

IT'S WHERE I'M AT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of English

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

By

David Messmer

May, 2016

An Abstract of IT'S WHERE I'M AT

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It's Where I'm At is the story of Doozer, a soon-to-be thirty-year-old living in a semi-urban Virginia town caught on a Peninsula reaching into the Chesapeake Bay. Doozer has never quite left his high-school job at Papa John's, but when his estranged sister comes to town he takes drastic actions to give her the money she needs to get back on the road; actions that cost him his job and land him in a local pizza shop that refuses to share his appreciation of pizza making craft. As Doozer longs for the comfort of his corporate career, and for the company of his next door neighbor – a dancer at a strip club where the girls don't strip – his sister's lingering presence forces him to confront the tragic consequences of a past he's tried to forget and a life-long guilt that won't ever let him move on.

“Acknowledgements”

More people deserve my thanks than I can possibly mention in the space I have here, so this brief moment of acknowledgement should be seen for what it is: selections from the list of people I need to (and will) thank in person.

That being said, I have to begin with the three members of my thesis committee. To Robert Boswell I owe thanks for the very existence of this novel as it was in his Fiction Forms class, which I took in the Spring of 2014, that the book got its start. The lessons he taught about the structure of the novel and the ways to conceive of a story longer than anything I had ever written were invaluable, and the exercises he threw at us all semester were astonishing in their generative effect. Professor Boswell not only helped to put the creation of this novel into motion, but helped to speed that motion by many orders of magnitude and for that I sincerely thank him.

If I owe Professor Boswell thanks for getting this novel started, I owe Alex Parsons for catalyzing my career as a fiction writer. When, in the Fall of 2012, I first considered dabbling in fiction it was he who suggested that I apply to the MFA program at the University of Houston. In addition to his help with my application process, he has been a fixture in my learning throughout my time at the program, leading my very first graduate workshop in 2013, the Intermediate Workshop in 2014, and the Master Workshop in 2015. I owe him thanks for his incredible insights into my work and for at least pretending to not be sick to death of a novel that he has now seen in many stages of development.

And, finally, if I owe Professor Parsons for his role in starting me on my way as a fiction writer, I owe Deborah Thompson for being a crucial presence in every step of my literary career. In the Spring of 2000 – my first as an English major – I took her course in

Modern British and European Drama and, with that class, began a career that has sustained me for all of my adult life. I owe her for that beginning as well as for all of her help along the way. I am thrilled by the poetry of having the professor who was there at the beginning of my formal literary education also present at its end, and am, more than anything, supremely grateful for all that she has done in the time in between.

It is with that notion of supreme gratitude that I must also thank my wife, Norie, for her support and understanding as I have embarked on this strange career. Taking on an MFA and writing a novel has been difficult, and I will be forever in her debt for sticking with me through all of the creative and personal disasters that it has brought. It is proof of just how lucky I am to have found her, and I hope she knows that if I am not always able to express what she means to me that is only because no amount of writing practice could ever give me the words.

And, speaking of there being no words, I also must thank my daughter, Evie, who was born during my first semester in the MFA program. Despite the hundreds of hours I spent caring for her rather than sitting at the keyboard, she has nevertheless enriched my writing in ways I could never have imagined, and she has enriched my life in ways that transcend the very concept of imagination.

And finally, I feel that I must thank all of the fellow students who have helped me with this manuscript through casual discussions and formal workshops. The number of people who have read various drafts of this novel is quite large, and I can't possibly name them all here, but I am grateful to each and every one. I do, though, feel that I owe a particular word of thanks to Dino Piacentini, who has read more drafts of this novel than anyone, and yet still somehow manages to approach each new draft with a generosity and

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For Norie

It's Where I'm At

“Friday”

1.

In an old, old city called Newport News the night was pregnant with pangs of regret. Doozer was in the middle of Warwick Boulevard, stranded in the median, waiting for the light to change. Across the street a crew of delivery boys were bouncing a hacky sack and checking their pagers while they hoped for one last delivery to make the late shift worthwhile. Those boys had all traded in the scarlet polos of Papa John's for the yellow tees of Tranito's Pizzeria - some as recently as three days ago - and it was Doozer who'd forced the swap. Now, he aimed to join them. He'd just left the night's receipts at Papa John's \$499 light - ending his brief career as a corporate shift leader. He could only hope \$499 would be enough for Carla to comfortably get out of town, leaving Doozer to the important work of supplying the city with circles of food.

\$499. He brushed the wad of cash in his pocket - too many dead Presidents to stash behind the Velcro of his wallet.

\$499. According to his roommate, Timber, he was one Washington shy of grand larceny.

\$499. There was nothing else he could do about Carla. Not that he blamed her, really. There just wasn't any other way for either of them to be - at least not that he knew. But what did he know?

\$499. It might be a bargain in the end.

"Hey, dumbass," Kurtz shouted from the Tranito's parking lot, his hacky sack hitting the pavement. "Green means go."

Doozer looked both ways. There wasn't a car in sight - only his own shadow stretching in front of him as light from the Papa John's marquee beat at his back - the marquee he'd forgotten to turn off as he left. He almost changed his mind - it wasn't too late to turn off the sign, drop the wad of cash in the deposit bag, and lock up. He could come back tomorrow, and the day after that - the tall, brilliant marquee marking his place of rest - the one place where a perfect pattern of labor freed him from disorganized thoughts of what might be ahead of him and of what was definitely behind. Thoughts of Carla.

The sign above Tranito's was unlit. Carryout was such a small part of that place's business there was no need to light the sign, leaving the storefront dark except for a smear of yellow seeping through sweaty windows and the gray shades of the slappers moving inside.

The drivers were crammed into that yellow glow, looking sideways at Doozer as he finished crossing the street. He'd come to know their glares, especially when he'd had to fire some of them two days earlier, following the semi-annual DMV report. Boot Day, they called it: the day the driver's speeding-tickets caught up with them. There wasn't anything Doozer could have done for them, really. There was still nothing he could say. The best he could do was give them a show.

"What the hell's he doing, stumbling like that?" Doozer heard a driver ask. It was one he didn't recognize; one who didn't already know what to expect from the former Papa John's shift leader. Doozer was clutching at the splotches of pizza sauce staining the front of his shirt, staggering across the parking lot with his head down and his legs dragging.

"Hell if I know," Kurtz said. He'd known Doozer almost a year.

After Doozer cleared the blacktop he mock tripped on the curb, dropping at the drivers' feet, his face pressed into the concrete.

It was a quiet night.

"Don't I look like I just got out of a knife fight?" he asked, sitting up and pointing at the splotches of red that he had been holding like wounds moments before.

"Look more like a tampon to me," Kurtz said. The light from the store made his skin as jaundiced as his glare.

Doozer got back to his feet, wiping gravel off his shirt.

"Y'all still mad at me for firing you?" he asked.

"It was the DMV fired us," one of the drivers said. "You just said some shit."

"It was still pretty cold," Kurtz said. "Firing me the day my kitten died."

"I didn't know your kitten died." Doozer felt genuinely sorry. Mostly for the kitten. "Did you get it high again?"

Kurtz paused for a bit, scratching at a blotchy spot on his pale face. "Don't worry about it."

These were the people Doozer had to work with if he wanted to keep his twelve-year career as a pizzaman going - a third-rate shop that sold its pies a dollar cheaper, ten minutes faster, and two hours later into the night than any other pizza place in town. Tranito's always needed drivers, and didn't bother with a lot of personal information. No DMV reports for them.

It was also the last place the Papa John's managers would ever think to look for the man who'd made off with \$499 of the store's money. They might stake out the Pizza Hutt around the corner, or even the Dominoes on Jefferson Avenue, but none of them would

ever think to look for such an accomplished pizzaman at the one place in town that even Little Caesar's could scoff at. Besides, what kind of fool would he have to be to steal so much money then work right across the street?

Hiding in plain sight. That was what Doozer did. It was what he'd been doing ever since Carla left town the first time, ten years earlier. It was hard to believe they'd only been eighteen at the time - about the same age as the drivers trying so hard to ignore Doozer and his sorry shot at making them laugh.

With the glares of the Tranito's drivers joining the Papa John's glow at his back, Doozer stepped through the door of the one pizza shop he'd always thought beneath him. The store's owner, Mr. Tran, had found a collection of corners to cut - cheap dough, frozen vegetables, cheese so processed it never spoiled. He didn't even print his own coupons - just honored the ones from other stores - "Give us a holler - minus a dollar!" Best of all, he didn't pay the drivers.

Everything about the place was an affront to the pizza art Doozer had committed to so long ago. Committed to on the same night Carla left, taking their problems and the swell in her belly somewhere else. He owed her for that. He did. And since there was no denying it he usually tried not to think about it at all. That was hard to do when she'd been sleeping on his couch for the past couple nights, never keeping the blanket high enough around her shoulders to hide those lacy bras. So he'd drive for Tranito's. He'd pay his debt. And soon enough, she'd leave. It had pained him so deeply the first time she'd split town. Every visit since had been an escalation - of guilt, of regret, of the need to see her on her way, and of what it cost to make sure that happened. In the meantime, all he had to

do was keep quiet about why he'd left Papa John's, not alienate his new boss too fast, and, at some point, buy a car.

"Commission and tips only," Reggie said when Doozer asked about joining their delivery team. "Your driving record's your business, not mine." With the drivers off the payroll the DMV never had to get involved.

Reggie was tall and bearded, with just the beginning of an afro pushing against his yellow visor. Visors - Tranito's didn't even have real hats.

"We don't normally get white shirts over here," Reggie said as he pounded on a piece of dough with a rolling pin. The man couldn't even slap a crust, Doozer thought. He was proud of his own slapping skills - could keep a crust spinning in a widening circle, flour hanging in the air like the fog that sometimes rolled off the James River. The way Reggie pounded on the dough was just embarrassing.

"You'll have to buy a new uniform," the manager said.

"I'll take a small," Doozer said.

"One size fits all." Reggie went to the back. What he returned with was a flimsy yellow visor and a t-shirt with the Tranito's logo - an oval pizza - stenciled in red across the front. "Fifteen dollars," he said.

"Can you take it out of my tips?" Every dollar he kept in his pocket was for Carla. And maybe a scratch-off lotto ticket or two.

"How do I know you'll be back?" Reggie asked.

"You think I'd go to this much trouble for a work shirt if I didn't plan to work?"

"Don't be smart. I'll hold onto the visor until you actually show up for a shift."

The compromise seemed reasonable.

"Can I start on Monday?" Doozer asked.

"Start in a month for all I care. It's the other drivers you costing money, not me."

Doozer's name was on the schedule in black - his wages already in the red.

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Trying to find a driver to give him a ride home was like looking for a decent record in the dollar bin. Gage was reclining against his battered pickup truck, quietly bobbing along to the Grateful Dead. Next to him was an athletic looking black man who sat in his Ford Escort reading the Bible. He was another driver Doozer didn't already know. Kurtz had just sauntered into the store for a run.

Doozer approached Gage, who'd made his disdain for Doozer clear even before Boot Day. There was no way he'd offer a ride without something to gain.

"Hey man," Doozer said. "I saw an auction for a sealed copy of American Beauty in Goldmine the other day."

"What's any of that mean?"

"The vinyl. Of the Grateful Dead album. It's one that's never been opened."

"What am I going to do with an unopened record?"

"It's worth a lot of money."

"I can play the CD for free."

The pale wattle on the driver's broad arm shook when he reached for the radio and turned up the Dead.

The Bible reader rolled up his window.

It was getting late and Doozer couldn't loiter too long or Reggie might get suspicious about his not having a car. He'd made the walk home plenty of times before,

just never at two-thirty in the morning and never with a \$499 bulge in his pocket. The money really was ridiculous. The drivers had taken all the good cash when they checked out at the end of the night - crisp twenties with Andrew Jackson staring stoically back at them. The wad in Doozer's pocket was a mash of small, abused bills - Washingtons that might have passed through a go-go dancer's bikini bottom and the Lincolns the local Army boys carried to buy beer on their civilian time. He almost wanted someone to try stealing that wad.

He definitely wanted Carla to be asleep by the time he got home. Turning south on Warwick, Doozer took to the sidewalk.

After only a few steps there was a loud whistle behind him. Kurtz was about to pull out of the parking lot - his window down. "You need a ride somewhere, man?" he asked.

"Headed home," Doozer said.

"That's somewhere, ain't it?"

Doozer hesitated.

Kurtz was everything Doozer hated about drivers - no appreciation for his craft. Doozer took his role as a pizzaman seriously, arriving at every shift with his khakis in order, his shirt tucked - he'd even gather it in the back to pull the fabric tight on his thin frame - no wrinkles. Every day started with a clean outfit to prove his professionalism and ended with a smattering of sauce to prove his work ethic. Sure, he might have some fun drawing stick figures in the sheen of flour covering the dough station, or giving another slapper's name when he answered the phone, but nothing that came at the expense of ensuring his cog in the pizza machine turned in a perfect, smooth circle.

Kurtz was a disgrace. Sauntering into the store all tall and skinny and pale, his eyes as red as his shirt and his pants sagging so low he'd trip if he walked any faster. Hat ass backwards, wallet chain obscene. He was no cog in a machine. He was a slob who billowed out the front door like pot smoke from an open window. Riding with Kurtz wasn't a great way to top-off a night like this. Doozer poured his tired body into the passenger seat of Kurtz's Civic anyway.

So many odors fought for a place in Doozer's nose that he hardly noticed the scratch of the carpeted seats on the back of his arms. Kurtz dropped a large pepperoni and order of bread sticks in Doozer's lap - he hadn't even bothered putting the food in a hot bag.

"Open that shit up," Kurtz said. "Let's get our grub on."

"This food isn't yours."

"You think the customers know how many bread sticks come in a box, man?"

They set off together, weaving down Warwick Boulevard, one of two roads, a train track, and an interstate highway that all ran in parallel through the city, a concrete and steel spine ready to carry the people of Newport News through a forest of pines between Fort Eustace to the north, the Naval shipyards to the south, and Langley Air Force Base to the East - three throbbing military organs keeping the city's civilian heart beating, pumping life through the network of strip malls, apartment complexes, and trailer parks lodged like kidney stones between the well-off neighborhoods full of colonial style homes coated in vinyl siding. The roads were wide and smoothly paved, with broad medians separating more lanes than the city ever really needed.

Kurtz needed every last inch of that blacktop. He'd drawn a thick glass pipe from somewhere and was loading it with weed while he shoved a bread stick into his mouth like it was a fat cigar.

"You want some?" he asked, offering the pipe to Doozer.

"I'm good," Doozer said.

As they cruised through a series of intersections Kurtz bit through his bread stick and let what was left bounce to the floor. "Always hit 'em green when you don't want to," he said, then took a heavy drag from the pipe.

Doozer tried a bread stick. It was rubbery and spat of salt. He took another bite rather than talk to the man he'd fired two days earlier. The Civic was weaving from one empty lane to the other, Kurtz too busy with his pipe to bother steering any more than he had to. The driver finally exhaled a useless blizzard of smoke.

"What's your sorry ass doing at Tranito's, man?" Kurtz asked.

"Going to be a driver, like you."

"You'd have to get taller and better looking, you want to be like me."

"Have to grow a patchy goatee and stop washing my clothes, you mean."

Kurtz let loose with an empty stoner laugh. "Definitely have to cut that ragged-ass ponytail."

"Can't cut this beauty," Doozer said, running his fingers as far as they'd go through the mat of hair at his shoulder. "It's my good luck charm."

"You sign up with Tranito's - that shit ain't working."

"You're there, too."

"I ain't in my thirties, man."

"I'm twenty eight."

"Open up that pizza, old man."

"Customers will know if a slice is missing," Doozer said as he lifted the boxtop free of the pie.

"They ain't going to notice a few pepperonis off the top."

"Tranito's puts their ingredients on the top?"

"Where else they going to go?"

"You ever looked at a Papa John's pizza?"

"I just delivered the shit."

"Ingredients should be under the cheese." He nodded at the disgrace in his lap.

"This isn't right."

Floating the ingredients - Doozer should have known. Pizza crafting was supposed to be simple. Elegant. Predictable and comfortable. In his ten years at Papa John's, Doozer had found the routine exciting and soothing at the same time. The order sheets with their detachable slips, each empty space repeating down the page, each new order on a series of three carbons identical except for their color: yellow, pink, and white; a slapper grabbing a ball of dough, passing it back and forth between his hands until it was ready for a thrilling toss into the air; the next slapper spreading sauce in wider and wider circles, then ingredients, then the perfect measure of cheese; in the ovens for five sweltering minutes, cheese pellets joining into a single stringy lake, bubbles blistering on the surface, ruining the perfect complexion unless the slapper at the boxing station was quick with his poker; a wide spatula scooping the pizza into the box where a cutter divided it into a set of wedges: six, eight, or ten slices with a pair of pepperoncinis in one corner of the box and a

tub of dipping sauce in the other. Not even the occasional order of bread sticks could interrupt the endless craft of reducing the customer, the slappers, even the pizzas themselves to a series of perfect circles, the infinite mix of ingredients hiding beneath a layer of pale cheese and a glossy sheen of grease.

The pizza in Doozer's lap wasn't a perfect circle. The wedges were anything but uniform. Even before Kurtz picked at its top, the ingredients were an unsettled mess, the pepperoni on display for everyone to see. Doozer closed the box, his thoughts straying uncontrollably to Carla - how she'd arrived without warning, how she'd flirted her way into his roommate's graces, how she'd tricked Doozer into thinking she'd soon leave, and Timber into thinking she might stay.

"What went down at Papa John's?" Kurtz asked.

The wad of Washingtons and Lincolns pulled Doozer's pocket tight. For a moment he thought about telling the whole story. Maybe Kurtz would respect him for sticking it to the employer that stuck it to him. Just as likely he'd use the wad to stick it to Doozer. Either way, it would only lead to questions - about why he'd stolen the money, what he was going to do with it. About Carla.

"I didn't want to fire people anymore," Doozer said.

"You didn't seem to mind firing my ass."

"Watch the road, man." Doozer was always better at hiding the truth than making up lies. He let the silence hang in the air, mixing with the swirls of pot smoke until his eyes stung.

With all the pressure welling inside him, he needed some small outlet, though he knew it wouldn't be any good to get into the mess of it all with the likes of Kurtz. He ventured an innocent question. "You have any brothers or sisters?"

"Two," the driver said.

"Brothers or sisters?"

"Two of each."

"That's a lot."

"How many you got?"

"Just one. Half, actually. A sister. Half-sister."

"You don't sound sure of that shit."

"Sometimes I'm not."

"She hot?"

The pizza almost slipped from Doozer's lap, the cheese threatening to slide off the dough. "She's my sister," he said.

"That don't answer my question."

"You know what I mean. Asking me that. It's weird."

"It'd be weird if I was asking about my sister. She look like you?"

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"She look like you then she ain't hot."

Neither said anything while they pulled up to the Fort Eustace gate. Two guards approached, neither with military precision. Without rolling down the window, Kurtz nodded at the boxes in Doozer's lap. The guards squinted at the pies, then waved the car through.

Every driver complained about Fort Eustace. There was a rumor it had been designed by a guy on crack. Another was that it was confusing on purpose - to throw off Russian spies. Doozer told himself to make mental notes of landmarks as he passed them - pushing himself to tame the unpredictability of being a driver, to bestow it with the same ritual monotony of being the pizza creator, to forget about what he was about to go home to. The base refused to cooperate. Sure, he could respect that everything had that same dingy military look, the homes even plainer and boxier than the one Doozer and Carla had grown up in, each one flashing by as Kurtz hurtled them deeper into the maze. The streets, though, those were a mess, with no pattern or grid to keep things in place. The base was like a tray of perfectly uniform pepperonis spilled helplessly across the floor.

Kurtz knew how to get around - he'd been at the game for over a year - a veteran by the driver's standards. The trick to the base, he knew, was to forget about directions, follow the street signs, and don't worry if the shit is a few minutes late.

"Where you live, anyway?" Kurtz asked as he throttled through a roundabout then swerved onto one of the streets.

"Right behind the Korner Kounter," Doozer said.

"Shit, man, we're on the other ass end of town. Why didn't you say nothing?"

"How was I supposed to know where you were going?" Doozer asked.

"My car got windows, don't it?"

Doozer went silent, unable to admit to himself any more than he could to Kurtz that going in the opposite direction of home wasn't necessarily a mistake.

"Shit, I ain't never getting back to the store." Kurtz shook his head. "You taking the pizza to the door at least. Shit."

"I'm wearing the wrong uniform."

"That don't matter."

"I can change real quick - got my new shirt right here."

"You ain't getting naked in my car, man."

"It's just a shirt. Won't take long."

"The customer ain't going to give a shit, just leave the shirt here and get your ass out of my car."

Doozer closed the door behind him, the boxes balanced on his shoulder, happy to have something to do. The order was going to one of the duplexes where the junior officers lived. The building was on a hill, making it seem like the door leaned heavily to the left, off-kilter and strange. Taped over the doorbell was a note reading, "Please knock." Doozer knuckled the door, which slid open just enough for a tall man in a tank top and shorts to peer through the gap before slipping outside and closing the house shut, trapping the silence inside.

"Damn it, man," the young officer said. "Knocking that loud you might as well ring the bell." His hair was cut short like all the other military men and he was well-muscled, as though he had completed boot camp just a few days earlier, the strength of his body making him look younger despite being close to Doozer's age.

"Sorry," Doozer said. "This is my first delivery."

"It's cool, it's cool. Just don't want to wake the kids."

That seemed odd to Doozer. People either got stuck with a baby young or waited until they were really good and ready. It was unsettling to hear someone his age talk about

children without the words carrying the weight of regret. This delivery - Doozer's first - was harder to bear than the humbling walk to Tranito's.

"What do I owe?" the young officer asked.

Doozer thought about that for a while. "I have no idea," he said.

"How am I supposed to pay, then?" the man asked.

"Oh, you meant for the pizza."

"What else is there?"

Doozer fumbled for a response. "Breadsticks," he said.

"I'd like to pay for those, too," the man said. "At the same time, if possible." He was grinning at Doozer, unsure if the strange delivery man was trying to be funny - playing along as though he were.

Doozer checked the label. "Eleven oh five with tax."

"I assume you don't have any kids," the man said as he pulled money from his wallet with the same slow, deliberate care as Carla used when she'd pull crabs from the river behind their grandmother's house using nothing but a string and a chicken neck. Were all deliveries like this? Doozer was already longing for the monotony of a night slapping dough, wondering if he could still rescue his career at Papa John's, afraid of a job that asked so many questions. "I just need eleven oh five," he said.

"You want to keep this professional," the man said. "Good call." He handed over a Hamilton and a Lincoln and took the boxes from Doozer, who hadn't thought to ask Kurtz for money to make change. With nothing else to do, he pulled some of the wad from his pocket.

"You been delivering to strippers all night?" the young officer asked, eying the mash of bills.

"In this town we call them go-go dancers," Doozer said, reminded that this man was raised somewhere else - maybe Alabama, or Minnesota, or some place like that - not a life-term resident of Newport News.

"Just give me two back," the man said.

Doozer's first tip - \$1.95. Not bad. Yet it felt like there was something illicit about their exchange, as though the children had to be kept secret - from whom he wasn't sure.

"Where'd you park?" the young officer asked. Another odd question.

Doozer pointed at the curb – at a blank patch of night. Kurtz and his Civic were gone.

Forgetting about the young officer for a moment, Doozer ran to the street, the slope catching him off guard, making him stumble to his knees. Surely this was just a silly prank; he'd see Kurtz's tail lights a little ways up the road, the stoned driver giggling through the pot smoke.

Yet the road was dark in every direction. The only trace of Kurtz was a little shake of burnt weed and a half-eaten bread stick with carpet fibers stuck to the bite marks. Of course, Doozer thought. Kurtz could pretend he wasn't holding a grudge, but getting fired was serious business. Serious as a dead kitten.

2.

Doozer had never invested in a watch. The only turns of the clock he ever had to notice were the ones telling him to start and finish a shift. As he wound through Fort Eustace his only measure of the passing hour was the growing chill as a warm late-autumn evening

gave in to the cold of a pre-winter morning. He had no measure at all of the roads winding like loose string through the base, and all seeming to dead-end at the James River. It was only when he kept the cold river winds at his back that he finally found the front gate and his passage into the civilian world.

