nerves up and down the timbered frame of his body. They told Carter now was the time for surgery. Surgery now and your body might go numb. Later and your body goes numb. His mother knew, just knew she would be left alone at the top of that long hill surrounded by pines with only a few traces in Nairemont to keep her company.



Carter wheeled Barth up next to a picnic table. They were eating an early supper at Howie's Hot Dog's at the northern end of the little strip of businesses at the heart of Nairemont. It was the summer before Barth started junior high. Carter was a year graduated from high school. The county had just finished adding ramps to the school's walkways in preparation for their new shining student.

"Can I tell you a secret, Barth?"

Barth nodded big. "Of course," he said with his mouth full of hot dog bun.

"You've got to promise not to tell mom."

"Why?"

"Only for a little while at least."

"Okay what is it?"

Carter took a bite of his hot dog off the end he hadn't started from and that had a little too much mustard and no onion on it. "I'm moving away," he said with his mouth full.

"You're doing what?"

Carter nodded. "To make some money for us."

"You can't do that," Barth said forcing his hot dog down onto the picnic table.

"I need to. I can't make enough here to help mom support us. It's only for a little while. Just to give us a bit of breathing room."

Barth was gripping the wheels of his chair. "Where are you going?"

"Alaska. To work in an oil field." He put his hand on top of Barth's white knuckled grip on the wheel of his seat.

"Don't leave me here," Barth said.

That was the only time Carter knew of that Barth broke a promise, to Carter, to their father, to anyone.

"Carter, you can't just run away to the other side of the fucking country!" his mother screamed at him.

It was near midnight. He pushed out through the screen door and walked into the darkness of their front yard illuminated by porchlight. He got in the Toyota and drove away from the house watching the shadowed faces of his mother and Barth. He drove out into the woods along the

stretching narrow pathway through pines and a bed of fallen needles, his headlights pulling shadows out towards him from behind the trunks, tires digging deep into the moss.



Carter spent about two hours sitting alone on the cold lifeless bed in the hospital room, holding himself up into a seated position. A jar of round yellow cotton drops sat next to the tongue suppressers. His legs were weak and a burning had invaded his back.

A nurse came in and helped him off of the bed into a wheelchair. Calm, she rolled him out of the room down the long white hallways with the occasional sick and broken person shuffling or rolling past him, past hundreds of fluorescent lights and a stark absence of incandescence. Another room, and another set of people. He was asleep.

Flayed open between vertebrae T10 and T12. The twinge in his back shattered across his skin, obsidian scalpels pulled and twisted, turning around, arching against his spinal cord pulling bone and nerve apart, broken metal ripped through into thick flesh, tugging at the curve of his spine, pulling and bursting upwards from beneath, through layers of wet persistence and yellow suppression, through the walls of his home and the forests of his town, through four years of guilt, a stumble and a fall, cheap cigarettes, a .22 and a four door Toyota, brackish mushrooms and miles of stony moss leaf litter and Virginia rain. A pair of forceps raised the metal from Carter's flesh and dropped it onto the steel tray above him.