That gate was its own problem. The two men on duty sputtered out of the little hut guarding Doozer's only passage off base. Neither man would recognize him from when he'd arrived with Kurtz - Doozer had been wandering long enough for a changing of the guards.

The two men were hard to tell apart, heads shaved, hats crisp and precise, shirts and pants a little less so. A few hours hunched over a table, swapping cards in an endless game of war, had put some random crinkles next to the sharp creases in the soldiers' pant legs and shirt sleeves. The only thing distinguishing one guard from the other was their height - one, at a solid six feet, towered over Doozer, the other would be eye-to-eye with him, give or take their choice of footwear.

"What are you doing here?" It was the tall soldier who approached. The shorter one stayed in the doorway, resting on his rifle as though it were a cane, the butt pressed into his palm.

"Just leaving," Doozer said.

"We might have something to say about that," Tall said.

"Did I do something wrong?" As long as Doozer was doing the asking he didn't have to lie about the answer.

"Just keep your hands where we can see 'em," Short said from the doorway as he hoisted the rifle into his hands.

"What's that in your pocket?" Tall asked.

"Cash. From deliveries." Just not his deliveries. Obscuring the truth always came so much faster to Doozer than lying ever would.

"How you delivering without a car?"

"Slowly," Doozer said.

"Don't get smart," Tall said. He nodded at Doozer's pocket. "Let me see what you got in there."

"What about don't ask don't tell?"

"I said empty your pocket," Tall was getting serious now.

Doozer kept his hands up and nodded at Short. "He told me to keep my hands where he can see them."

"And I want to see what's in your pockets."

"He's the one with the rifle."

"Just move real slow."

Doozer did as he was told, letting one hand drift into his pocket, gathering as many of the bills as he could fit into his fist, then dragging them out for the guards to see. Having to do it slowly gave him time to think of an excuse that didn't involve Carla - these men would never understand Carla.

"You been delivering to go-go dancers all night?" Short asked.

"What the hell's a go-go dancer?" asked Tall.

"A stripper," Short said.

"They don't strip," Doozer said.

"Ain't that the truth." Short had lowered his gun.

"How come you know so much about strippers?" Tall asked his friend.

"They aren't strippers, they're go-go dancers," Short said.

"Same thing."

"They don't strip," Doozer said again. As long as he kept this line of talk going they wouldn't ask him the questions he didn't want to answer. He even thought about mentioning his neighbor, Viv, who danced at Bluebeard's. He thought better of it. This conversation wasn't good enough for her.

"If they don't get naked what's the point?" Tall asked.

"It's the best you're going to get in this town," Short said. The gun hung forgotten in his hand.

"Can I go?" Doozer asked. He didn't want to have to think about this little man watching Viv dance.

"Yeah, you're all right," Short said. "Maybe I'll see you at Bluebeard's sometime." Tall didn't seem as convinced.

"I don't go there," Doozer said.

"You know some place better?" asked Short.

"I don't go to any of those places." Doozer immediately wished he'd just walked away when he had the chance.

"How come you know so much about them, then?" Tall asked.

Short remembered the gun in his hands, not because Doozer had actually said anything threatening - it was simply so rare that he realized a story wasn't adding up that when he did it was cause for alarm.

Doozer knew there was a simple way to put their fears to bed - just tell them he lived next to a dancer. He didn't even have to tell them who it was. He knew the names of some of the other girls - names like Ginger and Chili. He could make it through a conversation with the likes of these two without giving up more than that.

But he wouldn't give in. With Carla already bearing down with reminders of guilt and regret, he had to hold on to what he could. Something had to stay pure.

"I deliver to places like that all the time," he said, hoping that would be enough. He knew he was a bad liar. He had to follow with something true - something more honest. "I try not to see what goes on inside," he said.

That got the men thinking, which was Doozer's cue to leave. With the roadside gravel crunching under his Adidas, he moved as fast as he could without looking too much like he was fleeing.

"Never seen a delivery man without a car before," he heard one of the guards say.

"Never seen a stripper that don't strip, neither," the other said.

Their voices faded as Doozer moved away until he couldn't tell which voice was which.

"How much longer you stationed here?"

"Not too much longer."

"Damn, I've still got another year."

Doozer was thankful when the chilly breeze rose to fill his ears, letting him focus on the road ahead and on keeping thoughts of Carla at bay for at least as long as it would take him to walk across half the city to the one-bedroom apartment where, with any luck, she and his roommate were fast asleep.

Creeping along the jittery sidewalk, he worried that the wad in his pocket was a mistake. He was still on the Papa John's schedule for a morning shift. Warwick Boulevard would take him right by the store where he could still dim the marquee lights he'd forgotten to turn off earlier; still return the money without anyone knowing what he'd done. He'd also be able to pick up his paycheck on Friday. \$180 dollars or so. Still a little short on last month's rent, but nothing he couldn't make up by selling a few records out of his vinyl collection. According to the latest Goldmine he could get \$30 for his copy of Hunky Dory, and at least \$25 for his first pressing of Look What the Cat Dragged In, even in its ratty condition. Surely things wouldn't get desperate enough that he'd have to find out how much his empty sleeve of Born to Run with graffiti lettering was worth. It was the Holy Grail of Bruce Springsteen records and the centerpiece of Doozer's collection, even if the vinyl inside had been gone for years. He wouldn't part with it unless he had to.

A man hunched over the railing of the broad overpass that straddled the interstate ended Doozer's thoughts of empty album covers. The man rose and hobbled across the road, his eyes not bothering with traffic, his back not bothering to straighten.

"Change?" the man asked.

"Not tonight," Doozer said.

The man stood in front of him now, all motley layers and bad breath. In the dull street lamps all Doozer could tell of the man's skin was its filth.

"What's in your pocket?" the man asked.

"Not change," Doozer said. He put his hand over the bulge of cash, protecting the money from the man he thought was winking at him, who was really just blinking some dirt out of his eyes. Doozer wasn't good under this kind of pressure.

At his full height the man was taller than Doozer. Heavier, too - the street left more meat on his bones than Doozer had ever been able to pack on. A car roared by, lighting the creases around the man's eyes - creases deep enough to hide tired thoughts until they were lost in the dark and lonely folds of a life clinging to a worn out and useless body.

"I used to have hair like yours," the man said.

"What happened to it?"

"Got too dirty on the streets. Stuff builds up in hair like that."

"You have anywhere you can go?" Doozer wasn't sure if he'd asked out of concern, curiosity, or just to remind the man how different they were.

"Man, I got everywhere I can go. It's where I'm at that's the problem."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"What are you?" the man asked.

Doozer thought of Carla - all those years she spent wherever it was she spent them; always, eventually, winding her way back to Newport News. Back to Doozer. That was the difference. He and this man might be standing on the same sidewalk - a concrete bank along a swift river of blacktop - but Doozer was holding a string with Carla somehow clinging to its other end while this wretch was merely huddled and alone, watching it all flow aimlessly past, an anchor with no boat.

"I have somewhere to be," Doozer said, as much to himself as to the man in front of him.

"I ain't stopping you," the man said.

Doozer set off with renewed purpose, the wad of cash in his pocket pulling at his leg, almost forcing him to veer into the street. There was only one thing to do with that

money - he had to give it to Carla, had to set her adrift yet again. That was the only way to give his place a purpose, to justify his own inertia. He walked past Papa John's, letting the bright marquee continue to cast its red, white, and green ribbons of light into the surrounding pine trees.

Those lights seemed even brighter with the windows at Tranito's gone dark - it was later than Doozer thought. With some luck, the fatigue moving up his feet and into his thighs and hips would dissolve before he had to be back for his first shift at his new job. The fatigue in his mind would take a lot longer. His decision made, there was nothing left to distract him as he trudged the remaining three miles home.

Along the way Warwick spawned a series of tributaries, spinning off streets in gentle curves, splitting and diffusing. If Doozer walked far enough the Boulevard would eventually run barren, nothing left to do but dissolve into the mouth of the James River. Instead, he pulled off at a sharp breech where Warwick gave birth to Oriana, a busy road whose grudging slope away from its parent began with a scalpel-thin corner of unpaved land. It was on this little wedge that the Korner Kounter did its business, and right behind stood the Trenchant Towers - where Doozer did his.

He didn't know what "trenchant" meant, but "towers" was definitely a lie. His apartment was on the top floor and he only had to go up one flight of stairs to get to it. The building was in the shape of a wide "C," the sides like a pair of arms offering a hug that never closed. In front was a parking lot with one space per unit - no room for visitors - and an island with some half-dead shrubbery and a brick sign that was painted white but in the first shades of morning looked baby blue. "Trenchant Towers," it read in black. "Vacancies

- Inquire Within." It was always odd to Doozer that the last part was painted on - as though the owner never considered that the complex could ever be completely full.

As he climbed the stairs Doozer took a moment and a deep breath, letting the scent of his next-door-neighbor soak into his nose, his throat, his lungs. The same smell always seeped from Viv's place - something sweet and tropical, with hints of cinnamon. It was deeply familiar and yet strange and elusive. Not something from his childhood nor from some tucked away thought or memory, it was present and alive even as it was confusing in that way that all the most intoxicating things are.

He opened the door to his own apartment, hoping to find Carla asleep on the couch, maybe even with her blanket covering her bra for a change.

She was awake. Amid the clutter of books and old records, stacks of Goldmine pricing guides, VHS tapes and old soda cans, Carla was squatting naked on the floor, the sinews of her body tensed and active. Doozer's roommate lay beneath her.

There should have been an impulse to close the door - let them finish whatever they were doing, then come back and pretend he hadn't seen. Timber wasn't the kind of guy who could go all night - it only took him five minutes to get his money's worth out of a soft-core video rental, and Carla easily rated higher than that. Walk away. Go to the Korner Kounter for some scratch-offs. He could be back in a few minutes - get in bed and feign sleep while the flickers of what he'd seen battled with his long, long day and night.

If only he'd closed the door. Closed it as he should have. As he wanted to. Instead, with the calm, relentless look on Carla's face bearing down on him as she raked her hips across Timber's groin, Doozer grasped for any faint memory that might save him from the one he most feared, the one that threatened to draw his gaze to small breasts

wiggling with each motion of her bony hips, or to the muscles flexing along her stomach. He clung to a game they used to play - looking into the mirror together, cataloging their common features, putting together a half-image of the father they shared and that neither of them had ever met.

And there it all was - the nose anchoring the narrow cheeks to the crease of the brow, the small, flat ears, the thin brown hair. Like Doozer, she had a chin that bobbed when she spoke, a buoy floating in the clench and release of a jaw under an endless flow of strain. When he'd stayed long enough for her eyes to meet his, that clench gave way to a smile - a smile so much like his own. But those eyes, so pale they shifted color with the light - grey to blue, perhaps almost green, flecked with brown - those were rooted in the mystery of her mother.

Then there was the clench of her voice, scratched and deep. "There you are," she said. "We were beginning to wonder."

She spoke at the very moment that Timber chose to let out a series of guileless grunts in short sequence, his body tensing beneath hers as he realized in quick order that Doozer had arrived, that Carla didn't seem to think she should stop, and, most importantly, that his body was quivering with pulses of sensation that coalesced where his and Carla's groins met; where he was still trying to rock in time with motions that she'd stopped making moments before his glory arrived.

Eventually his grunts subsided, leaving him panting like a spaniel, his body still. He wasn't sure what his next move should be as he weighed the strangeness of the situation against the thought of simply reveling in what had just happened.

Doozer imagined his roommate's stillness was all right with Carla. Surely she'd woken Timber for some complex of reasons that had nothing to do with desire. Doozer arriving had only upped the stakes, and for that he imagined she'd be grateful to the young man beneath her. The gravel in her voice didn't let up.

"That's quite a bulge you've got there."

He was never sure where these things came from - if even she knew what was a joke and what was real. Regardless, it cut him in all the right ways. He pulled the wad from his pocket, her eyes growing darker, narrowing at the site of the cash.

"Do you want me to get my robe?" Timber asked from beneath Carla. No one in the room was sure who he was asking, or which naked body the robe might be for. It was the kind of ambiguity Carla delighted in.

"It's not like he hasn't seen it before," she said.

They held each other's gaze, her eyes taking on flecks of hazel as she squinted. Then Timber squirmed beneath her, the prickles in his groin fading far enough from the surface of his thoughts to finally leave room for awareness - of the oddness surrounding him and the threat that he was, in some profound but unwilling way, now a part of it all.

There was a slipping sensation as Carla finally rose from him.

That sight, of his roommate slipping free of his sister, flooded Doozer's thoughts with mistakes from a past that refused to ever leave him. With no chance at controlling where his eyes might travel, or how his memories might surface, Doozer was left with no option but retreat. He tossed the wad of cash towards her - an offering and a request - before he fled as he should have fled before, desperate to avoid the sight of Carla rising any further, of his roommate's joy spilling out of her, of what she might say or do next -

how else she might force him to confront the things he would give up his career, his money, possibly even his home, to avoid.

Leaping down the stairs three at a time, he expected the morning light to have bleached the apartment sign to its proper white - forgetting that the whole ordeal with Carla lasted only a few small moments. That sheen of baby blue light was yet another reminder that a few small moments were all it took. All it had ever taken for him and Carla to once again be the boy and the girl making trips to grandmother's place along the Hampton river on the other side of the Peninsula. Carla next to him, his mother in the front seat of a car changing as often as her boyfriends. He is the five-year-old in the wagon of Pauly's red pickup, and the nine-year-old in the bench seat of Sammy's classic Chevy, and the sixteen-year-old crammed in the back of Corton's Trans Am, where he and Carla wriggle against each other in a space not meant for two.

She settles finally, her head humming against the side window, her face peaceful - like she might even be having a few good dreams. It's hard to see how she could be his half-sister, even with his mom's constant reminders. How is it possible to have a sister only three months older?

He sometimes wonders about his grandma, too - so different from his mother. Grandma loves pies and the kind of laughs that leave some froth on the mouth. When they're all out of the car she meets them at the door with massive hugs, even wrapping her mom's latest boyfriend in the giant loop of her arms.

"What kind of a name is Corton?" she asks him.

"Mother!" Doozer's mom said.

"I've waited a year to meet the man. I have questions."

"Want to go crabbing?" Carla asks before they've even unloaded the car.

Doozer likes the idea of spending some time with his feet in the water. Their crabbing spot is at the bottom of the yard where a little square of concrete leads into the water. On either side of the pavement are thick bushes and shoots of bamboo full of buzzing insects and other rustley things that are best not to think about. Besides, the real dangers are hidden in the water - rusty fishhooks and water moccasins. And crabs.

The cold from the water goes up his legs, eventually chilling the teenaged heat in his groin. It's also chilling the moccasins, keeping them tucked away wherever it is snakes like to tuck. The crabs probably aren't running. That makes it even easier to relax as the cool water laps at his ankles and wets the bottom of his jeans while he holds onto a string, drawing it in slowly, happy to know there is no chance he'll find anything at the end of it but a chicken neck with the skin coming loose. Carla hangs back, the metal pole with the net at the end of it forgotten as she struggles to light a cigarette.

"Grandma will kill you if she sees," Doozer says.

"Corton bought them for me."

"She'll kill him, too."

"Stop being such a baby."

The cigarette doesn't make her look like a grown-up - she's too nervous, unable to forget she's holding something that's on fire. When she sucks on the cigarette, every muscle in her mouth and throat work the smoke in, then she pretends she isn't coughing through the exhale while she points her head straight up to keep the puffs away from anything the smell might cling to.

Corton doesn't seem to mind when he joins them at the river's edge, plopping his substantial rear on the mud by Carla.

"You two trying for crabs on a cold day like this? Ain't likely to catch nothing." That's what Doozer imagines he says, anyway - some of the words are pointed at the ground while Corton twitches a cigarette out of Carla's pack, the rest of what he says comes out of the corner of his mouth while he lights up.

"Cold don't drive away the crabs, just the snakes," Carla says.

"Crabs is just as cold blooded as the snakes. Ain't you afraid of crabs, boy?"

It's the first time he's looked Doozer's way.

"I just like the water." The mud tickles as it squeezes through his toes.

"I've never heard of nobody catching a crab pulling on the string that fast. You're too jumpy, boy."

"I'd catch them if the chicken neck wasn't so old."

"I'll get some fresher ones for you tomorrow."

The three of them stay like that for a while. Silence. Then Corton: "Until then, you'd ought to help your mother in the kitchen. Just wasting your time out here." He stands, the rivets of his jeans nearly brushing Carla's cheek. "I'll give it a go, though, if you don't mind."

He takes Doozer's string and pulls the dangling bait out of the water, then tosses it far, the soggy chicken neck plopping into the chilly river like a period at the end of a sentence that Doozer can't understand. Carla isn't giving any clues, just studying the moving surface of the nameless river, her eyes taking on the color of the water. A small finger of ash falls from the tip of her cigarette, exposing the burning flower beneath. When

Doozer gets half-way up the hill nothing has changed – Corton holds the string; they both work at their cigarettes, Carla's little coughs clack on the breeze.

Maybe that is when the guilt first sets in. When he decides to carry on up the hill, to leave them alone. Or maybe it comes later - like a transparent film draping over his memories with the passing of time. His feet feel heavy with something, maybe mud, as he makes his way to his grandmother's house. The one memory he will never doubt is the string drifting, untethered, into the water like a snake refusing to give in to the cold.

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The room on the bottom floor of Doozer's grandmother's house is tucked deep into the recesses of the hill; windowless and silent. He used to be afraid to sleep alone in that room - before he'd learned just how fun being sixteen and alone in the dark can be. It's the perfect place to play with the kinds of thoughts that send blood to his groin. With his hand resting, getting ready for action, he imagines Debbie Harry on the cover of Autoamerican, leaning on a concrete railing with those cheek bones catching the light and her head tossed back. He doesn't even notice Carla's feet squeaking on the fake wood flooring.

"Move over," she says. "I'm climbing in."

Hopefully she won't get too close to him - at least not until his groin has enough time to calm down.

The mattress hardly shifts as she moves closer. He rolls onto his stomach, away from her. The entire area around his groin feels doused in chilly water, but nothing is shrinking the way he needs it to.

"You going to go crabbing again tomorrow?" he asks.

"I don't want to talk about it."

With Carla shivering next to him the dark seems scary again. His body is still doing its work, though there is no pleasure in it now – no pulsing or throbbing, just awkwardness, all fleshy, and hard, and useless as a chicken neck.

Neither of them are close to sleep. With each moment the silence presses until Doozer says something just to ward off the dread creeping over them both.

"What did you and Corton talk about?"

"Let's not talk about Corton." Her voice is full somehow, like the time she tried to explain to him what it was like living without a mother - a real mother.

"Did he do something to you?" He tries to say it like a protective brother would. It comes out all wrong.

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

He turns in the bed, facing her. "Come on. Tell me. What happened?"

He's hardly finished talking when her fingers wrap around him, the blood that still hasn't left now trapped in her grip. There's nothing tender or sensual about it, just tugging – a demonstration. Then her hand is gone. It happens too fast to know what to do - or to even know for sure that it happened. He flops onto his back. He's next to Carla with his erection pointed at the ceiling, the throbbing sensation returning. But it is something more now. The space between them feels empty and wrong, and the little shudders he feels on the mattress call him closer. Either he pulls her or she rolls towards him, it's impossible to know, but somehow she rests in the crook of his arm, one of her legs draped across both of his.

"I was thinking about pretty girls," he says. "Before you got here."

"What are you talking about?"

"I just didn't want you to think you were the reason."

"Shut up, Richard," she says, turning into him, harder this time, her leg sliding and folding until her knees are on either side of his hips. The crease of her palm brushing across him isn't a demonstration anymore, but a guide, moving him to her and leaving him unsure if he should do anything or try to be perfectly still. Only when she removes her hand does he feel the full constriction of her body around him, clamping on his erection like a crab grabbing at his soggy chicken neck. He feels her knees near his ribs, then the rocking - frantic, as if she's trying to get control of something, or maybe shake something free. He doesn't want to move, but her hips demand it, bending him painfully until he finds a rhythm of his own. It's all over before he can decide if he's enjoying it, a burst of what must be pleasure that's too brief for him to understand or to question - or even know what he would ask - yet it is in this moment that fantasies of Debbie Harry leaning against a concrete railing will no longer be enough to keep off his fear of the dark.

“Saturday”

1.

The tapping of pebbles on Irene's window at eight in the morning wouldn't help her case for Doozer. Her friends at the Drop N' Drug had never seen his mundane charm - the way he held on to old things, records, old paperbacks and magazines, soda cans, and that pizza job he wouldn't quit. They thought a successful pharmacist with a house in Colony Pines was too good for the likes of him.

Maybe they were right. But it wasn't like things with Doozer were serious. For almost a year (three days to go) he'd been dropping by for a little fun - wasn't half bad at it, either - and did a marvelous job of making her laugh. That was more than anyone else had given her.

The pebble throwing? Now that had to stop.

She'd let him chuck rocks at her bedroom window for a good fifteen minutes while she finished getting ready for work, waiting for either his resolve or his throwing arm to give out while letting him know that she could keep him waiting if she wanted to. Finally, she opened the sliding glass doors and went to the half-moon of concrete that was her back porch.

"Why can't you go to the front door like a normal person?"

"I'm trying to be romantic," he said.

"Then why don't you buy some flowers and take me on a real date for once?"

"Can't afford all that."

"So you're throwing rocks at me instead?"

"Think of them as stone roses," he said, taking a knee and thrusting a hand full of pebbles towards her as though they were a bouquet.

She never knew what to make of him in moments like that - the weird jokes, the aimless references to music no one listened to anymore. There he stood - smartly laced Adidas a little worn, hair sprouting out the back of a Papa John's hat meant for people ten years younger, sauce splattered shirt still tucked tight into his pleated khakis. Maybe she'd buy him a belt for their anniversary. Or a clock. It was eight in the morning for god's sake.

Yet there he knelt, in the bottom of a wide and sandy crater that after nearly a decade of permit fiascos and budgeting problems had come to be called the "no-lake."

"It's been a long, long night," he said after he finally managed to scramble up the dry bank, using weeds to hoist himself forward.

"Tell me all about it, sweetie," she said.

"You know I hate when you call me that."

"Nice to see you, too." They went inside.

Irene liked to play a game where she guessed what prescription someone might need filled at the pharmacy where she worked. With Doozer, her guesses were usually a generic Zoloft or maybe some Adderal. Not that he was completely unhinged or anything - just a degree or two off. It was what made him so much fun. This morning her guess was different - he'd either be tweaking for some No-Doze or looking for a strong antibiotic.

"You get in a knife fight or something?" she asked.

"That's what I said!" There was no mistaking the seriousness in the hug he gave her.

"Really, are you okay?" she asked through the constrictions on her chest.

"It's just pizza sauce."

"Crap, it'll get on my smock." She stayed in the hug. It was these moments of depth and sincerity in his touch that, however unpredictable they might be, made him more to her than simply someone who made her laugh.

"Don't worry, it's all dried," he assured her. He pulled away from her anyway.

She pulled him back. She'd perfected a method of kissing with just enough pressure to invite some tongue without being so wanton that she'd have to take a peck as a rejection.

"You going to tell me what's going on?" she asked when the kiss stopped short.

"It's my sister."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"Let's just say she's in town."

"We can say that. Is it true?"

There was that look he got when he was thinking, his face creasing like a sheet of aluminum foil about to be thrown away. Irene knew it was best to wait those looks out - the funnier ones would be back soon enough. She took the Lay-Z-Boy nearest the window, the one that caught less glare off of her impressive 21-inch TV/VCR combo. One side of her bleached pharmacy smock had fallen open, accidentally letting the swell of her breast show through the purple t-shirt.

"You going to tell me what this is all about?" She checked the clock above the TV - she had a few minutes before she had to leave. She left her smock the way it was. "You don't have to," she said.

"I was hoping you could give me a ride to the mall." He ambled towards her, then parted the other side of the pharmacy smock.

"I'm already dressed for work," she said.

"So am I." He pulled his sauce stained shirt over his head to show off his ribs and chest bone.

"I already did my hair and makeup."

"Then we won't move around too much."

She was enjoying the way he looked at her.

"What about work?" she asked, stringing out the possibilities even as she knew how this would end.

"Have you ever known me to last that long?"

"You sure know how to talk to a girl," she said.

He brushed her face, then, in that way he had - that penetrating tenderness that he could wield at the most trying times, the layers of silliness peeling away to reveal - she didn't quite know what, but it was that mystery that had kept her willing, from time to time, to think of things like one-year anniversaries.

The clock, though, wouldn't tick any slower. She squirmed from beneath him, then pranced out of the living room, being sure to put some bounce in her raven colored bob.

"Let's go to the bedroom. I'll be on top."

Dragging himself from the Laz-Z-Boy, Doozer followed. Staying in the chair would have used less energy. It also would have spared him her bedroom, which was sharp and severe - all dark hardwood flooring and walls painted slate gray. An angular

dresser and pair of unforgiving end tables were the only furniture. Even the mattress was hard - the sheets starched and scratchy. It wasn't the kind of bed to linger in.

Irene seemed to like it that way. Her one concession to softness was a row of Beanie Babies on the window sill. "We all have our guilty pleasures," she explained whenever Doozer picked at them. He was pretty sure they might be worth something someday if she could find a "Squealer the Pig" to complete the set - more if she'd kept them in better condition.

Doozer slipped out of his pants and flopped onto the crisp bed with a bounce. Irene undressed slowly, laying her clothes out on the dresser, careful to avoid any wrinkles.

She and Doozer stayed on top of the covers despite the un-curtained window. They kissed again - this time Irene would settle for nothing short of sloppy with plenty of tongue. Doozer did his part. She reached for what he'd once called his "breadstick." She'd never let him call it that again. Playful was great and all, but come on!

This morning his breadstick needed a little more time in the oven.

"Could you get things started?" he asked.

"I already did my makeup," she said.

When another couple minutes of squishing hips didn't get them anywhere she gave in, first tucking the strands of her bob behind each ear, being careful to keep her rouged cheeks away from his thighs. Usually in these moments he closed his eyes, avoiding the fussiness of it all or the way the prissy angle put her hips in a frame around her face. This morning he was determined to keep his eyes open, the stare intense. It didn't seem that he was that interested in the sight before him - more that he was afraid of what might be behind his eyelids. Irene tried to pretend that the haunted look was just his fatigue.

She went at it a little while longer, grateful for his moans even if she suspected they were just for show. When he finally nodded to Irene to give up, she let him go with a "pop."

"It's okay," she said as she checked herself in the mirror over her dresser. "I should get dressed anyway." The bounce was out of her bob.

"It's just because I haven't slept," he said.

"You can nap here and we can try again when I get off work."

She pulled her pants back on, frustrated at the wasted time. Pretending to struggle with her shirt, she stared through the fabric, wondering if the man inside that purple silhouette was really what she wanted. She wondered about their one-year anniversary - if it was even a thing between them. "You never told me what happened last night," she said, finally pulling the shirt onto her broad shoulders. His eyes had sunken and his face drooped into a state that nothing in her pharmacy could cure.

"You want some breakfast?" she asked.

The mention of food snapped Doozer back to his usual pallor. "You still have Captain Crunch?" he asked.

Doozer loved Captain Crunch - always went on about how it had the best toys when he was a kid. Irene was more of a butter and toast woman, but she liked it when Doozer spoke of his childhood with even a glimmer of fondness. It was something to encourage. She'd added the cereal to her grocery list months ago, and now went to the kitchen to pour him a bowl while she put on some coffee, leaving him splayed on the bed, his clothes congealing on the floor.

When she returned to the bedroom he was nearing sleep, neither the clack of dishes in the kitchen nor the horrors of the previous night could keep his eyes fully open. He only jerked awake when she jiggled the bed, the small trickle of unpleasant dreams bleeding into the pressures of the new day.

"You know the way you eat cereal is disgusting," Irene said when Doozer went at the Captain Crunch. "Didn't your mom ever teach you how to hold a spoon?"

"She was busy," Doozer said, then went back to slurping.

Irene left the bed. A few moments later her smock was once again draped across her shoulders.

"I can't be late for work," she said.

She bent to pick up her purse, the morning light leaning through the window, coating her in a glow that spoke of a certain magic, the bright light melting her dark eyes into brandy, her smock shining into a spindled glow, ungraspable even as she seemed to demand a response.

"You sure you don't want to try again?" Doozer asked, his eyes filled with an intensity she'd never seen before. He wasn't just taking her in, but engulfing her with his gaze, the pretty blue rings of his eyes now a pair of forged chains pulling her closer.

"We both have things to do," she said, her eyes on his crotch.

"I came all this way just to see you." For once, they both believed him. He reached for her, pulled her, until she glided back into the ready bed.

It was as though Doozer was running to her, the slapping of their bodies feeling forceful even as it felt unforced. The light streaming through the window lit her pale body

until it glowed in the shine of those steeled eyes. It was a look she had craved for so long she'd forgotten she craved it at all, and yet there it was. And on Doozer's face no less.

When it was finished, she cradled his head in the dent between her neck and collar bone, still panting as his breath slowed and became more regular. The lashes over one of his eyes tickled her skin every time he blinked, until he stopped blinking altogether. Her own eyes drifted to the clock.

"Shit!" she screamed, jolting him awake. "I'm going to be late."

It was almost nine and they hadn't paid any thought to keeping her hair or her makeup in order.

"Just call, I'm sure it'll be fine," Doozer said.

"I'm supposed to be there in five minutes." She frantically dialed the phone. Irene, creature of the light, and Doozer of the steely eyes were gone. Irene Pock, a pharmacist in southeastern Virginia, and Doozer Handel - Pizzaman - were back.

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Doozer's debts were mounting. He owed his landlord one month's rent, and in less than a week would owe him two. He'd promised Irene an anniversary gift so she'd agree to drop him at the mall on her way to work, then hadn't visited a single store. And now, after haggling with the salesman at the EZ Dealz Used Car Emporium across the street from the mall, he'd taken on a fifteen-hundred dollar loan to cover the cost of a very used, very yellow Chevy Geo, a far cry from the shiny, white Plymouth Sundance of his dreams. Yet by the time he found a place to park his new car in a nearby neighborhood and walk back to the Trenchant Towers, all he could think about was how he was ready to at least pay back the debt of sleep he owed his body.

He'd have to get past his landlord, Hux, first. Bursting out of his apartment on the first floor, the large man forced his way into the drizzly dusk, his underarms flapping like a pair of pale satchels as empty as Doozer's pockets.

"What the hell happened to you?" Hux asked. "You bleeding?"

The rain had soaked through the pizza stains in Doozer's uniform, spreading the red into massive blotches that clung to him through the wet.

"Just pizza sauce," Doozer said. Hux still eyed him suspiciously. Doozer peeled the shirt from his skinny chest, presenting what he could. "Want to smell?"

"You know anything about the cigarette burn on my car?" Hux asked. The rain splatters turned his white tank-top gray.

"It wasn't me," Doozer said.

"What about your girlfriend? She's always smoking."

Viv or Carla? He could be talking about either. Couldn't be Irene – she never came to his place.

"She's not my girlfriend." It was true either way. "And it wasn't her." That was only true if he meant Viv.

"I find out who did it, Imma kill him."

"I learn anything I'll give you a holler."

"You learn when rent's due? Y'all still owe for last month."

Doozer would always be a month behind. "We'll have the money by Friday. Promise."

"Better. I'm already pretty sure Imma have to throw Ruth out this week. Don't want to do you too."

Ruth was an elderly woman in one of the corner apartments on the first floor. Carla had been bumming Newports off her whenever she wanted a smoke. One of those Newports sat in a tiny black puddle on the hood of Hux's Honda Prelude.

"We'll have it Friday," Doozer said.

Hux huffed once then inspected the hood of his car again, not touching the cigarette. Didn't want to tamper with the evidence, Doozer suspected. If only he knew how lucky he'd be to escape Carla with so little damage.

With the promise of the sweet, tropical smell always leaking through Viv's door, Doozer coaxed the final spasms of energy from his tired feet and labored up the stairs. Things should be peaceful now. It had been long enough since Doozer had given Carla the money. She should be on a bus by now - off to a "better life." She'd accumulated a lot of "better lives" in the past ten years, only to come back to the only one Doozer had ever had.

He was disappointed when he found Viv's delicate smell drowned in a thick smell of meat. Opening his front door, he was met with a massive spill of air-conditioning, armed and odorous and ready to do battle with the damp humidity of the city. This was more than the smell of processed sausage lurking in the fibers of a uniform. Doozer was facing down genuine, red, cooked-over-a-stove meat, its reek beating at his nose and sliding down his throat while the sound of its sizzle tore through his ears like the static of a record needle on a barren turntable.

All he could see was Carla.

Her presence felt like a violation of some unwritten code that had bound them since she'd fled that first time. She was supposed to flit back into town, collect a payment, then disappear until enough interest had gathered on Doozer's regret to make it worth another

visit. Sure, he'd cut some corners this time - chucking the whole wad right at her instead of slipping it to her in subtle installments. Surely they'd gotten too old for those games - too old to pretend that these visits were anything but a toxic meeting between Carla's desperation and Doozer's guilt.

Yet here she was, leaning against the breakfast bar he had fashioned out of cases of OK Soda and a bed sheet, giving Doozer's roommate a convincing look at her lack of cleavage while she turned her grin on her brother.

"Richard, you're home," she said.

"Not quite yet," he said, pointing at the doorstep in front of his Adidas.

"Well get in here. Don't make a liar out of me."

"We're all liars underneath our clothes," Doozer said, stepping headlong into the smell of cooking meat.

"Naked," Carla said.

"What?"

"We're all naked underneath our clothes."

He pulled at the collar of his shirt, looking inside it where the rain and sauce stains had left his skin pink and moist. "What do you know?" he said. "You're right."

"You still like your meat well-done?" she asked.

"I never liked it well-done," Doozer said.

"Good," Timber said, his voice wavering from the kitchen, barely audible over the sizzle of oil and steaks. "Then we're ready to eat. I made broccoli, too."

Doozer joined them slowly. Like a child afraid of the dark, he felt fears grow out of the air around him, his eyes wanting to take in everything even as they shrunk from

imagined horrors lurking in the corners - the breakfast bar where Carla leaned, the end-table made of Pepsi clear cases where she'd set her backpack, the couch where she slept, the door to the bedroom where she and Timber had probably spent some time, the blank carpet in the living room where he knew they had spent some time. At least they were all wearing clothes, even if they were naked underneath.

"Relax," Carla said. "It's not as bad as all that." She took two plates from Timber, a slab of meat and a pile of broccoli on each, and plunked them onto the breakfast bar, then slid into one of the two bar chairs. The plates were plain and unfamiliar. Doozer and Timber had only used them twice before.

"How much did all that meat cost?" Doozer asked. Carla didn't flinch at the mention of money.

"I took care of it," Timber said.

"Oh, I had no doubt," Doozer said.

The meat hadn't cooked for long - bloody and raw. The juices soaked into the broccoli, turning the stalks pink and the flowers mushy. Timber handed Doozer a butter knife, leaving the only steak knife for Carla.

"I could have sworn you liked your meat well-done," she said to Doozer.

"I could have sworn you didn't care," Doozer said, his frustration pushing out of him. He took the other chair, leaving Timber to float at the breakfast bar's end.

"Don't say that," she said.

She was right. For all her antics, she cared. There wouldn't have been any antics otherwise. Doozer went to work on his meat with another regret to add to his tally. The steak was too raw for a butter knife to do more than stretch the muscle fibers around little

rivers of fat. Doozer mangled a piece free and shoved it in his mouth. The burst of rawness and blood mixed with a burn of paprika. Maybe it was his hunger, or his fatigue, or too many years living on reheated pizzas that someone else didn't want. Whatever it was, the steak was one of the best things he'd ever tasted. He closed his eyes as he chewed, feeling the stringy sinews stick between his teeth as he tried to forget everything but the taste on his tongue and the apartment's meaty perfume.

Carla wouldn't allow that. "Timber told me about this Irene," she said. "I didn't know you had a girlfriend."

"And she didn't know I had a sister." Doozer let his eyes open again, his respite brief.

"You spend the day with her?"

Doozer didn't want to tell Carla about the new car. She couldn't take advantage of what she didn't know he had. "Not exactly," he said.

"I want to meet her," she said, then raised her steak to her mouth, tearing at the meat using only her teeth. She pulled until a bite came free, her whole body jerking with the effort. Her knees banged into the side of the breakfast bar.

"You ever going to sell these?" she asked, tapping at the pile of sodas covered with a beige sheet.

"If I find a buyer."

"You should drink it," Timber said. "Save money." He was also struggling to get a piece of meat free, his hand more jittery than usual.

"How would that save money?" Doozer asked.

"On drinks."

"Water's free."

"Anyway," Timber said. "They make a terrible breakfast bar." There was a loud scrape as Timber's knife slipped.

"That's why I wanted them to be a coffee table." They'd argued about that for a week when they first moved in.

"That would have been a better idea."

"See," Carla said. "You could learn a thing or two." She traced her fingers over Timber's arm, leaving a thin trail of steak juice on his skin.

Doozer almost felt sorry for Timber. Almost. Timber wouldn't have been a bad roommate, except he carried himself like he was better than everybody, even though he was four years younger and a lot less employed. He said he was "studying to be a lawyer," whatever that meant, and spoke as though living in a one-bedroom apartment in the Trenchant Towers was a temporary stop on his way to a better life; as though Doozer would one day be a funny story he'd tell his family over dinner. Only now, with that steak juice staining his skin, he was a part of Doozer and Carla's story, and that was a tale not fit for the dinner table.

"Tell you what," Doozer's voice seemed loud against the quieted sizzle of the pan still smoking on the burner in the kitchen. "Let's break open a case - celebrate Carla's visit."

"It'll put a hole in the breakfast bar," Timber said.

"I'll just take out three cans, leave the box." Doozer lifted the sheet, exposing the stacks of OK Soda - a brand that had come and gone two years earlier, and that Doozer

was convinced would someday be worth at least as much as the stack of discontinued Apple Slice he'd used to make his bedside table.

"Dude, I don't want to drink three year-old soda," Timber said.

"You sure? You can't get this stuff anymore."

"Just eat your steak," Carla said.

"We have something we wanted to talk to you about," Timber said, then sawed maniacally at his own piece of meat.

Doozer stopped tearing at his. What he'd seen his roommate and his sister doing had hung in the air since his return, unspoken and unacknowledged. Doozer was happy to leave it that way. He suspected Carla would be, too. "We don't need to talk about that," he said.

Timber didn't know how the game worked, and Doozer was afraid his roommate might make things worse.

"I got a job," Timber blurted. "With a law firm." He'd gotten a piece of meat free, wedging it into his cheek like a Big-Leaguer loading some chew. "Gibbs, Gib, and Gibbs," he said out of the other side of his mouth.

"That's quite a title," Doozer said.

"Two brothers and another guy. What're the odds they'd all have the same name?"

"For the brothers - pretty likely," Doozer said.

Gibbs, Gib, and Gibbs had no idea what they were in for with Timber.

"I got my own place," Timber said quickly. "I'm going to be moving out."

"When?"

"Friday."

"What about rent?"

"I'll make plenty to cover the rent."

"I meant my rent."

"I paid last month. Figured you owed me." Doozer had never told Timber that he'd spent the rent on an auction for a copy of The Velvet Underground and Nico in "very good" condition. Andy Warhol did the cover. What else could Doozer do? He hadn't known, at the time, that he wouldn't be collecting his Papa John's paycheck. Didn't know he wouldn't have a roommate. Didn't know Carla was coming.

Timber shoved another piece of meat into his mouth. "I'll make it up to you," he said, chewing painfully.

"How?"

Timber paused again. "That's what the steaks are for."

Three blood-red chunks of meat stared casually back at them, reclining on grease-soaked broccoli, counting on the drama to save them from being eaten any further. Doozer carried his plate towards the kitchen, determined to dump it into the trashcan. It was a simple gesture, childish really, yet it was the only way he could think to express an anger he knew he should be feeling, but that wouldn't come. In a way his roommate's news was a nice diversion - a set of questions whose answers involved dollars and cents; a problem whose solution Doozer understood, even if it was out of his reach to accomplish. So unlike things with Carla.

So unlike the little square of photo paper clinging to his fridge, wedged beneath a magnet featuring a red, white, and green logo and the a phone number: 555-PAPA.

He'd seen this photo before. A little black square with a wedge of grayish dots and speckles, framed in white borders that had gone yellow with age, the corners frayed. Dot matrix printing on one side read "Handel," then a date too smudged to read. He wasn't sure why he was surprised – whenever Carla appeared the old ultrasound did, too – she wielded it like a weapon.

"What's this?" he asked, though he already knew. He forgot to trash his steak.

Timber's blotchy face had gone pale. Carla tore another bite out of her steak.

"Carla and I," Timber said. "She's going to move in with me. We're going to live together. All three of us."

"You know that baby can't possibly be yours," Doozer said.

"I'm not dumb, you know. Carla and I have only been..." Timber's face regained some color in a hurry.

"You're going to raise the baby anyway?" Doozer asked. He knew he shouldn't be going along with this, letting Carla's lie stand, but he couldn't help himself. Timber was breaking Doozer and Carla's rhythm and the best punishment Doozer could come up with was to push his roommate further into the muck.

"He's going to help," Carla said. "And I'll play my part."

"I've no doubt," Doozer said, his anger growing. Rent was one thing. But that wide open smile on Timber's face, so fresh and cool and unsuspecting? It wasn't fair that such an innocent should take from Doozer what had sustained him in his private suffering for so long. The regret of his past with Carla pressed upon him, yet the burden was his - he had earned it ten years ago, he had fostered it for all that time, and he wasn't about to let

Carla toss him aside like bait that's lain in the sun too long. He'd nearly lost her to Corton all those years ago. He wasn't about to lose her to Timber.

"How long can you keep this up?" he asked his sister.

"How long can you?" she asked.

A silence followed, saturating the meat soaked air.

"You're going to be an uncle!" Timber said. He was trapped between the two of them, unable to escape without crossing through the stare that neither Carla or Doozer would break.

"I guess I should be proud," Doozer finally said.

"It's too late for that," Carla said.

"Mind if I keep this?" He nodded at the ultrasound.

"It's yours," she said.

She had made her declaration, exposed what she was here for at last. He waited just a moment, giving her a chance to say anything more. Then he snatched the ultrasound from the fridge, sending the magnet flying, and crumpled the paper into a tight wad in his fist.

For the first time since she'd come back - for the first time since she'd left home - Carla flinched, a wildness seeping into her eyes that Doozer hadn't seen for so long.

"Come on, Timber," she said. "Let's go to bed."

Timber's head had been swiveling between them, a witness in a case with no possible verdict.

Which reminded him.

"Uh, before I forget," his voice cracked as Carla pulled him from the breakfast bar. "I got it wrong last night. When you called about the grand larceny thing. It's two-hundred dollars, not five."

Two hundred. Not five. Strange that such dire news could wash over him so effortlessly, the reality of the last several hours unable to penetrate the reality he'd lived with for so long. He was \$299 into a felony, with nothing in his pocket to show for it and a job working across the street from the scene of the crime. Yet it was Carla that bore down on him. She'd changed the rules of the game too much for him to have any idea what was in store for any of them. Still, \$299 was a lot of money. His glare remained fixed on his sister as he said, "That's an awfully big difference."

Carla didn't budge this time, didn't flinch. Just kept dragging Timber's eager body away. Had she counted the money yet? Did she know what was at stake in what Timber had just revealed; what danger Doozer was in?

"Believe me," she said. "It could be a lot worse."

Of course she had counted the money. Debt collectors always do.

When the door closed Doozer sank onto the couch, still holding the plate. A puddle of juices had gathered at the lip on one side. The meat was red and tender. Still Doozer didn't move. He wasn't going to give in. He wasn't going to run. He'd sit on that couch and listen, no matter what Carla used Timber's body to say.

Even when he heard the pounding coming from Viv's apartment, Doozer didn't budge. The frantic thump on their shared wall not enough to drown out the constant rhythm of his past with Carla beating against the disaster of his present, a fantasy of frantic sound to go with the turmoil vibrating every inch of the apartment.

Then one of the stacks of records Doozer was storing on top of a cube of carefully arranged Apple Slice cases toppled, scattering albums and sleeves across the carpet. Viv must really need him. With the first soft moans of Timber's nasally arousal at his back, Doozer responded to her call, the plate of meat and wadded ultrasound still forgotten in his hand.

2.

The butter knife shrieked around the edge of his plate as Doozer rushed to the balcony. He knocked on Viv's door, eager to know what the trouble was; ready to have someone else's problems to think about. She answered slowly, the door cracking just enough for him to see her bathrobe and her bald head.

"What's the matter?" Doozer asked.

"You see anything?" There was a quaver in the usual smoke of her voice.

"What am I supposed to be looking for?"

Viv had moved in six months earlier, trying to get away from an anonymous customer at Bluebeard's who had gotten a bit too close - leaving her threatening messages at work, dropping off flowers on her doorstep, making phone calls that left her rattled. One night after a shower at her old apartment she'd found a pile - a big pile - of cigarette butts in front of her window. She'd never figured out who the stalker was - just knew he smoked Marlboros. Doozer had promised that, if she was ever afraid at the Trenchant Towers, he was only a thin wall away.

"I think he's found me again," she said, her eyes darting past Doozer, flickering back and forth. "Maybe I should call the cops."

"The cops'll only screw things up," Doozer hurried to say. "Just tell me what happened."

"Look." She pointed at a few cigarette butts lying on the balcony. "And Hux was asking about a cigarette butt on his car, too."

Squatting to look at the cigarettes more closely, he confirmed what he already knew. "Those are my sister's," he said. The stalker hadn't been there. As always, the answer was Carla.

Viv looked past him, peering into the splatter of rain still moistening the city, her own bald head and pale skin shining with the wet of a shower, like a fleshy pearl atop a sculpture of terry cloth and marble. "You sure?"

"Look," he said. "These butts - they're Newports."

Clutching her robe tight, Viv stepped onto the balcony and crouched next to him, inspecting the cigarettes scattered on the concrete near the metal railing.

"Sorry she scared you," Doozer said. "She's in town for... she's in town."

The talk of such simple things seemed to be calming her. It wasn't helping Doozer. Viv leaned against the wet railing, her bare feet casually kicking the cigarette butts off the ledge. She fished a joint and a lighter from the pocket of her robe. The pot would settle her nerves while she slowly settled Doozer's. "What you got there?" she asked before lighting her joint.

The creases of the ultrasound dug deeper into Doozer's palm. "It's nothing," he said, shoving the paper into his back pocket. "Just an old receipt."

"I meant your other hand."

Doozer had forgotten about the slab of meat he was still stupidly holding, the butter knife nearly spilling off the edge of the plate. "You want some?" he asked.

After a long drag from her joint Viv pinched the steak between two fingers, splattering meat juice on the metal slats of railing as she lifted it. She emptied her lungs, letting the smoke envelope the piece of meat, then took a bite, pulling hard to tear through the fibers, a ripple of muscles working all the way up her scalp as she chewed. Doozer delighted in the soft flexes of that scalp almost as much as he reveled in the desperate distraction of talking to his neighbor.

She was the prettiest girl he'd ever really been able to talk to without stumbling all over himself. Timber said it was because he knew he had no chance, like getting a scratch-off lotto ticket where the prize was a million dollars - winning was impossible so there was nothing left to do but enjoy the feel of a penny scratching across cardboard and latex. Doozer knew it was something else, something lovely and unsullied. She was a glimmer, a crack in the loneliness that had frosted him since sometime in his former days; a loneliness that was gruff and palpable, but soft and comfortable, too, like the blanket his sister had knitted him when they were both thirteen, the one that always itched his skin even as it kept him warm on those cold Peninsula nights when the wind from the Chesapeake bay leaked through the crack in his boyhood window. Some nights, when Viv and Doozer leaned together on the Trenchant Towers balcony, trading the parts of their stories they were willing to share, pouring some of their solitude into the wall of pot smoke she put up between them, her scalp would catch the moonlight in a perfect bare crescent that bent from her forehead to the nape of her neck. It was a beautiful thing to watch - pure and elegant.

Now, in the dull gray of late dusk, Viv returned the steak to the plate with one hand and offered her joint to Doozer with the other. He refused with a wave. They'd gone through this ritual so many times before - her politely making the offer, him politely refusing - that they didn't even notice when it happened anymore; it was a reflex they shared, an intimacy that Doozer enjoyed even when he didn't realize it was happening. Those, after all, were the best kinds of intimacies - the kinds that didn't need thinking about.

He and Viv leaned together on the railing in the pose they'd taken so many times since she'd moved in, though this time the plate made his arms awkward. He swirled the meat juices, soaking the broccoli, some spilling onto the unfortunate Honda below where it mixed with the rain on the hood.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Viv said. "But you look like hell."

"What's the right way to take that?"

"I'm saying that you usually look a lot better. It's a compliment."

"Does that mean I should never say you look great?"

"Not if I look like hell when you say it. You mind?" She took a handful of broccoli, popping some in her mouth when she felt like it. "So what happened to you?"

Doozer had made so many wrong moves since he'd woken up the previous morning. He didn't know where to begin. "I lost my job," he said. It was the easiest mistake to explain. Finally coming clean with somebody brought a welcome, inadequate, relief.

"You know, that's probably a good thing. You can't work in pizza places forever, you know. Maybe a change is what you need."

With his free hand Doozer tugged at the front of his shirt, which clung to him like a napkin soaking the grease off of fresh-cooked bacon. There'd be no point in even washing it anymore - he'd just throw it in the dumpster for the raccoons. He couldn't bring himself to tell Viv that he already had another work shirt with a pizza stenciled on the front. Well, would have if Kurtz hadn't stolen it.

"I'm sorry about my sister," he said.

"It's not her fault." Viv leaned in close, her head toppling onto his shoulder.

"Thanks for helping me out tonight. I feel a lot better."

Doozer's arm was getting tired from holding the plate. Still, he didn't move, not wanting to do anything that might make Viv lift her head. Despite the deep fatigue seeping into him he could stay awake if she was with him - her moves were like a fresh stir of caffeine in his blood, her words a tonic to the turmoil of his sister's presence.

"Shit," she said. "I'm going to be so late for work. And I have to walk in this damn rain."

"I can give you a ride," Doozer said. "I bought a car today."

"Where is it?" She was scanning the parking lot, her scalp creased with doubt.

"Had to park on the street - Timber's using our space."

"Why didn't you take mine?"

"Can I?"

"Of course."

She'd finished the broccoli and, with only the familiar joint in her hands, stood straight to retie her robe. Through the flutter of fabric Doozer mistakenly caught a glimpse of what was beneath - a single frame of smooth white skin, a pepperoni sized nipple, and a

perfect swell of flesh that he didn't dare desire because to do so would be to lose everything that made Viv so precious to him - the one woman in all the world he could sit on a balcony with, eating steak and confessing what he'd done. Most of what he'd done.

"Why don't you come watch me dance?" Viv asked.

She'd been asking him to come watch her at Bluebeard's since she'd moved in. His job at Papa John's had always been his excuse. Now, he had no way out.

"Won't it be weird?" he asked.

"It's not like we get naked. Have some fun - take your mind off things."

It wouldn't take his mind off of what he'd just seen beneath her robe. After all that had happened - with Carla, Timber, even Irene - he couldn't bear things changing with Viv. He didn't want her to become something new. That image, that flash of naked skin, hung in the front of his mind, unsure where to go.

She wasn't letting him get away. "You give me a ride and I'll make sure the waitresses slip you some free beer." She leaned on the railing again. He cautiously joined her. She went for another bite of meat, accidentally knocking the butter knife free to clatter against the Honda below. Doozer hoped Hux didn't hear the clank of metal on wet paint.

"Sorry," she said. "I'll get it."

"Don't worry about it. It was Timber's anyway."

"In that case." She chucked the plate towards the street. It fell behind a Mazda Miata parked at the edge of the complex's lot, the impact ringing with the satisfying sound of breaking porcelain. A couple stray bits of broccoli squished against the windshield of Hux's car.

"That plate was actually mine," Doozer said.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry."

She disappeared into her apartment before Doozer could stop her, giving him time to think about what he'd just agreed to. Had he agreed?

"Here," Viv said when she returned. She thrust a plate towards him with both hands. It wasn't a plain white plate like his had been - it was decorated with colorful stripes and clips from a magazine: a dragonfly, a little girl from India, and a series of different colored frogs with their tongues extended. The pictures had been glued and painted to the surface in a wide iris surrounding a dollop of blue paint in the plate's center.

"Did you make that?" he asked.

"In an art class. Back when I was still in school."

Doozer inspected the plate closer, noting the different patterns of color on each of the frogs' bodies.

"Why don't you go get your car," Viv said. "I'll finish getting ready. Meet you in the parking lot in ten minutes. You're my hero!"

"Thanks for the plate," he said as she pranced into her apartment with another swirl of fabric. He was half way down the stairs when her door reopened and her face poked out, nodding at the plate.

"Don't eat off that," she said. "Might be toxic."

Holding it over his tired, tired head he let it give him a small circle of protection from the rain while he braced himself for a visit to a strip club where the strippers don't strip.

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She's waiting for him in his bedroom, looking out the window at Reddick Road. With the lights off, the albums he's tacked onto his wall look like a series of dark, speckled squares - the sleeve of Born to Run right next to his new copy of Born in the USA. Right underneath Bruce Springsteen's butt, Carla's feathered hair catches the light of the street lamp in a burst of peroxide. She doesn't move when he comes in - just stares at the street. Their mother always tells them the quality of a place is in the roads. "Without a curb the grass grows right into the street cracks, makes them worse." She's wanted to upgrade from Reddick for as long as either could remember.

Doozer turns on the light, the outside scene fading as Carla's reflection melts onto the glass, her eyes poofy, her mouth severe. Her legs are crossed, her tanned knees pointing in opposite directions, her acid washed shorts pulled tight around her teen-aged thighs.

Doozer's legs ache from his first shift at Papa John's. His feet are tired and heavy. The work is boring and the days slow and repetitive. Doozer's thinking about quitting. What real future can there be at a pizza joint anyway?

It's not that it's unusual for Carla to be in his room. She's taken to hiding out there when Corton stays over, just in case. She and Doozer have grown so much closer lately. So much closer. She hasn't been in his room the last couple of weeks.

It's not like her to be so quiet. Doozer knows what that must mean. "What did the doctor say?"

Only her hand moves, dangling what looks like a small photograph over the soft blade of her shoulder, which peeks out from her black tank top. Doozer takes the photo.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to be looking at," he says.

"It's the big dot," she says. "Looks like a bean."

Doozer can't see anything but the slick computer printing on the edges - a last name, "Handel," and the date, 07/06/85 - the black ink sharp and clear on the white paper.

"So it's definite," Doozer says, still not completely sure what he's seeing. Carla's quiet had already told him what he wanted to know.

"The doctors don't get something like that wrong."

"What are you going to tell mom?"

"She'll think it's Corton's."

Doozer still wonders that himself. He's been wondering since she first missed her period. He's not sure if he wants it to be Corton's or not.

"You sure it isn't?" he asks.

"That's the one thing he was always careful about," she says.

"You'll have to tell mom eventually."

There was a long pause and a little shudder in her shoulders. "Not if I take care of it."

"You have that kind of money?"

"I was hoping you might."

"I don't have enough."

She turns to face him when she hears the tear of Velcro from his wallet. A Jackson, two Hamiltons, and a Lincoln is all he has.

"It's a start," she says, folding the money into her fist.

He checks the ultrasound again. No matter how hard he tries to keep it down, a ripple of pride stabs through everything else. "It really happened," he says.

"It's really happening," she replies.

"Where will you get the rest of the money?" He joins her on the bed, making sure there is a good bit of space between them. They both know the consequences.

"I'm not sure if I should."

"Mom will find out if you don't."

"I could leave." She rubs the folded cash together. "This is enough to get me someplace."

They sit like that for a while, Doozer unsure what to feel, what to say, what to do next. He's only certain of one thing - he doesn't want Carla to leave him. Her shoulders eventually give in to more sobs and she curls tight on one side of the bed. Doozer doesn't move - the ultrasound still in his hand, propped against his knee. They sit like that, with nothing else to do, until the weariness of two weeks of waiting creep upon them. His shoulders and neck are pressed into the wall, the back of his head against the window, his legs dangling uselessly off the side of the bed, the photo growing loose in his grip as he nods off with Carla breathing softly beside him.

3.

On the way to Bluebeard's Viv couldn't stop talking about her new wig. "The spotlight makes it shimmer like nothing you've ever seen," she was saying. She was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt with the hood draped down her back, leaving beads of rain to sparkle across her scalp every time the Geo passed a streetlight.

Doozer was worried about keeping his tired eyes open, and about the bird droppings his wipers were smearing across his windshield in a pair of perfect arcs. He hadn't noticed the crust of droppings at first, he'd been so busy using his shirt to wipe at the

plate Viv had given him, making sure the rain didn't curl the magazine clippings behind their layer of shellac. Now the plate was wedged between Viv's thighs.

"Are you sure it's a good idea for me to watch you dance?" he asked again.

"What's the big deal? I'll be in a bikini. It's like we're going to the beach together."

"But the dancing. And being around all those men watching you strip."

"We don't strip."

"That just makes it worse."

"How is that worse?"

"If they don't see you naked what are they paying for?"

They drove the rest of the way in silence, Viv's excitement doused with that single question. She usually enjoyed her time with Doozer - he was always so willing to avoid the truths that she didn't want to face, wrapping her flaws in his sweetness until she could almost believe that the looks he gave her were sincere rather than growing out of whatever dark secrets she knew he hid beneath his compliments and that off-kilter sense of humor that was such a welcome contrast to the off-color jokes she usual dealt with.

"Let me out at the Trinity," she said as they neared Bluebeard's. "Can't be seen with a man dropping me off at the club. Putz won't allow it."

"Putz?"

"The manager."

"His name is Putz?"

"It's short for something."

Doozer pulled into the Trinity - an auto repair place with a few battered vehicles littering the area in front of three car ports. Doozer's Geo fit right in.

"You want me to meet you here later?"

"I'll get home on my own," Viv said. "Thanks Doozer."

She tucked the massive wig under her arm then pulled her hood up and drew the string tight, hiding her scalp. There weren't many men she was comfortable being bald with. It was a secret that she protected, preferring to fool the clients while she knew that, should they ever try to take hold of her, the illusion would tear free.

It had never occurred to Doozer what an intimacy that scalp was. So many men had watched her dance; seen her exposed on the stage. Yet the clientele at Bluebeard's had never seen her bald.

Doozer had never seen her any other way. He thought about keeping things the way they were. Dark and quiet, the Trinity parking lot would be the perfect place to give up and let his eyes close to the patter of rain on the Geo's roof.

The plate of frogs glued in a multi-colored iris stared at him - tallying his lies, his disappointments. There would be no sleep in front of its judgmental stare. He drove his Geo across the street to Bluebeard's parking lot.

The club shared a strip mall with two other businesses that not even most regulars of the club's regulars could name. It was a cranky place with grates on the windows and peeling paint on the walls. All Doozer noticed was the massive man at the front door who wasn't paying attention to the rain pelting him. Each customer flashed an ID in the man's face before pulling open the heavy wooden door to the club. The big man never moved. He might have been carved from stone if not for the occasional flexing of his biceps, which were as large and shiny as his bald head. He made no move to help when Doozer struggled with the weight of the door.

After squinting against the harsh lights of a darkening street, the interior of the club was strangely soothing - dim but not dingy, Bluebeard's let Doozer's eyes relax and blink at their usual rhythm. A sultry Scottish singer purred through the juke-box, blanketing the place in a dusting of sex and oddness, not the attack on his ears he'd prepared for. Most of the room was filled with mahogany benches - repurposed church pews, Doozer realized - all polished to a shine and pointed at a bronze pole in the middle of a stage a few feet higher than the wooden planks of the floor and a few feet lower than the wooden bar with unmatched bar stools stretching against the opposite side of the room. The man serving drinks was tall and lanky with shaved hair on the sides of his head and a mop of curls on top. His face was lean and angular, creased in odd places, including a cleft in his chin so deep and comical the flesh almost wagged when he scanned the bar for empty beer cups. Putz. That had to be Putz.

On the stage a thick limbed girl in higher than necessary heels was turning and wriggling slowly, failing to match the sultriness oozing from the speakers. It was hard to blame her. Other than a few glances over a lonely shoulder, most of the men in the club were focused on either their plastic cups or the two women weaving between them, one in a robe, the other spooned into a tight t-shirt and pair of shorts. None of the women were Viv.

Doozer was disappointed that there were no dark corners where he could hide. He chose a pew instead, where his nose was wrapped in a swirl of beer and wood that pulled his heavy lids closer to closed, his distaste for the club ebbing from him to leave a deep and empty space in his mind that only sleep and sadness could fill. His head was just dipping towards his clasped hands, the background murmurs of feminine voices and deep

male rumbles blurring into a simple blankness that Doozer only enjoyed in the moment before sleep.

"Doozer get over here," a voice snapped him free of his fantasy. At the bar was a new woman, leaning casually against the wooden top, her leg on a stool that seemed made for the length of her limbs. If not for the calm grace of her body - was there anything that wasn't the perfect height for Viv? - Doozer wouldn't have recognized her with the straight locks and sheered bangs hanging in alternating platinum and honey from her scalp. She still wore her sweatshirt, the hood down, and there was the impress of some new outfit lurking beneath.

Next to her was a well-built man in his fifties who couldn't seem to get his stool far enough from the bar to save his knees from banging against the wood.

"This is Danny," Viv said when Doozer joined them, wondering how he might slip between the man and Viv without causing a stir. The well-built man extended his hand, a deep crease marring his forearm where it had been pressed into the corner of the bar.

"Danny's been at Fort Eustace for almost a year now, visits every Saturday," Viv said.

Doozer scanned the man - the crisp haircut and clean shave. There was nothing sinister behind those eyes, only focus and a squint of loneliness in the corners of his lids that eased whenever his eyeballs swiveled in Viv's direction.

"Pepsi's been my favorite girl since I got here," he said.

"Pepsi?" Doozer asked.

"That's me," Viv said. "That's my name here."

"And she's my favorite," Danny said again. "I like the artsy types."

"On hiatus at the moment," Viv said. "Just heard tuition's going up."

Doozer barely noticed the Hamilton that slipped from Danny's hand into Viv's.

"Sit down," Viv said. "Relax."

He'd been floating between Viv and the client, reluctant to give up his place until he knew what this Danny expected in exchange for the cash. With Viv's eyes on him he felt foolish. He took her spot at the bar while she made her way further down to a man who'd just coated his beard in a fresh foam of beer.

"She's a sweet girl," Danny said. "Reminds me of my daughter."

Doozer tried to get comfortable at the bar, finding its height put strain on his shoulders when he leaned. He focused on shifting to the edge of the barstool rather than groping for a way to respond to the man next to him, the man who somehow didn't shudder - maybe even embraced - the mix of family memories and the veneer of sex permeating the place. "Your daughter's a dancer?" he asked when the silence had grown too long.

"I don't know. I haven't spoken to her since my divorce."

Doozer turned away, searching for Viv, unable to stand the mirror of loss and desperation sitting next to him. Viv had taken a new pose next to the bearded man - her feet propped on the bottom rung of the barstool, her back to the bar, her elbows propped on its top. It would have been a provocative, even lewd gesture if the thickness of her hoody didn't make it so charming. The bearded man's eyes never ventured lower than her drawstring. Doozer felt a wave of jealousy.

"Your birthday's in a few weeks," Viv was saying to the man. "What kind of cake do you want?"

"I can't believe you remembered," the bearded man said.

"I can't believe you thought I'd forget," she said.

"Whatever you make is cool with me." He plunked two Jacksons on the bar in front of her. "For the ingredients," he said.

Doozer didn't get to watch the end of the transaction. "Want a beer?" the bartender asked.

"I'm good," Doozer said.

"Can't just sit in here. We ain't a library."

"When was the last time you were in a library, Putz?" Viv asked, sliding back to Doozer. Her hand clasped into his, passing him a bill that he didn't know what to do with.

"I know they're free," Putz said. "And I'm running a business."

"Give him some singles," she said to the manager, pulling Doozer's hand from beneath the bar, a fresh Hamilton resting in his palm. Putz swiped the bill and replaced it with a stack of Washingtons.

"Come on," Viv said, tugging Doozer away from the bar.

"You make cakes for these guys?" Doozer asked as they headed for the church pew nearest the stage.

Viv knew that look. "You're not jealous are you?"

All those nights on the balcony clipped through his mind - the closeness, the intimacy. Had the railing where they leaned been nothing more than a misshapen bar? "I thought you just stripped for them," he said.

"We don't strip."

For a moment Doozer wanted to insist again that this was worse, but he couldn't decide if he believed it anymore, or if jealousy was, indeed, bending his thoughts. He remembered the silence that had claimed them the last time he'd said it. He couldn't bear

that now, especially when Viv forced him to sit in the front pew, giving him no means of escaping the woman on the pole.

She wasn't the same one from before. She might have been the woman he'd seen in the robe earlier - he couldn't be sure. Whoever she was, she was tall and thin, her spins around the pole matching the R&B song someone had chosen from the juke box.

"What are you doing?" Doozer asked.

"Showing you a good time," Viv said as she took his money and held it out for the dancer. The woman had just begun a tight spin near the top of the pole, then let her body descend until she lay before them, the yellow of her bikini a bright contrast to the rosy tan of her skin. The nearness of her belly and the casual display of her navel bombarded Doozer even as the length of her body so close gave him nowhere to look away. The woman's head turned to them, her face blank until she noticed Viv, who earned a wink.

"Hey Ginger," Viv said. "This is my friend Doozer."

"You finally got him here, huh?"

"You talk about me here?" Doozer asked.

"All the time," Ginger answered. "Says you're the brother she never had."

"Let's show him how it's done," Viv said.

Ginger arched her back, the ridge between her abs a shallow trench pointing Doozer's gaze in a pair of impossible directions.

"Relax your fist," Viv said to Doozer. He let go of his grip on the money while Viv fanned at the bills, a blizzard of Washington's falling into a pile around the dancer's navel.

"That always tickles," Ginger said.

"Newer bills are even worse," Viv said.

"You working later?"

That question, and the image it conjured of Viv on this stage, made Doozer even more desperate to settle his eyes somewhere free of exposed skin. All he could find was the shiny pole where a distorted reflection stared back at him, its wide eyes confused by the casual conversation between the two women, one still wearing a dusting of Washingtons on her exposed belly.

When their talk was over, Viv helped Ginger gather the bills. With them still in her fist, the tall dancer wrapped her leg around Doozer's helpless reflection, his wide eyes disappearing behind a bronzed thigh then reappearing in time to the beat of a new song.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Viv asked.

Doozer didn't say anything.

Viv leaned close to him, her lips nearly brushing his ear. "These guys pay me to talk to them. They don't even know my name." Then she rose from the pew to join a heavy-set man who'd just walked through the thick wooden doors.

"James, good to see you," she said, giving the man a hug. His eyes closed as he took a deep breath of her.

"Good to see you, Pepsi." He'd handed her a pair of Lincolns before he even made it to the bar, where he and Viv wedged together between a growing crowd of twenty-somethings who ignored the bar in favor of the stage.

As he rose to find a bathroom Doozer felt a give in his chest and stomach - a strange break as the unsettled feeling of the club's odd familiarity was becoming littered with the prickle of young men ready for a show. By the time he'd returned from the toilet the ranks of men had swollen until Danny and James and the bearded man were as lost as

the specs of grime on the bathroom stalls. The club's shellaced walls grew moist with the heat of so many bodies, and as the lights went down coils of moonlight pooled beneath the grate-covered windows. Behind the bar Putz was pulling taps as fast as he could, his face now lit from below, casting a deep shadow into the cleft of his chin, its comical flaps now etched and frightening. The dancers had all vanished, leaving behind a crew of young women who didn't look old enough to drink what they were serving. The waitresses took the beers from Putz, then dissolved into a darkness that coated the place like years of dust. Doozer groped about for an empty seat.

The men who'd come to watch un-naked women were huddled in packs, leaving big spaces in the seats. Doozer tried to imagine the original owners of those pews, bent in prayer, their foreheads pressed to the wood that would someday support the backs of men trying to hide their erections.

It was hard to make out anything specific about the clientele through the brief glimpses of light. From what he could tell, each pack consisted of tired men rallying around one excited member whose enthusiasm offset the look of obligation on the faces of the others.

The excited member of one of those packs was wearing a yellow t-shirt with a Tranito's logo on the front.

"Doozer!" Gage yelled before there was time to duck away. "Ain't never seen you here before."

He was with three other guys that Doozer didn't think he knew, until he realized one of them was Kurtz lurking out of uniform - instead sporting a shirt with the numbers 3-1-1 in metallic blue. His saggy jeans and wallet chain were in their usual place.

"Damn, man," Kurtz said. "You still ain't been home?"

The smug look on Kurtz's face cut through the sleepiness clouding Doozer's brain.

"Been home three times," he said.

"Why ain't you changed your shirt?"

"Somebody stole my new one."

"You ain't got another shirt?"

"Not one I'd wear to a place like this."

"That's some shit, man," Kurtz said. "That's some shit."

A waitress interrupted. "Want a beer?"

"No thanks," Doozer said.

"Gotta buy something if you want to stay."

"I'm just here to see Viv."

"Who's Viv?"

"Pepsi."

"Everybody's here to see Pepsi."

"I mean I'm a friend of hers."

"Everybody's a friend of hers." The waitress made eyes at one of the bouncers standing near the stage.

"I'm her neighbor. We live at Trenchant Towers together."

The waitress squinted at him. "Wait, are you Doozer?"

"You know my name?"

She waved off the bouncer, then brushed her hand across Doozer's shoulder.

"Nice to meet you." She leaned in close to whisper. "Don't use her real name here. And don't mention where she lives." She put a beer in the prayer book holder in front of him, the narrow slot squeezing the plastic cup into an oval. "On the house," she said.

Before he could refuse she'd already blended back into the dark.

"Damn, man," Kurtz said. "You live with Pepsi?"

"Not with her." He grew suspicious of everyone around him and desperately wanted to change the subject.

"Still, she's your neighbor. That's some shit, man. That's some shit." He was staring at the empty stage, either lost in some kind of thought or in a maze of THC. Doozer slipped away to look for a different gap in a different pew. The beer was bitter and squatted in the back of his throat, ignoring the metallic glare of steak still on his tongue. When he'd finished the first beer he ordered another in the hopes that it might numb some part of him - he didn't care which part. By the time the music got louder and the crowd quieter Doozer was feeling a little drunk, the beer taking thoughts and memories from different trays in his brain and scattering them together like an assortment of ingredients on top of a pizza with the works: a foolish roommate and naked sister, an open bathrobe and, sometimes, even Irene; money fanned out of a palm drifted onto a midriff as white as fresh pizza dough only to disappear into the crusty fibers of a worn couch; a deep, driving beat thundering on a thin wall, or perhaps on a refrigerator with an ancient ultrasound, or perhaps on a door with a policeman on the other side ready to finally settle Doozer's score.

A burst of silence snapped him fully awake. The stage had gone completely dark. Then a thumping bass that seemed to come out of Doozer's own chest set the entire place into an uproar. The music pounded for a few moments while the whistles of the men

provided the treble. The beer felt even more present in his throat when, in a single burst of light, the show began.

Viv had exaggerated about her wig, but only slightly – when she stalked onto the stage it was hard to even remember what she looked like bald. Silver hair sprouted in every direction, adding a couple feet to the diameter of her face. She wrapped a leg around the pole, claiming it and the attention of every man in the room. The spinning was slow at first, the muscles in her legs flexing to keep her in motion. As she gained speed her legs worked less and less until she was able to lift herself free of the floor, spinning in a tight orbit.

Then, in a moment, she was off the pole, prowling the stage with a series of stomps and turns made more exhilarating without the aid of a prop. While she danced, the spotlight ticked through green, magenta, and aqua marine, yet the hair was never anything but bright, sparkling silver.

Doozer caught himself enjoying the spectacle, even if the wig took all the focus away from the mix of kindness and disappointment that were Viv's best features. She danced in a black bikini made of latex with silver rings that echoed the circles she'd performed on the pole – sometimes tight and fast, sometimes languid and looping, her body tracing a pattern similar to the wobble of pizza dough after a vigorous toss. Even away from the pole there was something circular to her movements – the hair twisting into a swirl of silver shades as fast as her body whipped from a view of her well-covered breasts to her well-covered buttocks, then back to those un-naked breasts.

The response of the crowd was ecstatic and the men shed dollar-bills like mangy dogs shed fur in the summer. She prowled through the haze of cash, marking her territory

with harsh stamps of her tall heels only to soften with another turn or a twizzle of her hair or a caress of her fingers along the broad fabric of her clothing.

Doozer didn't know the song that played. It didn't matter – her hips were the beat, her hair the melody. The men weren't ogling her, they were worshipping her and, for a startling, gratifying moment, Doozer was proud of Viv's performance. She'd told him over and over how the stage gave her a sense of power, and as long as she stayed in glorious, spell-binding motion everything belonged to her: the men, the club, even the moonlight catching on the grates over the windows – it all existed to make her more lovely.

Then it all stopped. Her dance was over. She dropped to her knees. At last, the men got what they'd paid for.

"I know somewhere you can put that dollar," someone shouted.

"I'll give you another five if you blow me," a man in the back hurled at her.

With the wig off-kilter on her head, Viv crawled along the stage, dollar bills jutting from her fingers as the wad of cash grew in her hand. "Somebody give that bitch a spanking," - the men kept up their shouts – their idol bought and paid for. "Get back on all fours you slut," a voice that sounded like Kurtz screamed when she finally rose from the floor. Doozer felt his cheeks blush in sympathy with the half-circles of red that had formed on Viv's knees, traces of the unsettled feeling in his chest and stomach melting completely into the hot indignation he'd been so ready for.

When the display was over he staggered out of the club, struggling to breath and unsure what his eyes were still fit to see. The night had grown warmer - or perhaps it was just the club still clinging to him. He found his Geo and sat on the hood, remembering too

late that it was crusted in soggy bird droppings. The iris of frogs on the plate Viv had given him peered through the windshield, making him self-conscious.

"In or out," the large bouncer at the door shouted across the lot.

Even with his blurry vision Doozer couldn't miss the width of that man's arms.

"I'm here with..." he caught himself. Pepsi. He had to remember to call her Pepsi.

"In or out," the man said again.

He wanted to leave with Viv - to promise her he'd pay her rent and her tuition - anything to spare her having to get back on that stage. He owed her that - even if he wasn't sure why.

He remembered the back entrance that Viv had used but before he'd taken five steps in that direction the massive man let out a sharp whistle and a shake of the head that left no room for questions. If Doozer was going to do something - anything - for Viv, he'd have to go back into the club. Under the doorman's threatening gaze he passed through the heavy door a second time.

A dancer lacking all of Viv's theatrics had taken the stage, moving through a workmanlike performance to a country single that sounded like all the others. She moved through the men in the front row, one-by-one, making each the center of her universe just long enough to get a few Washingtons on the stage - even a Lincoln or two. It was straight-forward and professional. Maybe Viv could learn to be like that. Maybe that was what Doozer could teach her - how to be a piece of a machine rather than the star of a show.

He went to the bar and asked for a napkin and a pen. Putz tore a paper towel from a roll and gave Doozer the short wooden pencil from behind his ear. Doozer set to work,

his handwriting slurred and uneven as it filled every dimple in the paper towel with promises he knew he couldn't keep - of riches that would save her from this place, of a future filled with possibilities - his or hers, it didn't matter. He thought about telling her all about his sister - everything from her past, which was also his past - exploding the secrets between them, and exposing the value of hoping for something just out of reach, unlike the fathomless pipe-dreams so many people wasted their lives on.

"You want a beer?" Putz asked.

"I'm good," Doozer said.

"Can't sit here if you don't want a beer."

Doozer hurried to finish his scrawl, then left the bar to search the dark for the waitress who'd served him earlier. There were a few female heads bobbing in the sea of men. He approached the closest one.

"I need to get a message to Pepsi," he said when he got the girl's attention.

"You and everyone else," she said. It wasn't the waitress from before.

"I'm Doozer," he said.

"I'm not sure what that means."

"It means I know Pepsi."

"Want a beer?"

"Thanks."

"That'll be three dollars."

He gave the beer back.

"Can you just give this to her?" he asked. "She'll know who it's from."

"I'll see if I can remember," the young woman said, taking the napkin.

Finally, Doozer fled the club, climbing into his Geo under the hostile gaze of the bouncer. Flopping himself into the driver's seat, the rustle of wadded paper reminded him that he'd been carrying something in his back pocket. Drunkenly reaching for the ultrasound, he unfurled it, still unable to see what he knew was there. The name on it was clear, the name he and Carla shared - "Handel." The date was smudged. Not that it mattered - that date was as permanent in Doozer's memory as the cook time for an order of breadsticks. He didn't want to look at the ultrasound anymore, tossing it instead into the wedge of dark where the Geo's dash met the windshield.

He started the engine before he realize he was in no shape to go anywhere. Only after he'd pulled out of the lot did he realize he had no place to go. Turning quickly onto Industrial Park he kept to the dark and empty streets as he crawled towards the one road that might just settle his nerves and make him forget: forget what was at home, forget that he was broke, forget that he was wanted by the law, forget that he'd just given Viv a napkin that could change their lives forever.

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The whole day had already felt like a dream that refused to give any rest - unplanned and out of control. He needed to do something where he made the moves - where he could feel something real and physical, like rubber clinging to concrete. Keeping his shuttering vision peeled for cops he made it to the Jefferson side of town and turned on Old Denbigh, a reckless, twisting line of pavement slicing through the woods that separated Newport News from Yorktown. Back in high school he and his friend Buzz would take turns at Old Denbigh, their tires screeching at the sharp turn right before the bridge, the high-beams on

Buzz's Camaro soaking into the wall of pines so dense and close to the road it left no room for a mistake at the wheel.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was that there was nowhere for a police car to hide on that street - just a four mile stretch of blacktop and trees. It was time to see what this Geo could do.

He let loose, blazing along as fast as nerves and bad tires on slick roads would let him, the bends in the street feeling familiar and strange at the same time, like going back to an old pair of shoes. The road wouldn't let his mind wander past the mash of pine trees daring him to lose control as he wound through the swings and curves. Doozer took it all without fear. He could almost hear Buzz yelling "Damn, man, don't kill us," when the back of the Geo wobbled. His favorite part of the drive pounced - a long, sweeping left that flicked into a sharp right, then a strait shot out of the trees to the little intersection where the stop sign wasn't worth noticing - the wet pavement almost getting the better of him. He held steady. Steady until, at last, he burst onto J Clyde Morris Boulevard and Yorktown.

After a sheepish u-turn he tried his hand at Old Denbigh in reverse. Then u-turned again. Back and forth he drove on that road, until his feet grew tired of switching pedals and his arm ached with the shifting of gears. Frantic and irregular, the road battered at his awareness, forcing him to search for memories of what turn came next, where the pavement might crack, where the pine trees might rear before him without warning. The left turns and right turns, the pumping of the break and the pushing on the throttle, Buzz and the Camaro - it all rushed back, folding other memories into his brain as it did, the screeching of his tires as they clung to the road like the wail of his mother, the burst of the

street lamp like a sharp ray of light from the hallway in an otherwise dark room. A street light on a curbless road. Albums tacked to a wall. The sheets crumpled where Carla had been. His head still pressed against his bedroom window. His hand empty.

"You're a whore just like your mother!" his mom yells. She's found the ultrasound that slipped from Doozer's limp fingers when he fell asleep.

"It's Corton you should be yelling at," Carla sounds weary and desperate. Doozer moves quickly down the hall to Carla's room where the fight is happening. The door is slightly open, not wide enough to poke his head in. He decides against going in.

"I should have kicked you out as soon as you started making those eyes at him."

"I never wanted any of it."

"And these slut shirts you're wearing. You might as well have been naked you whore."

In between the yells there is the sound of drawers jerking open, of zippers and buttons.

"That's why he left, isn't it? Got what he wanted. I bet the two of you had a big laugh about it while he was in between those whore thighs of yours."

"Corton will come back, mother. He always comes back."

"Don't call me mother. You're just the whore I took in. And this is how you thank me?"

"It wasn't my choice."

"You're real innocent in all this."

"You're the one bringing those perverts around here."

A slapping sound, so loud and bright Doozer can almost feel it on his own face. In truth, he wishes he had. Light explodes into the hallway. Carla has an overflowing duffel bag perched on her shoulder, two blankets tucked under her arm, a scarlet palm print stamped on her cheek. The bag nearly knocks Doozer over as she struggles down the narrow hallway.

His mother is in pursuit. Neither bothers to look at Doozer.

"You leave those blankets right there," his mom says. "I'll be damned if you're taking one more thing from me."

"He'll be back." Carla can't get her sandals on before their mother pounces on her, pulling hair and smacking with no hope of control.

"You're just like your whore mother," she keeps screaming as Doozer struggles to pull her away.

Carla rises from the floor, picks up the duffel bag, escapes through the door. His mother breaks free of Doozer to fling herself at the wall, pounding it with her tight fists. "That whore. Stealing my man just like her mother. Just like her mother."

Doozer winces at his mother's lie. He and Carla don't know much about her mother, or their father. What they do know is that Carla is three months older than Doozer, not the other way around.

"Don't go after that bitch," his mother says as Doozer slips through the door. "Don't take her side." Doozer ignores her.

"Carla, wait," he says, slamming the door behind him. "You don't have to do this." She's already a little ways down Reddick, her bare feet keeping her from running on the rough concrete.

"What am I going to do instead?" She stops and faces him.

"We could tell her."

"Tell her what?"

"That the baby's mine."

"You think she'd react better to that?"

Her right arm is flexed and tense with the weight of the bag, her eyes heavy with the weight of all the things they both can't run away from.

"You don't have to do this alone," he says.

"I can't stay here."

"I could come with you."

"And what? There's no reason for this to ruin both of us. You've got a good job. A good head. A good heart. Stay here - keep your life."

"You shouldn't have to leave."

"I don't want to be here anymore."

Though he can't see her eyes in the shadow, he can still see her shudder. Her mouth, so like his own, creases while her brow collapses around those shrouded eyes. The streetlight is shining on Doozer, leaving him open and exposed - the regret, the guilt, the feeling of helplessness. He can't give her anything more than a Jackson, two Hamiltons, and a Lincoln. But she's right - he has a good job, and if he's careful with his money, he might be able to help her from time to time. He realizes what it means to her, what it means for them. He can feel his own eyes soften as she walks along Reddick, one foot on the grass the other on the brittle concrete. She passes under the next streetlight, her glittery spray of hair bursting with shine.

"If you ever need anything..." Doozer yells at her back just before she oozes into the darkness - first her body, then her hair - his sentence unfinished. The last thing he sees of her are those two feet moving tenderly with nothing to protect them. His own suddenly feel so heavy.

“Sunday”

1.

The heel of a small hand left crescent shaped imprints in the condensation coating the driver's side window. Cracking his eyes against the hot noon sun, Doozer tried to gauge who was attached to that hand - whether to pretend he was still asleep.

"You okay in there?" The voice was low, smoky, and concerned. He rolled down the window.

"I'm fine, Viv," he said. She was back in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. And bald. It was hard to believe this was the spinning silver vision of the night before - almost as hard to believe as it was to forget.

"Why are you still out here?," she asked.

He sat straighter, reaching for the lever that would cancel his seat's recline. The back rest sprang forward, meeting his sweaty shirt with a "thwack."

"You said it was okay if I used your parking space, right?"

"By 'you' I meant your car." She did that cute thing with her fingers as she said "you."

The stuffy heat drained from his body when he recognized the paper towel in her hand. He tried to remember exactly what he'd written on it the night before - if he had anything he needed to apologize for or run away from. It was all a little hazy.

"You going to translate any of this for me?" Viv asked.

He took the paper, relieved to see the scratchings of pencil across the dimpled surface were impossible to read. "Sorry," he said. "The waitresses brought me a lot of beer."

"Good, I told them to." She looked at the paper again, scrunching up her face with the effort. "You going to tell me what this was about?"

The writing was so bad the paper might as well have been blank - he could tell her anything he wanted. Without the aid of several beers it was harder than he imagined. "It said something about being glad we're neighbors," he said. "And that you could do better than Bluebeard's."

"I was hoping for something juicier."

"What time is it?" There would be other chances to say more to Viv, when he was better rested, more grounded. When Carla was bearing down less on his thoughts.

"Time for you to change that damned shirt," Viv said. "And take a shower. You're going with me to Busch." From her back pocket she drew two passes.

Doozer hadn't been to Busch Gardens the Old Country - a park whose theme was as grand as their prices - since Carla had left the first time. They used to bluff their way into the park for free.

"Where did you get those?" he asked Viv.

"A guy at the club - said he works the Da Vinci's Cradle. I just had to promise to say hello. But I need a ride, so go get ready." With that she pranced up the stairs and into her apartment. Doozer crept slowly into his own, uneasy in the silence that warned that Carla and Timber were somewhere together.

The rain and the sweat had spread the sauce stains on Doozer's Papa John's shirt until they looked like pink saucers overlapping across the dingy white. When he pulled himself out of his Geo the shirt clung to his back while the embroidered company logo on the front scratched heavily at his nipple. It felt right to pour so much of his own filth and

stink into this shirt before taking it off forever. He shed it, tossing the wad in the trash to mate with the fat and gristle of last night's steaks.

The albums that had fallen during Viv's pounding still littered the floor - a Jane Fonda's Workout Record smiling up at him. If he was honest he didn't have time for Busch Gardens. He needed to sort through his records, figure out what he had to sell if the Tranito's customers didn't come through with enough tips to keep Hux happy.

The bedroom was thankfully empty except for the stacks of Goldmine magazines he'd piled against the walls. If only he had time to list some auctions of his own. Instead he'd settle for driving to Fantasy, Inc. on Monday where he could haggle over their wholesale value. Until then, he'd just try to enjoy Viv's company and put thoughts of rents and ultrasounds from his mind.

Before he could even get into the shower an assault of honeysuckle and musk pushed into his nose. Face creams and botanical shampoos were everywhere, cluttering the tiny shelves above the toilet. Two designer soaps were wedged into the cavity in the tiled wall where a stick of Irish Spring used to be. New towels and a bathmat. A fresh shower curtain. Candles. And topping it all off, a brilliant new shower head with a detachable nozzle and five different spray options. The whole room dripped with fresh money.

The new shower head was nice, he had to admit, regardless of how little he wanted to use it. The water didn't feel like it was searing his skin clean, instead patting at him so softly he wouldn't have trusted it to rinse away the Irish Spring. The gentle soaps in the dish melted away just fine and by the time his shower was finished he felt like a tulip glistening after a rain rather than a man scrubbed clean. At least his razor and shaving

cream were still original, burning one set of cheeks even as the fluff of a new towel brushed softly against the other. With Timber so willing he wondered if he could ever toss enough money at Carla to make her leave.

The front door opened and soft feet shuffled on the carpet.

"Richard, you home?"

Doozer stepped out of the bathroom, tucking the towel tighter around his waist.

"Where's Timber?" he asked.

"Like your new bathroom?"

"How much did he spend on this stuff?"

"You guys needed this, your place is gross."

"He's about to move out."

"Lucky for you, then." She kicked at the records scattered near her feet. "You know you really ought to sell these damn things."

"Thanks for the tip."

Doozer fled to the bedroom.

He never quite knew what to wear on days he wasn't working. For a moment he considered the extra Papa John's shirt hanging in his closet, pressed and ready. Viv would never let him hear the end of it. He decided on an old Adidas shirt, struggling to get the fabric over the knots of hair he still hadn't brushed or pulled back into a ponytail. Carla leaned in the doorway.

"That car down there yours?" she asked.

"What car?" He'd hoped the secret could last at least fifteen more minutes. With his eyes avoiding hers he went to the hamper in the corner of the room where he kept the

rest of his clean clothes. Beneath the row of khakis he found some boxers and a pair of pale denims.

"The one you were sleeping in this morning," Carla said.

There was no getting out of that one. "It's new," he said.

"It's definitely not," she said.

"It's newer than that ultrasound."

"At least that's bought and paid for."

"According to who?" Doozer didn't like the pain and accusation in the look she gave him then. "Timber's a lawyer, you know. He's bound to figure this out eventually."

"Right. Because lawyers never ignore things they don't want to know about."

"I'm sure you'll have a story ready either way."

"And I can count on you to say nothing." She stared at him in a way he wasn't used to. He deserved that stare.

"Sounds like we'd make good lawyers ourselves," he said.

"Handel & Handel?"

"What are the odds we'd have the same last name?"

"We'd be better lawyers than Timber, that's for sure," she said.

"Only you'd never pass the background check."

Carla laughed at that. Then, with that playful, sideways look she must have gotten from her mother she added, "Neither would you."

Doozer stood stupidly at the edge of his room, near the beds he and Timber had bunked. His underwear and jeans were in his hand, his towel growing a little loose around his waist.

"I need you to take me to Fantasy, Inc. this afternoon," Carla said.

"You into vinyl now?"

"Of course not. But I got a heart of glass."

Fantasy Inc. didn't just sell vinyls. They were also the town's top spot for hand-blown pipes and bongs as tall as the Papa John's marquee.

"Get Timber to take you," Doozer said, even as he knew his plans for the afternoon had changed.

"He's running errands."

"For you?"

"He's a big boy."

"Can you let me get dressed?" The towel had come so loose Doozer had to hold it up. Carla disappeared from the doorway.

"Then you'll take me?" She yelled from the living room.

"I'll think about it while I get dressed." They both knew what his answer would be.

The clock next to Doozer's bed reminded him that he was already supposed be on his way to Busch Gardens. Doozer shouted from his room. "You know I already have plans with Viv?"

"The stripper next door?" she asked. Doozer wasn't sure when she'd come back to the doorway.

"She doesn't strip," he said in a softer voice.

"Timber mentioned her."

"I bet. You going to get high while carrying his step-child?"

"Every relationship needs a secret."

"And you can afford a new pipe without his help?"

"I came across some cash the other night," she said, that playful look on her face again. This time Doozer didn't find it as funny.

"Get ready," she said. "I'll meet you in the car." She finally left with a rattle of his keys. He was alone to figure out what to tell Viv while he gathered a few vinyls he knew he could part with.

He found her on the balcony, a tightly bound plastic bag in her hand, her scalp blazing in the sun.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"That's my sister," Doozer said, nodding at Carla, who was waving at them from the passenger seat. The white brick sign with "Trenchant Towers" written in black was blinding in the mid-day glare. Doozer held his stack of albums over his head, shielding his eyes.

"I only have two passes," Viv said.

"She's not coming with us."

"Does she know that?"

"I have to give her a ride somewhere. You can ride with us if you want."

"There's no room."

"We can squeeze you in."

"Where are you going?"

With a wince he said, "Fantasy, Inc."

"That's on the other side of town!" He'd never heard her angry before. "It's literally in the opposite direction."

"It's Sunday," Doozer said. "Traffic should be light. Won't take more than an hour."

"That's bullshit. What's so important at Fantasy?"

"She wants a new pipe."

"I could teach her how to roll a joint in five minutes."

Carla rolled down her window, leaned her head out, and shouted "What's taking so long?"

"You think three of us would really fit in that car?" Viv asked.

Doozer had expected the trip to be a harder sell. Now he had to hope Carla wouldn't mind cramming a third body into a car barely built for two.

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The fan in the Geo's dashboard was busy keeping the window unfogged, leaving the interior to burn with the glares between Carla and Viv. Traffic was pouring out of a range of churches along Warwick, trapping them for several cycles of every one of seventeen stoplights. Viv was growing restless.

"My god," she said. "You can run a yellow every once in a while."

"I told you we should have taken the interstate," Carla said.

"In the opposite direction," Viv replied.

After tossing her mysterious plastic bag next to Doozer's records in the hatchback's hatch she'd managed to wedge between her neighbor and his sister, her legs straddling the stick shift, leaving her in charge of changing gears. One thigh scratched against the pale denim of Doozer's jeans, the other slid along Carla's bare legs.

"His name's Richard," Carla said.

"He told me he preferred Doozer."

"Is that his stripper name?"

"We don't strip. And Doozer would be a terrible stage name. No offense."

"None taken." Throughout the drive he'd refused to take his eyes off the road, squinting through the sweat in his eyes, jumping every time they saw a popo directing traffic in front of a church.

Viv was wiping at her own eyes, struggling to keep out sweat that had nowhere else to go.

"They might sell headbands at Fantasy," Carla said to Viv. She'd been taking shots at Viv's baldness since the drive started.

"They sell rolling papers at every seven eleven," Viv said to Carla. "Could have saved us all a trip."

She couldn't quite figure out what it was that bothered her about Carla. It was definitely more than getting a late start to Busch Gardens. She suspected it really had to do with Doozer - the way he deferred to Carla as though she was paying him to spend time with her. She knew what that looked like.

"We made it," Doozer said, pulling thankfully into the little gravel parking lot in front of a small building that housed two businesses behind a corrugated metal shell: a used bookstore run by two white women with a hankering for Marion Zimmer Bradley novels, and an "alternative" store with the front windows blacked out and the words "Fantasy, Inc." stenciled on the clear glass of the door.

Viv gave her eyes a final wipe before all three of them popped out of the car as though loaded on a spring. She approached the used bookstore, a volume in the display window having its way with her attention.

"There's no sign banning strippers," Carla said. "What are you looking from outside for?"

"Wow," Viv said. "I've never heard someone end a sentence in three prepositions."

"I guess grammar class is where you learned how to wrap your leg around a pole?"

Doozer stepped between them. "Let's get out of the sun," he said.

The trio split - Carla and Doozer disappearing into the dark interior of Fantasy, Inc. while Viv cracked the seal on the nameless bookstore.

"How much for the Buck Rogers?" she asked a bulky white woman hunkered down behind a cash register in the middle of the store.

"Fifty," the woman said, the effort taking the breath out of her.

Another woman, sleek and silver, was in the back moving paperbacks from one stack to another, jotting something in a notebook each time. "For a pretty girl like you," the woman said, "we'll let it go for forty small dollars."

"Lucky for me, small dollars are all I have," Viv said, strolling slowly through the narrow aisles of paperbacks, approaching the sleek woman doing the stacking. It seemed the store specialized in the kind of books she'd seen Doozer reading quite a bit - lots of muscle-bound knights and scantily clad women. She worked her roll of cash out of the pocket of her shorts.

"What strip club did you come out of?" the stacker asked, then made a noise more like a puff than a laugh.

"Bluebeard's, actually," Viv said. The woman's laugh stopped. "And we don't strip. Wear more than these ladies, even." She pointed at the cover of a Red Sonja paperback.

The woman's face went stern. "I'm sorry," the woman said. "I didn't mean anything by it. I didn't think-"

"A stripper would read?"

"You said you don't strip."

"I say it all the time."

The woman seemed stumped for a response. Viv picked at a row of books, the covers packed with dragons and women clothed head-to-foot.

"We're pretty proud of our Anne McCaffrey selection," the woman said, nodding at the books. She stopped her stacking to take measure of Viv.

"She any good?" Viv asked.

"She's no MZB," the woman said.

"I don't know what that means," Viv said.

"Marion Zimmer Bradley. She's a writer. You'd like her. She'll take you to another place."

"That's what the Buck Rogers is for." There was something fetching about all the store's books - their exotic covers of imagined worlds. She could see why Doozer liked them.

"You might want to give MZB a try," the woman insisted.

"Why? She write about strippers?"

"She writes about women in a man's world."

"I'll give you twenty for the Buck Rogers."

"How about thirty and I throw in some MZB."

"Ten extra dollars for a used book is a bit steep."

"All right, twenty five for Buck, and the MZB is free." She held out her large, fleshy hand.

"Let me think about it," Viv said. She really hadn't planned on spending any money on this leg of the trip. Rent was coming due soon, and her pot stash was getting pretty skimpy.

"That's why I'm at the register," the large woman at the register said as Viv walked past her. "Betty can't close a deal."

"You take care, dear," the woman in the back said as Viv made her way slowly from the store. Back in the sun, she sat on the hot hood of the Geo to wait for Doozer and his sister while she decided how many bills she was willing to part with.

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The record store was long, narrow, and dim. Doozer gave his eyes time to adjust. When they were younger, Fantasy was one of the few things Doozer and Carla shared without consequence. She went there for the bootleg tapes and black t-shirts, he to riffle through the bins of second-hand records until he found the ones with the best covers. A glass case on one side contained the glass pipes, false edged swords, and various pewter goods - figures, belt buckles, jewelry, and a very large and ornate shoehorn that didn't strike Doozer as very pretty or very practical. Behind the counter were the rows of bootleg CDs, and the bladed weapons that could really do some damage. Across from all that were racks

of t-shirts and posters, three bands to every one naked lady. Soaking into all of it was the sound of a white-boy reggae/rap hybrid that Doozer did his best to ignore.

With his records under one arm he went into the side room where piles of cardboard boxes held the left-overs from when the world still appreciated the broad canvas of vinyl. He hated CDs, with their tiny squares of album art and their cheap, flimsy booklets. He couldn't even look at the desperate attention grabs on albums like Amorica or Nevermind. Give him a clean copy of All Things Must Pass, even if there was a Post-It note plastered to the front admitting two of the vinyls were missing. If only he had a dollar to spare.

"Looking for anything in particular?"

Doozer hadn't noticed the young man in the corner scribbling at a piece of paper. "Selling, actually." The young man didn't budge, his expression hidden behind the canopy of dark dreadlocks falling around his face.

"What you working on?" Doozer asked.

"Just got to keep my hands busy," the young man said, finally straightening long enough for Doozer to see the sharp, dark eyes before they went back to their work. The notebook paper below was littered in a series of deep, jagged marks twisting into the shape of a cartoon mouse holding a gun to its head, red ink spilling out in a series of deadly lines on the opposite side of its face. Doozer couldn't take his eyes away. "It's just something I'm working on," the young man said.

Doozer leaned closer, captivated.

"I drew something like that, once," Doozer said. "Only it wasn't a mouse, it was a turtle. And he didn't have a gun. He was paddling in a boat across a lake."

"That sounds totally different."

"The lake was full of acid."

The young artist considered that. "How'd you draw acid?"

"I wrote 'acid' and had an arrow pointing at the lake. My teacher made me see the social worker at our school after that."

"How old were you?"

"I was in the third grade."

A new voice joined the conversation. "Wow, that's amazing." Carla was behind him, as captivated by the suicidal mouse as he had been. She had a pair of glass pipes in her hand - one entirely clear except for a streak of green, like alien urine swirling in a toilet bowl, the other dark with ribs of red and yellow firing along its length.

"You got anything else?" she asked the young man, who tugged at a few other sheets of paper scattered on the little desk where he was fulfilling some purpose for the store. Doozer pushed his records between them. The young man set the small pile in his lap, flipping through them with alarming speed.

"Ten," he said.

"You're good with your fingers I see," Carla said.

"There's a near mint copy of The Wall in there," Doozer said. He didn't know what Carla saw in this guy.

"It's in fair condition, maybe fair plus, tops."

"Still, ten is only two dollars a record."

"There's no market for this stuff."

"Once everybody gets over CDs, they'll come back to vinyl and these'll be worth a fortune."

"Bring these back when that happens." The young artist offered the stack back to Doozer.

"Could you do fifteen at least?" Carla asked.

"Throw in your digits and we've got a deal."

Carla took the young man's pen and wrote a string of numbers next to the suicidal mouse. It was odd for Doozer, seeing his own phone number hovering on that page.

"That your real number or you just trying to play me?" the artist asked.

"It's where I'm staying right now," Carla said. "Cross my heart."

"Staying with me," Doozer said. After a pause he added, "And my roommate."

"My bad, I didn't know she was your girl."

Doozer sputtered for a response that wouldn't come.

"Give me a call," Carla said to the young man.

"The guy at the counter'll pay out," the young man said before things could go any further. He returned to his drawing, putting a circle around the numbers, turning them into a speech bubble - the mouse's dying words.

"I've narrowed it down to these two," Carla said, showing Doozer the pipes again as they went to the counter. A skinny kid in tie-dye and khakis was splitting his attention between the pipes and Carla's chest while proving that dreads didn't look nearly as good on white people. He was cackling slowly, if such a thing were even possible.

"Why don't you ask Beavis here," Doozer said. "I bet he's full of insight."

"I want to know what you think," Carla said.

"Won't they both do the same thing?" Doozer asked.

"It's about the experience," Carla said. "It's understanding the beauty of it that separates the users from the addicts."

"If that's supposed to be another pot shot at Viv she's not here."

Another slow cackle dribbled from the guy behind the counter. "Pot shots," he said.

"Just tell me which one you like," Carla said.

"The green one," Doozer said. He wasn't sure if that was even true, he just wanted to get Carla away from these men, and Viv on her way to Busch Gardens. Carla pulled out a familiar mess of Washingtons and Lincolns, flicking them one by one into a pile until enough gathered to pay for the pipe, then went back to the vinyl room.

"The guy in there said he'd give me fifteen for my records," Doozer said to the guy behind the counter.

The guy turned down the awful music for a moment. "You giving this guy fifteen?" he shouted towards the record room.

"Make it twenty," the young artist yelled back, Carla's laugh closely following.

"Hey man," the stoner said, glancing towards the store's front door. "Which one's your girl?"

"What?" Through the glass he saw Viv sitting on the hood of the Geo, counting a roll of Washingtons, her face creased with indecision.

"I's just wondering if you could hook me up with whichever girl ain't yours."

"The only thing that's mine is the car."

"Shit, you can hook me up with both of them, then." The slow cackle came back.

"How about I hook you up with the Geo. You might like the fumes."

The kid cranked the music louder than before, his dreadlocks bouncing in time while he slowly counted the money from the register.

With four Lincolns in his pocket Doozer left. Viv had disappeared back into the book store. Carla was the first to join Doozer in the steamy Geo. She lit a cigarette, puffing on it with the ease of experience. She held a piece of paper torn free from a spiral notebook, flecks from the ragged edge dropping across the seat.

"Your artwork has dandruff," Doozer said.

"I guess I'm spoiling the decor in here," Carla said. "Let's go now. Forget the stripper." She'd already claimed the passenger seat and didn't plan on letting Viv climb to the spot in the middle.

"I can't ditch her," Doozer said.

"Come on. Just drive around the neighborhood. Give her a scare. It'll be fun." She dropped her seat back to a reclining position, her arms crossed and eyes closed.

"Girls like it when you play hard to get, you know?"

"I'm not trying to get Viv."

"Really? How many times have you thought about Irene today?"

"As many times as you've thought about Timber."

"I don't run to Timber every time he knocks on a wall."

"He'd probably run to you."

"Exactly."

"It's not like that. She only knocks for emergencies."

"What could be so important?"

"There's this guy - watched her through the blinds once. She's afraid he'll come back."

The tip of Carla's cigarette flared as she drew in a deep breath. She held the smoke for a moment before billowing it into the tiny space. "She's lucky you're there."

Sometimes it was hard to tell just how far Carla meant her implications to go. Either way, Doozer felt himself eager to dish some of his own. "Luckier than Timber, that's for sure," he said.

"Timber's having a good time."

"Until he runs out of money, right?"

"What do you think I am?"

"You've taken plenty of money from me."

"Whores charge up front." She was staring out the window, refusing to look towards Doozer; sucking at her careless cigarette.

"I wasn't calling you a whore."

"Yeah you were. Runs in your family."

There was nothing Doozer could say that would be equal to the moment.

"What's your plan? With Timber."

"He's the one planning our future."

"You really see a future with Timber?"

"It's not a future I'll be around for. But it's nice in the meantime. It feels good."

She squinted into the glare outside the Geo. "It doesn't have anything to do with money."

"Tell that to my landlord."

"It's never been about money."

"Why else would you come back?"

"Stop paying me to go away and maybe you'll find out."

"You don't have to keep taking the money."

"You wouldn't know what to do if I didn't."

A swell of anger clenched Doozer's throat - similar to the rage he'd felt when Timber claimed he and Carla were a couple.

Viv burst mercifully from the store. Doozer climbed out of the car to give her room to join them, pretending he didn't see Carla's tight fist slam once on the dashboard before she re-draped herself in indifference.

"What'd you buy?" Doozer asked once they were arranged in the Geo again, Doozer thankful to have a body between himself and Carla.

"Check it out." She unfurled the paper bag and withdrew a large paperback with the title Buck Rogers in the 25th Century scrawled in dramatic letters across its front. "I read this when I was a kid."

"I didn't know it was a book," Carla said, watching Viv flip the pages with interest. "I used to watch it in reruns when I skipped school."

"Me, too!" Viv shouted. "I loved that show."

"I never saw it," Doozer said.

"You should check it out if you get the chance," Carla said. "It's some good shit. Speaking of," she leaned forward, peering around Viv at Doozer, letting him know the seriousness of what she was about to ask. "Can we swing by RIPS?" The package holding her new pipe rustled.

Doozer kept his eyes on the road, waiting for Viv to ripple at the new delay. "It's a bit out of the way," he said.

"It's not that far," Viv said.

"What about Busch?" Doozer asked, surprised that Viv was okay with another delay.

"It's not going anywhere," she said. "I wouldn't mind stopping by RIPS either."

Carla glanced at the clock on Doozer's dashboard. "You think anybody will be there this early?"

"Why don't you get some gas?" Viv asked. "I'll page Benson."

"Benson have good stuff?" Carla asked.

"I've had worse. What's that?" She noticed the paper in Carla's hand.

Carla showed Viv the notebook paper that had been shedding onto Doozer's seat. This picture a collage of spiraling shapes bearing down on a child in over-alls, sucking on his thumb.

"That's incredible." Viv nearly ripped the paper out of Carla's hand. "Where'd you get that?"

"Guy in Fantasy gave it to me."

"He just gave it to you?" Carla asked.

"We hit it off."

"We need to be in gear," Doozer said.

Viv reached between her legs, sliding the car into first. The car lurched forward.

Doozer felt an unease creeping on him - there was something happening that he didn't understand, a queer feeling that despite his best efforts, both women were changing, slipping away from him as fast as their hostility was draining from the Geo.

"What else is in the bag?" Carla asked.

"Some book those ladies wanted me to read. Not sure what I'm going to do with it."

"Let me see." Carla removed the book. "I read this in high school," she said. "You should check it out." Carla gave Viv her sideways smirk. "What's the matter?"

"I'm just surprised-"

"A drop-out would read?"

Viv's blush showed even through the sweat.

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RIPS was a convenience store on an inconvenient street - hiding in a thick knot of pine trees next to a road connecting Newport News with Yorktown the same way RIPS connected users with dealers. The store survived on sales of potato chips and a few "alternative tobacco pipes" crammed in a glass case in the corner. These weren't the artisan pipes that places like Fantasy, Inc. sold to the casual pot smoker. These were no-nonsense metal bowls designed to get the goods in the system - no time for swirls of color in hand blown glass.

The store didn't get a lot of daytime traffic except for a few kids who'd take the bike trails from the nearby neighborhoods to buy a magazine or two and maybe steal some baseball cards. A heavy-set white woman in a dark polo shirt worked the register. She took interest in a faded Geo and the three people who popped out when the car came to a

stop in the gravel parking lot. All three stretched as though they'd been driving for a long time, circles of sweat staining three sets of armpits and forming rings around three collars, especially the collar of the bald girl with the pleasant smile and crooked teeth. The other girl wasn't smiling - maybe frowning against the sun, maybe frowning against the world. The man's hair was greasy at the roots and frizzed at the tips of a ragged pony-tail. He had a nice butt for someone so skinny.

"You sure this Benson'll show?" The normal-haired girl asked as they pushed through RIPS' front door, each blinking into the A/C as they entered.

"He'll be here," the bald one said. "Just make sure it's worth his while."

"What's that going to take?"

"More than a dime."

"I was hoping for a whole lot more than that."

"Can't have that talk in here," the clerk said. "Do your dealing where we can't see it."

"Sorry," the bald one said while her friend went to the coolers in the back to browse the beers. "I'll take some papers."

"You need some tobacco, too?" the clerk asked, letting her eyes go stern. Selling rolling papers without something to roll was a good way to get the popos sniffing around. The bald girl looked sharp - the kind who'd get the message.

"If it helps you out," she said.

The clerk wanted to dislike the bald girl - a body like that wasn't fair. That smile, though. And the scalp with hints of a rash smeared across it. And her willingness to play along. She was forgivable.

"Nah," the clerk said. "The cops aren't going to sniff around here in the middle of the day. Just don't get too comfortable in the future."

"Doozer, you want anything?" the bald girl asked.

The man was staring at the scratch offs on the wall behind the counter as though they were some kind of crossword puzzle, his face wrinkling like a crushed bag of potato chips, but in a good way. She decided she liked his front even better than his back.

"Already spent my Lincolns on gas," he said.

Doozer's mouth creased, like one of those customers who thinks he's hiding something. He had some Lincolns left. The clerk was sure of it.

The bald girl drew a fiver out of her pocket and slapped it on the counter. "Give my buddy here a ticket, whichever he wants."

"You don't have to do that," Doozer said.

"It's my tobacco money," she said, winking at the clerk.

"What's been winning lately?" Doozer asked.

"Honey," the clerk said. "Ain't no one bought a lotto ticket here in a month."

"I'll take a Buck Shot," he said. "Thanks Viv."

Viv didn't seem the kind that needed thanking - craning over Doozer's shoulder, she was as eager as him to find out what was under that latex.

"How long's this going to take?" the normal haired one asked, returning to the group empty handed. She'd be worth some envy, too, if not for the hardness around the edges of her features and the way her shoulders couldn't decide if they were bowed forward or back. She was watching Doozer scratch at his ticket without any interest, as if

she could make her way without games of chance - or maybe she had already given up on the dream of good luck.

"Loser," Doozer said.

"No tobacco for you, I guess," the clerk said to Viv.

"Good thing Benson's here, then," Viv said.

"I don't need to know nothing about that," the clerk said.

The other girl folded a stack of ones and fives into her palm, frowning at how the wad showed no matter how she held her hand. When she went back to the open sun, Doozer was alone with the clerk. The clerk liked that. What was it about skinny guys?

"You don't go in for all this stuff, huh?" she asked. "Good for you."

"You don't either?"

"Honey, I'm just making my way."

"The only way you know how," Doozer put some melody in his voice.

"That's just a little bit more than the law allows," the clerk nodded at the transaction taking place in the parking lot. Quirky, looked good in jeans, and knew his Waylon Jennings - or at least his Dukes of Hazard. As Doozer shuffled down an isle, plucking at an imaginary banjo and checking out the colorful boxes full of baseball cards, she decided she could live with the pony tail.

"You collect cards?" the clerk asked.

"There's no value in them."

"I got \$25 for a Mark Rypien rookie card a couple weeks ago."

"The big money will only be in the stuff nobody wants right now."

"That's a strange way to look at it."

"You got any old soda cases in the back?" It was the most excited he'd looked since arriving.

"Honey, all we got in the back is dust mites."

A bulky white guy with a skewed cap and baggy pants entered the store and limped to the counter with swagger. "I get some tobacco?" he asked, slipping a sizable bit of money into the clerk's hand. She added the money to the register without giving the guy anything in return.

"Thanks Darlin'," the man said.

"Come again, come again," she said while the man swagger-limped back out of the store empty handed.

"That Benson?" Doozer asked.

"Honey, I don't need to know," she said. "I'm just making my way."

Doozer picked up his imaginary banjo for just a second, then put it down. She nodded. He knew when to quit, too. That was a plus.

"Looks like your girls are about done out there," the clerk said.

"They're not my girls," Doozer said quickly.

"You don't have to tell me that. A woman knows when sparks are flying and when they ain't." It was hard to show cleavage in a dark blue polo, but that wasn't going to stop her from trying.

Carla's head poked back in the store. "Come on," she said. "We're going to Busch Gardens."

"Leaving so soon?" the clerk asked.

"They got what they came for."

"Did you?" She was only trying to flirt. It was a shame how heavy his Adidas tee suddenly looked on his shoulders.

She didn't like the mopey ones.

Oh well.

2.

The long bend of the on-ramp was a welcome relief, tugging on Doozer's body as though I-64 was pulling the poison out of the wounds of his past. When it was finished Doozer found himself on an interstate lined with trees and bushes so thick it was impossible to see anything else unless he focused on the road ahead of him or looked above to the timeless sky. The trees on either side of I-64 were bursting with scarlet, orange, and yellow in the late afternoon sunlight - not the pines of the city, but deciduous rows of oak, river birch, sugarberry, and both sweet and black gum. Hiding in the shrubbery were swarms of lightning bugs, blinking their salutes to any driver lucky enough to roll by.

Viv's joint blinked back, the sun on her scalp as bright and multicolored as the leaves of the trees, the chemicals in her blood preventing her from being annoyed at the delays to her visit to the park.

"You sure you don't mind us smoking in your new car?" she asked.

"Just finish before we get to our exit," Doozer said. "Popos could be around."

"You could help," Carla said, offering her new pipe to him. The swirls of green in the glass looked out of place in the earthiness of the late afternoon. She'd offered the pipe to Doozer every time, ignoring his refusals.

"Isn't Timber going to wonder where you are?" Doozer asked.

"That'll make him even more excited when I get back."

They all pressed tightly together when Doozer put the Geo on the swooping exit ramp, the short scamper to Williamsburg complete, leaving them to pass under an ominous sign that read: "Last exit before Busch Gardens the Old Country."

"You know we only have two passes," Doozer said to Carla. He'd been wondering about that for a while - afraid that he'd end up waiting in the parking lot while Carla and Viv enjoyed the rides.

"Passes were never an issue before," she said.

They'd pulled it off plenty of times in high school - showing up in the afternoon, Carla swearing to the boys at the gate that they forgot to get their hands stamped when they'd left for lunch.

"You're not sixteen anymore," Doozer said.

"I'll get in."

"Take the first entrance," Viv said, her eyes glancing at the clock in the dashboard.

"We can park in the front lot."

"There's no way that lot isn't full," Doozer said.

"The people who got here early enough to get those spots have left already, trust me."

She was right. They parked just a few rows from the front of the park. With the sun at their backs the sign arching across the wide pebbled walkway blazed: Busch Gardens - the Old Country. Spilling beneath were a flow of people, hands plastered to their foreheads to ward off the sunlight scraping at their eyes; children so saturated with fun that they could hardly walk clinging to tired parents; teenagers traveling in packs - the boys eyeing the girls from behind inflatable baseball bats, the girls trying not to eye back

while they spun their bendable glow sticks on their fingers; a family coated in t-shirts from the Big Bad Wolf sparkled in the crowd - the young boy bouncing in excitement between his mom and dad, telling them which ride he'd liked best, while the sister trotted next to them picking at a patch of cotton candy bigger than her head. Some of these travelers to another land carried medieval broadswords made out of plastic, others had ceramic beer steins wrapped and tucked under their arms, eager to remember the grand Oktoberfest dances. As a final treat for the guests, a group of young girls in purple and green Lederhosen handed out free packs of peanuts from wicker baskets.

Doozer had never gotten used to the glory of it all. It was a glimpse, however distorted, of a world so far from the cozy city he'd hardly left - a world where the past could be reduced to nothing more threatening than a plastic cup and a novelty tee.

"Come with me," Carla said, tugging his arm and refusing to see the people pouring from the gates as anything but a crowd to be pushed through. Viv was still in the car, trying to find the plastic grocery bag she'd tossed in the back hours earlier. "Save the other pass," Carla said to Viv over her shoulder. "Meet us at Squire's."

"You're not going to be able to flirt your way through sixteen year-old-boys anymore," Doozer said.

"I've got a different idea," she said.

"What if it doesn't work?" Doozer asked.

"Then you can leave me to fend for myself."

Doozer wasn't sure why he had such a strong impulse to look over his shoulder - check for dangers that weren't there. He and his sister wove through the sun-blinded

crowd, veering towards the little black gate where a teenage boy watched the exiting crowd from behind his linebacker's build, his tied-at-the-knee red pantaloons nearly bursting.

"Start looking awkward," Carla said as she looped her arm in his and put her free hand over her eyes in mock shame. "Tell him I forgot my tampons. We were in such a rush to get to the car we forgot to get our hands stamped."

So that was her plan. The way she was half dragging him, he realized, was only making their story more believable.

"You ain't got stamps," the over-sized boy said. Carla turned away, her eyes on the ground.

"My girl's period," Doozer said. He couldn't go any further, no matter how hard Carla squeezed him.

"No stamps, no entrance." The boy spoke a little slower, his own eyes trying to find something to look at.

"Her period," Doozer said again. "We didn't have time."

There was a long, awkward pause.

"Her period," Doozer said again, using his free hand to mime blood gushing from his crotch.

The boy shook his head, looking panicked. "Just go ahead, man," he said, doing everything he could to avoid eye contact.

And just like that Doozer and Carla stepped into olden times.

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The entrance to the park was at the bottom of a steady hill, the pathway lined with shops whose fiberglass fronts created an Olde English charm. They passed a multi-tiered

fountain where children tossed away money for a wish, then climbed to the top of the hill to find Squire's Grille, a burger joint where customers stood beneath antiqued wooden beams to choose between the Squire's Platter, the King's Feast, and a Chicken Sandwich.

Doozer tried not to think too much about food - the Lincoln in his pocket had to last. He separated himself from Carla to rest against a thirty foot replica of Big Ben, his back pressed against one side just a few feet from a young woman who leaned casually on the corner, her hair jet black, poofed tall and wide.

The park was beautiful - the trees lining the paths as bursting with color as the ones along I-64. The walkways were pebbled, and kept immaculate by a steady crew of teenagers carrying dustbins and blood-shot eyes. Down one path was a line of carts hawking pretzels, jello cups, and thick pens with purple ink and massive feathers sprouting out of their backs; down the other path was a steep hill that veered sharply out of sight after reaching a wide river. The clock at Doozer's back donned fifteen past the hour, the vibrations traveling along his spine and shaking free some of the left-over jitters of the caper he and Carla had just pulled off to get inside the park.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" the woman with the poofed black hair asked.

His head still ringing from the clock, Doozer was about to reply that he didn't. It only took a steadier look at those crooked teeth and glorious smile to finally see past the raven locks. "Viv?" Doozer asked. The mystery of what was in the bag she'd brought was solved.

"Come on," Viv said. "I need to see Danny before he gets off work."

"Can't we ride the Loch Ness Monster first?" Carla asked.

"He'll be off soon."

"Let's take the skyride at least."

A few minutes later they were crammed into a bright blue car hanging from a thick cable and watching the park scroll below them; Carla and Viv on one side, Doozer on the other.

"You look like Joan Jett," Carla said, twirling a bit of Viv's wig through her fingers.

Neither looked at Doozer, who was taking in the park below - dense New World wilderness pressing against paths that wound from one Old World country to another. From so high up the full grandeur of the place was laid out in every direction - the twitter of people as they walked the paths between countries, the gasps of guests on a battering ram swinging back and forth, a hollowed out log that raced down a shoot of water with a spray of foam and laughs, a bright yellow roller-coaster whose track arced into a pair of interlocking loops. There were little knots of pastel where teenagers twirled five-dollar cotton candy, and the landscape was speckled with the bouncing and excited reams of overtired children.

The whole thing was magnificent and brought Doozer a sense of serenity he rarely felt - as though nothing, not the grind of the Italian gondola running on rails made invisible by the murky river water, nor the out-of-place beeps coming from the video arcade, nor even the glimpse of employees stripping off their hats, untying the knees of their pantaloons, or shedding the clip-on bow ties around their necks as they slipped through the employee entrance, could possibly spoil the sense that the past was something to admire, that the real events of history could somehow, with enough time and design, be no more than an afternoon of fun and imagination. The scene below him made him forget that his sister - half-sister - was only a few feet away. It even made him forget about Viv, the sister

he'd never had. There was no pain or longing in that world below him. Only fair-grounds and spectacle. There was no regret or guilt. Only the thrill of a new ride or the sparkle of a souvenir. For the people passing through this timeless confection of the land, there were endless pleasures without even a dollop of fear.

Doozer took it all in until the dark shadow of the loading dock robbed him of his view, a shiftless jerk on their door announcing that the ride was over. They'd arrived in Italy.

"The Cradle's right over there," Viv said, pointing to a magic wooden carpet propped on a quartet of arms that spun in massive circles. "You're coming with me. Pretend to be my boyfriend."

"Okay, but only if I can talk in a fake Italian accent the whole time," Doozer said, half as a joke and half under the spell of the place. The way she looped her arms through his sealed the agreement. His sister gave one of them, it was impossible to know which, a wink. She stayed back, hanging near the Pompeii Pretzel Stand while Doozer and Viv joined the short line for the ride.

"Hey Danny!" Viv yelled.

The ride operator stopped in the middle of his warnings about securing loose items. He gave Viv a wave and let an excited smile spread through the thicket of his beard. After finishing his instructions he set the ride in motion, then leaned against the railing to get closer to Viv.

"Hey Pepsi," he said. "Glad you could make it."

"Thanks for the tickets. Ricardo and I have been wanting to come here for a while." She winked at Doozer.

The red bonnet perched on top of Danny's bushy hair drooped forward just a bit. Pushing it back he smiled at Viv, not letting Doozer into his memories of this moment.

"You dye your hair?" Danny asked.

"Just for you," Viv said.

"Want to hang out later? I'm off in half an hour."

"We've already been here all day," Viv said, running her hand over Doozer's arm. Doozer smiled and stood stupidly, waiting for his chance to practice his Italian. "Heading home after we have some food," Viv continued. "Couldn't leave without seeing you, though."

Danny's eyes were fixed on Viv. Working hard not to flicker in Doozer's direction.

"You got any food you could recommend?" Viv asked.

"What do you like?"

"We like free."

"The La Cucina around the corner."

Doozer was sure telling Danny that "La" meant "the" wasn't the best first thing to say.

"Find Cracker. Tell him Shaggy sent you."

The ride was winding down, the four massive pistons rocking a few feeble times before the lap bar popped open, inviting Doozer and Viv to take their turn.

"Enjoy the ride," Danny said.

Doozer had been so focused on his fake Italian that he'd never actually thought about getting on this carpet ride. It had been so many years since he'd been to the park, and he didn't know what to make of the Da Vinci's Cradle. A roller coaster was simple

enough - all forward motion and sharp turns. The loops were over before you knew you were in them. This was different - four tall arms spinning a single slab of wooden carpet in a giant circle, rows of passengers clinging to a lap bar as they rose and fell, rose and fell.

Viv steered them to the back row, far from the control station where Danny might be listening.

"Just so you know," Viv said. "These rides actually scare the crap out of me."

"I've never been on one like this," Doozer said.

"You didn't use an Italian accent."

"I've never a'been on a'one like-a this," Doozer said.

"That was terrible."

"I'll stop."

"Don't. It's a good distraction."

They scooted onto the long bench and pulled the bar, clicking it into place. "At least this one doesn't go upside down," she said. "Don't think I could handle that."

This late in the day they were treated to the backs of only a few heads and the smiling faces of a few others. No one else sat in their row.

"You called me Richard back there," Doozer said.

"I called you Ricardo. You're supposed to be Italian."

"I keep a'forgetting."

"Besides, people at the club know the name Doozer."

"I don't think'a he was a'paying any attention to me anyway."

"He paid enough. It only takes a bit of reality to keep the fantasies in their heads where they belong."

Viv's words gave way to a gasp as the ride began - just a tiny wobble at first, then a rocking motion, the four arms gaining momentum, preparing to spin them in a complete circle. One of Viv's hands went to her head, holding her wig in place. The other mingled with Doozer's, the muscles flexing tighter and tighter with each alternating whirl of the pistons. When the carpet gained enough momentum for the arms to make a complete circle, dropping the wooden carpet towards the ground, Doozer could only think of the grip Viv had on his fingers - her fear as precious to him as the bald head that Danny would never see. He even forgot about Carla, down there somewhere - maybe watching them get wrenched in a series of giant Os, or maybe finding a way to get a few free chances at the dart toss. With the lap bar holding their bodies firmly to their seats, he squeezed back, not in fear - just to let Viv know he was there, that she wasn't doing anything to hurt him, that she could squeeze harder if she wanted to.

He never noticed the ride coming to a halt, so constant was her grip. Only the motion of her lifting their joined fingers to her lips woke him from the endless circle of Da Vinci's Cradle.

"Thank you," she said. In the dimness of the evening her unsure eyes softened, then she disentangled from him, sliding off the bench and back into the park, leaving him to recover. In the heat of the early evening, the cool press of her kiss warmed quickly on his skin while he stumbled back into the dusk to figure out what had become of his sister.

Carla was busy at the Wacky Wire. The game looked simple enough - she had to get a circle of wire to the bottom of a corkscrewing twist of metal without touching it. Contorting her body, she could get it near the bottom each time only to brush the right angle at the end.

"It's hopeless," Carla said. "Let's get some food."

At La Cucina they looked for "Cracker."

"You know what he looks like?" Carla asked.

"He's probably one of the white guys," Doozer said flatly.

"Unless he's being ironic," Carla said.

"Nobody's that ironic."

They approached a pale man about Danny's age. Whether he actually was "Cracker" or not, the name "Shaggy" earned them each a free wedge of Dante's Inferno - a jalapeno and pepperoni pizza with a prefab crust and a sauce to cheese ratio that was almost comical. It had been nice to forget about poorly crafted pizza for a while. For the first time, Doozer found the park disappointing.

"The ingredients are all on top of the cheese," he said. "And clumped in the middle."

"What happened to your Italian?" Viv asked.

"I'ma sorry. This's a pizza, it a'sucks."

Carla joined in. "Eat your bloody food and stop bein' such an arse."

"What the hell was that?" Doozer asked.

"I'm going with Scottish," she said with a thick brogue.

"But we're-a in Italia," Doozer said.

"I'm visitin' from the Highlands."

Viv's eyes went back and forth between them, her crooked teeth showing through her smile. "This is the first time I've seen a family resemblance," she said. "Where'd y'all learn to talk like that?"

"Must have'a been our father." Doozer said.

"Now there's an arse," Carla added.

"You two make quite the team," Viv said.

"Handel & Handel," Carla said, her accent gone, her eyes fluttering to Doozer, who took a healthy bite out of his slice of Dante's Inferno. He ignored the rising heat of jalapeno as long as he could, enjoying the rare tenderness of the moment, remembering what he and Carla had once been so capable of. Finally, the burn in his throat and wetness in his eyes forced him to cough and break character, the Italian accent gone forever.

With the playacting over, Viv took off her wig and tossed it in a trashcan shaped like a fully clothed version of a nude sculpture.

"You aren't keeping that?" Doozer asked.

"Not unless we can go back to 1984."

"That's too recent for this place," Doozer said.

Doozer's mind drifted back to the Wacky Wire.

"Can I borrow a Lincoln?" he asked Carla. "I think I can win one of those bears."

"Use the cash you've got," she said, brushing jalapenos onto the pavement below her.

"Money's a little tight right now," he said.

"I know," Carla said. The tenderness they'd shared moments earlier evaporated into eight bongs of Apollo's Chariot.

"It's late," Doozer said. "We should get moving. Danny might come by."

"I'm going incognito," Viv said, waving her hand over her bare scalp.

"He'll still see you."

"Remember Big Ben? I could have kissed you without you realizing it was me."

Sure enough, a few minutes later Danny appeared, scanning each of the benches around La Cucina with an unconvincing casualness. After his eyes had passed over both Viv and Doozer three times without any recognition he removed his Renaissance cap and left, not even bothering to say hi to Cracker.

"Come on," Doozer said to Carla. "Give me a Lincoln. If I win you can have the bear. If I don't I'll give you five bucks."

"How's that different from using your five bucks in the first place?"

"Because winning won't cost me anything."

There was hardly a bulge left in Carla's pocket. Just a few Washingtons and Lincolns.

"I'll give you the five," Viv said.

Doozer didn't even bother with the remains of his crust - the pizza revealing the thinness of the area's Italian veneer.

Back at the Wacky Wire Viv handed over the money. A young boy was taking his turn at it, his parents watching intently, as if he had a real chance of winning. They seemed genuinely surprised when he bent his body nearly in half trying to keep pace with the screwing motion of the thing, then set off the light with the wire hoop barely half way down the piece of metal.

"You just have to keep still," Doozer said. He took his place, the wire steady in his hand. It was the contortions, the bends and moves, that made the game impossible. When the attendant told him he could start, Doozer waited for the spiral to come in front of him then, with a slow motion, held perfectly still except to lower the wire in time with the spin

- no contortions, no real movement. When the wire reached the bottom Viv and Carla both screamed in triumph. Doozer's hands, so steady moments before, began to shake.

"That bear's mine," Carla said.

"It was my money," Viv said.

Doozer couldn't listen. "Let's go on a ride," he said. His victory was complete, his belly almost full, and he had a Lincoln still safe in his pocket. He was ready to have himself flung about by a giant machine.

--

By the time they left the park they had ridden the Loch Ness so many times Doozer had learned to anticipate the bone-crushing mash of Viv's hand on his own. It had taken some doing to convince Carla to sit alone in the seat in front of them.

"My hand's as tough as his," she'd said at first.

"But I doubt you'd squeeze back," Viv said.

"I get the bear," was all she said, clinging to the stuffed creature who'd gotten crushed when the three of them shared a spinning car at the Trade Wins.

So late on a Sunday, the lines had evaporated, allowing them to take turn after turn at each ride without ever leaving the cars. Doozer had never ridden a roller coaster at night before - the darkness around them giving nothing to the eye, leaving all of his focus on the rise and fall of sensation in his stomach and the desperate press of hard-clenching fingers driving feminine nails into the heart of his palm.

When the closing of the park finally left them no choice but to leave the loops of yellow track behind, that feeling of rising and falling was still with him, and the crush of Viv lingered like the sweet burst of pineapple on a Hawaiian pizza. Carla and Viv

chattered behind him, Gordon shifting from one to the other. Doozer was awash in something he didn't want to scare away by listening to what they were saying.

Instead he enjoyed the closing of the park - the facade breaking down before them as employees stripped off their hats and untucked their shirts. This late on a Sunday night there were no families to usher out, leaving the teen-aged workers every opportunity to flirt without interruption. At the bend by the Rhine River Cruise a young boy in bright blue pantaloons and a frilly top had his lips pressed firmly onto the face of a girl in a beret and false corset. The steps leading back down to Olde England were littered with tired sweepers, the boys bragging about how little work they'd actually done while the girls pretended to enjoy awkward back rubs. Big Ben had become a backdrop for another couple to test out each other's mouths, while the fountain just inside the entry gate now offered a small pack of boys and girls a chance to playfully splash at each other. None of the young people bothered to notice the twenty-eight-year-old pizzaman walking in their midst with his neighbor and sister trading a bear between them.

3.

The drive home was thick with the fatigue of a long day and fertile with a newness Doozer couldn't quite understand or even be sure was there. Carla took a single hit off of what was left in her new pipe before letting the weight of her head trap Gordon against the glass of the passenger window. She was asleep before they'd gotten on I-64.

Viv was awake, sucking on a joint. He should talk to her, he knew that. All he could think about was the imprint on his hand where her fingers had squeezed, his nerves still tingling where her nails had dug in. Now, with no lap-band or safety harness to contain them, he couldn't find any words.

He wasn't really sure what he wanted to say - especially not when Carla was with them, wiggling to get comfortable against the glass. There would be other nights. Other times. His sister wouldn't be here forever, surely. For the first time, he wasn't sure. Timber would figure things out - when Carla's belly never swelled, if not sooner. What then? He'd already paid her off. For what she'd done. For what he'd done. That had always been enough. If there was something more she wanted, Doozer didn't know if he could give it. Surely, she had to leave soon. Surely.

"Doozer!" Viv was startled.

He'd nearly curved off the road.

Fully aware again, he straightened the Geo out, shaking his head and blinking quickly.

"Sorry," he said. Carla hadn't stirred.

"It's okay," Viv said. She relaxed slowly, each muscle letting go at a different pace.

"You know, I've always kind of wanted to be in one."

"An accident?"

"I love the sound of crunching metal. Don't you?"

"Never really thought about it."

"I have." She took another long drag from her joint. "The first time I heard it I was riding with my dad to school. Kindergarten or first grade. I don't remember what happened exactly - just that my dad slammed the brakes and the car in front of us hit someone in the middle of an intersection. The sound was amazing. It was so surprising. I'd seen cars after an accident before - the metal all crunched. I was expecting it to sound like balling up a piece of paper. But it was more of a thunk - no rustle. No rustle at all."

Her hand drifted back down, taking the joint with it. He'd seen her smoke so many times before, but never with such heavy eyes and the glassy voice of the stoner. Either Benson sold some good stuff or something was very different inside her this night. There were benefits to shopping with Carla.

"You ever been in one?" Viv asked.

"An accident?"

Her body convulsed, like she was laughing without sound.

"Once."

"What was it like?" She didn't sound curious.

"The cops had to come, and my friend broke his arm. We were stuck there forever filling out forms. Had to explain to my mom why we were going so fast - and why we were headed to Yorktown."

She waved him off. "That's after. Nobody enjoys that part. But the accident itself, that was a thrill, right?"

"Not sure it was worth it. I think you and your dad were the lucky ones, just getting to listen and watch. No consequences."

"There are always consequences. Even if you just watch." Her eyes were back on the street, her voice faded and dull, like she was remembering something from long, long ago.

"What if you turn away?" he asked.

"There are always consequences." Doozer wasn't sure if that was an answer or a meaningless echo. "Hey," she said, her voice thick. "You never told me what you thought of my dance the other night."

"You made a lot of money," was all he could think to say.

There was a brief lull of silence, then her head fell - almost toppled - onto his shoulder and before too long she joined Carla in sleep, her joint eventually puttering out in a line of curling smoke.

For a just a moment, Doozer let that bald head pressing into his shoulder chase away thoughts of Carla, taking the exit ramp slowly to keep her head from toppling forward. Then, they coasted onto Warwick where the regular glow of streetlights sent a flimsy image of his dashboard across the windshield, a ghost of Carla's ultrasound in reverse sliding across his vision with each light that they passed.

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The Geo was as eager for a rest as Doozer was when he finally parked in Viv's space at the Trenchant Towers. The creaks and whines of the engine cooling weren't enough to awaken the two women crammed in the front seat with him. He didn't want to wake them - didn't want Viv to move her head. Several minutes later, the blare of a horn as someone made a bad turn onto Oriana did the work for him.

"Thank god," Carla said, popping open the door and crawling out. She looked like a burn victim where Gordon's hair had pressed against her right cheek for so long. Now the bear was tucked under her arm, his legs flopping against her chest.

Viv climbed out Carla's side, the books she'd bought earlier lying forgotten by the floor mat.

"I still say that bear's mine." Viv was taking each stair with heavy, deliberate steps, not a single quiver in the muscles of her scalp.

"I'm telling you - sloppy seconds. Look at him." Carla had a point. Between the ride on the Trade Winds and being a pillow, the thing looked more like a wadded bearskin rug than a stuffed animal.

"It's pretty clear he'd be better off with me," Viv said.

The argument stopped when Doozer's front door opened.

"Where have you all been?" Timber asked, his voice high and squeaky in a way Doozer had never heard before. He didn't know if that voice meant Timber was concerned, angry, or simply at a loss. Carla quickly stuffed her new pipe into the pocket of her shorts, where it crumpled the notebook paper with the picture of the child in over-alls. Even stoned, she knew what she had to hide.

"You get everything you wanted?" Carla asked him.

"I got the king-size just like you said," Timber said. "Delivered tomorrow."

Carla left Gordon leaning on the two-foot wide strip of brick separating Doozer's front door from Viv's. "Why don't we just leave it here," she said. "He'll be both of ours."

"Sounds fair," Viv said, her voice still thick and distant. She went inside her apartment and shut the door.

"Where were you all night?" Timber asked.

"Doozer took me to Busch Gardens," Carla said.

"All night?" There was a hint of lawyer in his voice.

"I'll make it up to you." She took Timber's hand, pulled him to the door of the apartment, his flicker of lawyer gone, the blotchy ex-Virgin back and skipping at her heel.

Doozer stayed at the top of the stairs squatting to face the flattened teddy bear. The heat was finally breaking - the air heavy with more rain. He leaned against the rail, its

dampness leaving a soggy T on his back. He was tired. Whenever he shut his eyes the pull of the roller coasters assaulted him, that sense of vertigo that he'd have to sleep off. Until then he needed motion. And time. And a place to eventually lay his head - somewhere he could dig his fingers into someone else's palm. Somewhere that a fake accent would only bring laughs - not the tenderness and pain of a long and varied past. Trouble was, Irene expected him to be at work and she thought he was still a manager at Papa John's.

He went into his apartment. He'd need his Papa John's shirt.

After the sights of two nights ago, listening to Carla and Timber carry on in the bedroom wasn't so bad. Digging through the fat and gristle of last night's steaks, Doozer found the shirt he'd thrown away and ran it under the kitchen faucet, the scalding heat a welcome distraction from the growing sounds of sex in the apartment.

The shirt wasn't getting much better no matter how much he rubbed the soap on it. He rinsed it as best he could before carrying it with him back to the Geo. He'd seen girls at Virginia Beach dry their bikinis by hanging them on the antenna of a boyfriend's car. The Geo didn't have an antenna. The best he could do was catch a sleeve in one of the doors, leaving the uniform dangling in the chilly night and leaving him to worry that having a white shirt flopping across the driver's side window might draw the attention of the popos, like a bright flag of surrender coasting down the empty Newport News streets. He wasn't sure who or what he'd be surrendering to - the cops, Carla, his landlord. Hell, he might even be giving in to Viv in some way he didn't understand. Or Irene. He needed Irene, he was coming to realize that more and more as he drove to her. Not even the press of Viv's

fingers lingering on the skin of his palm could drive away that need. There was something in the way she laughed so hysterically at him, whether he was trying to be funny or not.

That was it, that laugh. That was what he needed. A constant reminder that none of this was normal, whatever "this" even was. It could change. It had to change. Even those things that could never change would be okay if he could just learn to laugh like Irene - to understand the absurdity of it all - to see it all as absurd. This wasn't the way of things. There was no need for despair.

Reaching across the passenger seat, Doozer cracked open the door, letting the shirt flutter away, deciding, once and for all, that he'd suffer the consequences of jeans and an Adidas tee.

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The sight of Doozer standing in the no-lake, chucking rocks at her window at two in the morning was more than Irene could take.

"I told you to stop with the rocks," she said when she stepped onto her porch, hugging her pink robe to her body despite the warmth of the night.

"It's a tradition," he said. "If I came to the front door you wouldn't know what to do."

"Try me," she said.

"Look at what I'm wearing."

He'd scabbled up the bank and joined her on the porch.

"You're always telling me you don't want to see me in work clothes." He spread his arms wide and did a turn. "Take it all in."

Irene was pretty sure grown men shouldn't wear tennis shoes. No one should ever wear an Adidas shirt.

"I bought a car," Doozer said.

Irene glanced at the no-lake. "Where is it?"

"I parked it on Shields."

"If you have a car why wouldn't you just drive to the front of my house?"

"I figured you'd be embarrassed. It's a used Geo - in pretty bad shape."

There were times when he made her laugh in a way that shook right past her belly and into the parts of her that made her want him. Other times, she was laughing in that way that stayed in the head, leaving the rest of her to go cold with a bad kind of wonder. The man standing in front of her with the scraggly pony tail and sad jeans inspired a laugh that never made it past her throat, the build up of pressure behind her tongue bringing tears to her eyes.

"Can you take me for a drive?" she asked, suddenly eager to get out of her house.

"I guess," Doozer said, his eyes sagging with a fatigue he'd been trying to hide.

"I'll pull the car around while you get dressed."

"No, I'll come with you now." She slipped her feet into a pair of flip-flops next to the sliding glass door. "It's late. No one will see."

Doozer took her hand and led her down the bank and into the vast expanse of water that wasn't there. "Aren't you going to ask why I'm in these clothes?" he asked as they trudged across the dried dirt, avoiding the smattering of bushes and tufts of grass pushing through the cracks. Empty beer cans littered the dirt, rusty and more dangerous than her

flip-flops could handle if she stepped on one. Good thing they'd just received a shipment of Penicillin at work.

"I'm kind of afraid of the answer, to be honest."

"That's why you're with me, right. I'm such a man of mystery."

To the relief of both of them, Irene's laugh burst through her chest, up her throat, out of her mouth, and into the chilly dark of the night.

“Monday”

1.

By Monday afternoon Doozer was anxious to get back to the emotional harbor of work, thankful in the meantime to be worrying about the low gas warning on the Geo's dash board. It was bright and distracting. Tangible. Solvable.

Well, not solvable yet. A mile-and-a-half and six stoplights still separated him from his return to the labor force and the drive with Irene had finished off a day of burning more gas than all his Lincolns could buy. He could use the change "bank" Tranito's would give him to keep the Geo running. He just had to get there.

Fixing his rear windshield would take a little more than the store's change. That morning, after slipping away from Irene's without bothering to wake her, Doozer climbed over the barbed wire fence separating the "No-Lake" from the broken down road to find his new car crusted with teenagers - two boys sitting on the pavement, leaning against his tires and reading - one an antique copy of Buck Rogers, the other a book by Marion Zimmer Bradley. A girl was lying on the dented hood, puffing a joint that had already made a few rounds. All three of the teens had that flanneled, beanied, all weather look, and all three were dusted with shiny pebbles that turned out to be pellets of glass.

"What the hell happened to my window?" Doozer asked when they noticed him standing in the ditch between the fence and the road.

"It was like this when he got here, Mister," the boy with the MZB said, brushing a few pellets off his shoulder then getting back his book.

"When was that?" Doozer snatched the reading material out of the boys' hands. He'd stuffed those books deep under the passenger seat the night before to avoid awkward questions from Irene.

"Few minutes ago. We're early risers." The other two laughed.

There didn't seem to be anything else broken but the window. Other than the books, there wasn't anything for them to steal from the car. They'd left the ultrasound alone.

None of the kids were eager to move. He got in the car, putting the books back in their sack by the baseboards, and started the engine.

"Damn, man. You trying to kill us?" one of the boys asked as all three of the teens scrambled away from the Geo.

Doozer had seen their kind before. Hell, he'd seen all the types of pot smokers - the rejects, kids like these with nothing better to do than find trouble, too lazy to find trouble worth doing; the stoners - Kurtz and Gage and the like - whose minds were as hazy as the air in their cars; and the habituals like Viv, who used the stuff to calm something inside them while their behaviors escaped unscathed.

Doozer had learned a long time ago that pot wasn't for him. He'd only tried it one time - right after his high-school graduation when he was still looking for something to numb the loss of Carla. The pot hadn't sat too well with him - the laughs it forced out of him felt disconnected and false. Work was a better drug - the calming repetition keeping his mind at bay in a way no narcotic ever could. He was always eager for another fix.

Even as that thought rippled through him the Geo lurched forward and went dead, just moments after passing Thorncliff, and a Shell station he couldn't afford. He had just

enough speed to roll down Warwick to a Self Storage near Woodhaven Road. Without power steering it took some doing, but he managed to get the Geo into the parking lot and halfway into a space before the car cranked to a stop. He'd been so close - his peace of mind only a hundred yards away.

A stocky, dark haired man wearing a name tag reading "Carlos" emerged from the office in front of the storage facility. He was carrying a clipboard and a sour face.

"Can't park here - you looking for storage?" He wasn't holding the clipboard with hope.

"Just for the next fifteen minutes," Doozer said, wiping sweat from his forehead even though the weather had cooled.

"Can't park here - no broken down cars."

"It's just out of gas."

"Can't park here - we don't take no cars that don't work."

"It works. Just needs gas."

"Can't park here - if it works then you can drive on down the road."

"Not without gas."

"Can't park here - gas is your problem, not mine."

"It's both of our problems until I move it."

"Can't park here - I'm calling the tow truck." Carlos jotted something on his clipboard, squinting at the Geo.

"Look, I'll be back in fifteen minutes to move it."

"Can't park here." Carlos was shaking his head and staring at his watch.

"So I've heard," Doozer said. He checked a watch he didn't have. There wasn't far to go and with some smooth talking he might get a bank out of Reggie in time. He would have to. That car was his only chance at making rent. He'd never have the money to get the car out of the tow lot, not to mention the risk it would take to leave a paper trail of his whereabouts. More importantly, he needed to his fix of work.

He covered the hundred or so yards to Tranito's, his Adidas cushioning the fast patter of his feet. The evening sun blared from the west, refusing to let him see inside the gilded window of his new employer even as it shrouded the Papa John's parking lot across the street in the shade of the pine trees. With his head down, hoping no one at his old job would notice the familiar ponytail across the street, he hurried through the Tranito's parking lot. Splotches of yellow moved in front of him - Gage and Kurtz were there, and a bland looking guy Doozer recognized from his days at Pizza Hutt – Pile was his name. The black man with the Bible was there, too. He sat apart from the others. There were two more drivers - strangers to Doozer - cast-offs from other stores who didn't bother to acknowledge him.

"Ain't you supposed to have a car now?" Gage asked.

Doozer ignored him - no time to waste on the likes of Gage.

Kurtz was grinning as wide as a stoner can. "Like my shirt?" he asked Doozer.

"It's new."

There were snickers behind him. Kurtz had spent a good part of the weekend bringing everyone up to speed on the prank he'd pulled.

"Any chance you'll let me have my shirt back?" Doozer asked. There were so many reasons that would make his life easier.

"Reggie will sell you a nice new one for fifteen dollars," Kurtz said. Doozer didn't have time to argue. Inside the store he went straight to the manager.

"Can I get my bank?" he asked.

"Can't be behind the counter without your uniform on," Reggie said, his rolling pin resting on his shoulder like a billy club.

Doozer retreated to the waiting area. "My bank. Can I have it?"

"You still owe me for the shirt."

"Can I get another one? Take it all out of my pay tonight."

Reggie went to the box to get a shirt and visor. "That's thirty you owe me."

"You still owe me a visor from the other night."

Reggie pulled a second visor out of the box.

"Can't you just give me one visor - charge me less?"

"They come as a set," Reggie said. "You don't sign out tonight until you make enough to pay me back." He put the shirt and pair of visors in Doozer's reaching hand.

"And the bank?"

"Em, set him up." A pale, spindly girl Doozer hadn't seen before popped open the cash drawer and set to work counting stacks of change and a pile of Washingtons.

"Just a Hamilton and a Lincoln will do," Doozer told her, the timer in his head ticking dangerously low.

"How will you make change with that?"

That stumped him for just a moment. "I've got a system," he said.

Em rolled her eyes and handed him the cash. She seemed sharp. Doozer liked her already.

With the cash in his pocket he resisted the urge to put his Adidas right back to work. Reggie was already suspicious enough - leaving in a hurry with fifteen dollars and no car would probably land Doozer in the hospital with a rolling pin sticking out of him. Instead, he penciled his name on the delivery list and sauntered from the store.

Back on Warwick, Doozer opened into a trot, retracing his steps towards the Shell station at Thorncliff. His Geo was still safely resting in the empty parking lot, the busted out back window and crunchy look of the hood making it hard to believe that gas was its only problem. The Public Storage manager with the charming catch phrase kept checking his watch.

"I'll be right there!" Doozer shouted as he jogged by. "Just getting some gas now."

"Can't park here - tow truck's on its way," he said. Doozer picked up his pace.

The gas station only sold one size of can - larger than Doozer would ever need. Eleven ninety-nine plus tax, plus the cost of a little splash of gasoline - Doozer owed Tranito's forty-five dollars, and was in a race with a tow truck driver who'd just pulled into the parking lot.

"You don't have to take it," Doozer said when the truck's driver hopped out of the cab. He'd parked right behind the Geo, the massive hook on the truck looking more like a wrecking ball than a tow cable. "I'll move it," Doozer said. He held up the gas can as if that explained everything.

"Got a call to tow a car. I'm towing a car."

"But I'll move it."

The driver pulled a lever to release the hook. The race was on.

Opening the gas cap as fast he could, Doozer drained the gasoline out of the awkward tank. Behind a trail of fumes he leapt into the driver's seat and gave the key a turn just as the man approached his rear bumper with the hook in hand. The Geo whined to life. Doozer kicked at the gas pedal - crushing the front tires into the concrete bumper at the front of the parking space. The Geo rocked forward, nearly clearing the barrier, then fell back on its haunches, the unsteady motion buying a little time as the tow man took a step back.

Doozer gave it everything he had, a short squeal followed by a loud thunk as the front wheels cleared the barrier, the bottom of the car bouncing off of it, then the rear wheels doing their part. The steering wheel lurched as the car's momentum spun through an empty, grass-filled lot, before finally getting purchase in the parking lot of a big colonial style home now marked with a sign reading "Fred's Apartments." The traction of that parking lot shot the Geo back onto Warwick amid a hail of honks and a screech of breaks. Doozer listened to the curses hurled his way from rush-hour traffic while he sawed the Geo until it pointed in the right direction. The tow truck driver and the Public Storage manager watched in disbelief.

A few minutes later Doozer pulled into the parking lot of his new job, his gas gage just clear of "E," one new visor resting on his dashboard, the other perched safely on top of his ponytail, the bright afternoon sun casting the whole scene with a glow that gilded the new Tranito's shirt billowing around his skinny body in gold. Things were looking up. He hadn't thought about Carla at all since his gas ran out, and he was ready to settle into a long night of peaceful labor with only forty-five dollars to go until he'd be gainfully employed.

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The delivery queue was long and the order list short. Doozer figured to help out making the pizzas - the sweaty store windows protecting him from the idle looks of anyone at Papa John's who might be \$499 worth of interested. Maybe, in the meantime, he could make Tranito's pizzas a bit more respectable. With any luck Reggie might even let him slap out some dough.

The shape of the store's insides were a mirror of Papa John's - a small waiting area in the front for customers, with the chairs on the right instead of the left, then a large counter with a bank of phones and order slips and a dough station in the wrong corner. One side of the store held the line, where plastic trays were half full with pepperoni, olives, peppers, bacon, mushrooms, ending with a vat of cheese pellets. The other side held the drivers' station - a big metal table with hot bags stuffed underneath and a map of the city hanging above. In the center of the store was a large metal contraption split down the middle, the front full of boxes waiting to move to the back, where they would be filled with pizzas in need of slicing, then piled onto a metal rack for the drivers to argue over. Behind that was the pizza oven and its five minutes of heat. In the back a storage room and a walk-in fridge fought for space with an office and an industrial sink.

What set Tranito's apart were the final touches. Papa John's was all white and red and shine, the floor as pure as the walls - the counter a brilliant scarlet, the chrome as shimmering and regular as the circles of food the store pushed out its doors. Tranito's was pale and corroded, the red lettering on the boxes not enough to cure the faded look of the place. No wonder the drivers did their loitering outside the store.

There were two slappers working the line - brothers Doozer would learn later. Jay had eaten a few too many of his creations, his body stretching his t-shirt until the logo on

the front looked more like a watermelon than a pizza. His brother, J.R., fit into his clothes better. He spent his nights puzzling over how to slice the pizzas. Four and eight slices was easy enough. Six and ten took some doing. Both brothers worked with their heads down, flinching every time Reggie's gaze lashed across them. Em worked the front of the store - handling the phones and any stray walk-ins intimidated by the grandeur of the Papa John's marquee.

"Emma?" Doozer asked her, hoping for some talk to distract him while he waited to do some work.

"Marion, actually."

"Is Emma your middle name?"

"Middle name's Denise. Reggie can't be bothered with more than a letter. See Jay over there?" She pointed at the heavy man piling ingredients on top of cheese. "His real name's Jeremy."

"And J.R.?"

"His name's Thomas."

Doozer frowned.

"We're not sure either," she said before he could ask.

The phone rang, ending the conversation.

Reggie was in the back, leaving the dough station empty. This was Doozer's chance. He took his position, turning over a medium dough in a plastic bin of flour. Once the stickiness was gone he dropped it on the metal counter top, digging into the edges to define the crust. Tranito's made their dough inside the store - not the uniform balls that came from Papa corporate. Maybe that was why Reggie used the rolling pin - uneven balls

of dough made for lopsided tosses. Too much of that and before you knew it the thing spun in the air like a single-bladed propeller rather than a perfect disk. Only under an expert's hands could something so irregular find the form and balance necessary for a proper toss.

Doozer was back where he was supposed to be. Thoughts of not quite estranged sisters and ultrasounds loaded with the past spun away with each turn of the dough on the counter. Roommates and rent payments, none of it mattered when he flipped the dough over, curving his hand as he pulled the crust further from the center, giving some sections more tension than others, evening out the weight. Viv, Irene - siren calls falling on ears grown deaf from his focus as the dough passed from one hand to the other, catching on the outside of his palm where the force stretched it just a bit thinner. There was that satisfying point, when the dough shifted from a solid lump into a flimsy, malleable thing that he could draw slightly up his forearm with each pass, getting closer and closer to the glorious moment when his arm went straight up, sending the dough spiraling into the sky, the florescent lights glowing through evenly - no bright, thin patches or opaque lumps. He caught the spinning dough on his fist, gave it a few more slaps back and forth, then tossed it again - letting it spin itself just a little bigger than the oven tray, counting on the fibers of the dough to pull together a bit as he arranged it on the circular mesh of metal that would carry it through the oven.

"What the hell are you doing over there?" Reggie had returned. "Get your white ass away from my dough station."

Doozer held his finished product in front of him, holding the crust like an alms tray, certain that the beauty of his craft would sway Reggie to let him keep at it.

"You listening to me?" Reggie asked. "I said get the hell out of my station."

The dough was so perfect. Doozer lifted his hand. Maybe Reggie just hadn't seen it clearly enough.

"Give me that," Reggie said, snatching the tray so quickly the dough fell, flopping onto the floor like a towel left for dead. Reggie picked up the dough, wadded it into a ball, and tossed it at a big gray trash can.

"That dough was perfect," Doozer said.

Reggie had already removed another unworked ball, pressing his rolling pin right in the center. Doozer could almost hear the dough crying out at the rude pressure of that pin.

"You a driver, not an employee, you got it? Hurt yourself doing stuff like that we could get sued."

"How can I hurt myself slapping dough?"

"I'll hurt you with this rolling pin I see you at it again."

Doozer gave up. There was nothing else to do but mill around the driver's station. Eventually he sat on the shelf underneath the bagging table, the hot bags rising on either side of him reeking of that special tang that only Tranito's could manage. His memories pressed even harder than the smell.

It was an hour before he took his first run – a medium pepperoni going to the Fort Eustice barracks. The sun was finally giving up, the sheen on the front window of the store had faded from gold to a mat gray. With the pizza bag filling his Geo with the odor of a Tranito's pizza he pulled away from the dirty looks of the other drivers, trundling onto Warwick with a sense of purpose, dreams of his first tip, and the anticipation of a brief respite from the idleness of his thoughts.

It was a respite that never came. As soon as he turned onto Warwick, the streetlights reminded him that he'd never fetched the ultrasound from its place on his dashboard. He reached for it, but it had wedged too far between the plastic and the glass. Afraid to take his eyes from the road, he left it there, careening across the windshield while he struggled to figure out where to go.

Ten years of staring at maps of the city tacked above driver stations didn't help him navigate as much as he'd thought they would. All the horrors he'd heard of Fort Eustace proved true. By the time he finally found the place the pizza had gone almost as cold as his shot at a tip. The customer was so adamant he sent Doozer to a store to break a Hamilton rather than let Doozer walk away with the change he couldn't make since he'd spent his bank on his gas tank. The guy at the Seven Eleven counter wouldn't break the money without a purchase. Subtracting the cost of the gum, Doozer's commission amounted to \$1.20.

He did his best to put thoughts of money out of his mind. There were still a lot of hours to go, and a lot of days before rent was due. The profits would come. The important thing was to be back at the job, looking for the rhythm that would carry him through the blissful hours.

The rhythm wasn't easy to find. Never in his years as a slapper had he imagined the challenges the drivers faced when they ventured into the jungle of neighborhoods and trailer parks and apartment complexes, fighting the flows of traffic only to squint at houses whose street numbers always seemed to hide behind a parked bicycle, or a tuck of ivy, or to not exist at all. With the cash from his second delivery he bought a map of the city - a mini-Atlas that could do nothing to prepare him for the massive speed bumps in Jefferson

Square that scraped the bottom of his Geo no matter how slowly he crawled over them, or the backwards numbering on the homes at Seabranh, or the twenty minute delay when a freight train blocked off half the city with a cargo of something going somewhere else, or the detour around the only road that might get him where he needed to go, or the subtle ache in the calf muscles pressing at the clutch, or the creeping sadness that seeped behind his eyes when he was at another red light with nothing to do but wait and think, or the tiny wince that grabbed him with each fresh view of the ultrasound on his windshield.

Hovering over it all was the constant fear of the popos, gliding around the city like bloated mosquitoes sucking the blood out of people already too desperate to care about the rules. Those police had driven the likes of Kurtz and Gage to Tranito's, and it would only take a small mistake on Doozer's part for them to haul him off to jail.

No wonder the drivers smoked so much pot.

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As the night wore on the number of deliveries dwindled. Every driver had a limit to how long he was willing to sit around not making money. One by one they faded, first Pile, then the Bible Reader, then another, then another. Kurtz held out until eleven thirty. With him gone only Gage stood between Doozer and the last-minute orders that just might make make it a profitable day of work. With one o'clock in the morning approaching he'd been at it for a solid ten hours. There was one hour left until closing. He had \$15.50 to go.

Reggie had gone home for the night, leaving Em in charge. When another light splatter of rain started she was kind enough to let Doozer use sheets of Saran wrap to cover the busted rear windshield on his Geo. Keeping his visor low over his face to hide from

the light of Papa John's marquee he blocked some of the drizzle from soaking into the hatch then joined Em inside the store, leaving Gage to nap in the cab of his truck.

"You want to slap dough that's fine with me," she said. "Just wait for an order and don't slice open an artery or nothing."

"You need help cleaning?" Doozer was happy to have a reason to be in the store.

"In case you hadn't noticed, we don't have to get things spotless." She handed him the push broom - nothing as precise as the small brush he'd used on the floors at Papa John's. "Don't overdo it," she said.

The shriek of a phone rang above the uninterrupted bristling of the broom on the flour dusted floor. Em took the order as a cloud of darkness claimed the sidewalk outside. Papa John's had closed, the unlit marquee robbing the Tranito's parking lot of most of its glow.

"Two large pepperonis," Em said as she tore the order slip out of the book.

The phone rang again. Doozer glanced over her shoulder to see Em write another order on a new slip. He shucked three doughs out of their tray, eager to sink his fingers into the soft mix of flour, water, and yeast. Em put the new customer on hold to answer another call. By the time she was finished they needed another two larges. The thunk of the first slaps of each dough resonated through Doozer's body, warming his bones and calming his nerves. Em was ready with a ladle of sauce, grinning at him while he turned the awful balls of dough into perfect crusts.

"Why don't you work in the store?" she asked as he passed her the first large.

"Reggie wasn't hiring. Don't really want my name on anything official right now anyway."

"Child support?"

"Something like that."

"You taking all of these?" Em asked when the orders were ready to go.

"What about Gage?" The big driver was in his truck, his head heavy on his chest.

"I won't tell him," she said.

Doozer loaded the bags into the Geo.

By the time he returned to the parking lot Tranito's had locked its doors. Gage's truck was in a different space than when Doozer had left.

"Damn, man," the big driver said. "What took so long? I want to go home."

"What's stopping you?"

"Can't leave Em in the store by herself."

"Probably safer than being with you."

"I ain't the perv living next to a stripper."

"They don't strip."

"You don't gotta tell me that. That shit sucks a fat one."

Doozer didn't like the pace of the conversation. "You ever been to those new places off Woodcreek?" he asked to mix it up. "I couldn't find an address anywhere."

"Only got to know the first one, then just count the numbers in fours."

"That would have been good to know."

Doozer had made \$10.50 in commission. Only \$3 in tips.

"You get a late run?" Doozer asked.

"Hell yeah I did. Some drunk high school kids had a party at the American Tudor. Ordered a stack of pizzas. Don't think they meant to tip me twenty, but I ain't going to point it out."

Em had finished cleaning the store - even had the paperwork done in a neat pile in the office. Doozer's stack of order slips was ready, his balance calculated. He handed over everything in his pocket.

"I paid for my shirts and gas and stuff," he explained to Em.

"You still owe two more dollars."

"That's all I got."

"You owe me," she said, marking two dollars down in the "Misc. Adjustments" ledger and changing the totals for the evening. He'd have the rest of the week to work on rent. For the briefest of moments, he left the store with his own kind of high. He had a job. And if Em worked the night shifts often enough, he might even get to slap a few doughs from time to time. On top of that, his clothes were cleaner than they'd ever been after a day working as a slapper. He could wear his outfits at least two shifts without having to dump quarters into a washer or dryer.

2.

Home was a reminder that all was not well. Piled just a few feet from the boundaries of Viv's parking space was an old couch, two decrepit chairs, and a series of boxes full of dishes, worn clothes, and a transistor radio with a plug that wouldn't even fit a standard socket. Doozer crept from his Geo, poking at the boxes that were slowly dissolving in the light drizzle. At the end of the collection of junk was a massive ball of coat hangers tangled and dangerous with their metal hooks reaching in every direction. A collection of

TIME Magazines from the sixties and seventies had toppled over, covering the sidewalk, the moisture blanching the photos on the cover. In a box full of broken down appliances Doozer spotted something he didn't recognize - long and bright pink, it looked like a thin flashlight with a space for batteries but no place for a bulb. Only when it started vibrating in his hand did Doozer realize what the thing was.

"Good for Ruth!" Viv was at the railing, looking down at Doozer as he pushed back his embarrassment and tried to ignore the photo at the top of another box - of his former neighbor as a young woman, her face broad and free of worry.

Viv was a different story. The water was gathering on her head, like a sheen of polished sea-shells on a white-sanded, Hollywood beach, yet the weight of worry on her face made his own scalp feel slimy and cold under the plaster of wet hair.

"Something happen to her?" Doozer asked.

"Hux," Viv said. "She was behind on rent."

"Where did she go?"

"Not sure. I heard all the yelling - she was pleading with him to stop. By the time I came out she was gone. Must have been in a hurry to leave that behind." She nodded at the vibrator still in Doozer's hand.

"It's a shame - her stuff out here in the rain. Wonder if she'll come back for it."

"I just can't figure out why Hux moved it all the way over here instead of putting it outside her door."

Doozer knew. It was a message - a warning that if Doozer didn't come through with some money by Friday, he'd be next. Placing the photo back in the box, Doozer did his best to cover it with a magazine picturing Ronald Reagan with a smug grin on the front.

Something about that didn't seem right. He covered over the first magazine with a second - a simple shot of an astronaut against a field of stars.

"Nice tits," Viv said as he climbed the stairs.

"What?"

"Your shirt."

Most of the letters in the Tranito's logo were hiding in the folds of Doozer's extra-large t-shirt, leaving only four letters visible. He untucked the shirt, letting it hang more naturally. She was leaning on the railing, ignoring the rain, a joint in one hand, a bologna sandwich in the other. She offered him her joint and he waved it away without thinking.

"Didn't mean to embarrass you," she said. There had been no humor in her voice. Flat and worried. "Back at the pizza game, huh?"

"For now," he said, unsure if he should ask what was bothering her, suddenly very ashamed of his uniform.

"Want some?" she offered the bologna sandwich as automatically as she had the pot.

Doozer accepted, struck by how hungry he'd become. "Thanks, I'll just have a bite."

"You can have it all. I'm really not even sure why I made it." She handed the sandwich over. "You ever do that?"

"Make bologna sandwiches?" He took a bite. Creamy and rich; not tangy and acidic like pizza sauce, not so hard to eat like Timber's steaks - the sandwich was exactly what he needed. He ignored the glassy look in her eyes.

"I mean do things without thinking first."

"Maybe some part of you knew I was coming and that I'd be hungry."

"We are quite the pair, aren't we?"

He'd been about to lean with her on the railing. The talk of pairs slowed him - made him nervous.

"Why are you up so late?" he asked.

"Can't sleep," she said. "Look at this."

She handed him a scrap of paper towel, similar to the one he'd scrawled on two nights earlier. Only on this scrap, the writing was bold and legible. On one side was Viv's name. On the other it read, "I like your stuffed bear."

"One of the waitresses found it on the bar." Viv shuddered.

"You think it's the same guy from before?"

"Unless two creeps have the same handwriting."

Doozer let his forearms press into the metal railing next to her, ignoring the wet.

"I just don't understand," she said. "I've been so careful - never used my real name at work. And no one knows where I live. Not even the other girls."

Doozer remembered the night he'd spent at the club - talking to Kurtz and Gage. He'd mentioned her name, the Trenchant Towers. Surely not. It couldn't be either of the former Papa John's drivers - they'd both spent the night at work. Could someone else have heard? Viv was leaning on the rail next to him, a quiver rippling through her every once in a while. There was something to say here - some right course of action. These were the moments - the difference between the life he was living and the life he might have led. All he had to do was make the right move, set things right. The skittish rain drumming on the parking lot made it hard to think.

"This sandwich is amazing," he said.

"The mayo ratio is key."

Viv leaned into him and let her head fall against his shoulder, her cheek pressed against his arm.

"Maybe we should hide the bear," he said.

"It's not Gordon's fault." She lifted her head to look at the stuffed animal who was slumped towards Doozer's apartment. Two nights of rain had soaked into the plush, weighing down the head and arms, the curls of hair clinging to the artificial fibers beneath. "Shame." Viv said.

"If you want to get some sleep," Doozer said, "I'll stay out here - make sure he doesn't show up."

"That's sweet, but what are you going to do, stand out here all night?"

"If I have to."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow you'll feel better - figure things out. It's okay to be scared for one night."

"You planning to catch the bastard tomorrow?"

"How would I do that?"

"Exactly. Tomorrow won't be any better."

"You could crash in my place. Carla's not using the couch anymore."

"I'd appreciate that."

They slipped inside Doozer's apartment, leaving Gordon, the water-logged bear, alone with the boxes of possessions that Ruth had left behind. The smallness of his place

was a little embarrassing somehow, even though hers was the same size. The bigger problem was the dusting of juicy flies spotting the walls, the carpet, the couch; his trash can spewing them in a cloud so thick they could see it even with the lights off. Timber's steaks were still in there, coated with a writhing mess of maggots.

"I can stay at my place," Viv said. "I'll have to eventually."

"No, no," Doozer said, rushing to the trashcan while he swatted at the bugs pelting his face, some nearly catching in his eyelashes while others threatened to fly down his throat. Touching the trash liner was out of the question. Doozer picked up the whole can - liner, meat, and maggots - and fled the apartment.

As he carried his burden down the stairs, careful not to catch his pants on the wad of coat hangers near the bottom, a door opened. Hux stood in his doorway on the first floor in his usual wife-beater - somehow sweaty no matter the weather.

"What the hell is that, boy?"

"Trash."

"You need to take that out more often."

"Thanks for the tip."

The dumpster shook with an empty clang when Doozer tossed the trashcan in, the meat spilling into a long, maggoty streak along the wet, rusted metal.

Hux was still in his doorway when Doozer headed back up the stairs.

"You ever find anything out about that cigarette burn on my car?"

"Can't help you," Doozer said.

"How's about rent?" He'd stepped out of his apartment, tapping his hands on some of the boxes, peering into them with a knowing frown.

"I'm working - look." Doozer pointed at his shirt.

"That's a different shirt from yesterday."

"It's still a work shirt."

"Friday - you hear? I ain't fooling."

Doozer returned to his apartment where Viv still stood in the dark, shooing as many of the remaining flies as she could through the front door. She stopped to let Doozer pass. At last, he noticed that the TV wasn't there anymore. And the stack of VHS tapes that should have been next to it were gone, too. And the jacket Timber always left draped over the vinyls on the end table. And Carla's backpack. Timber had moved out and, it seemed, taken Carla with him. The beige sheet - Timber's apparently - was gone. Even in the dark the neat stack of OK Soda was on full display, the glossy silver of the boxes clashing badly with the smaller stash of Apple Slice he kept next to the bedroom door. The Pepsi Clear always looked the same.

"Want something to drink?" Doozer asked.

"No thanks," Viv said.

She laid on the carpet in the little rectangle of yellow light from the balcony, the glow bathing her bare head, her arms, her shoulders. A quiet fatigue shone with its own light behind her eyes; those eyes that looked at him with a sincerity and affection not even he could miss. He couldn't picture the twirling, silver-haired seductress of Bluebeard's stage.

"Mind if I smoke?" she asked.

She drew a joint out of her shorts. A lighter was quick to follow. One hand allowed her to puff, the other waved lazily across the carpet's rough fibers, stirring up an occasional fly.

"It's nice to spread out like this," she said. "My coffee table's always in the way."

She raised the joint to him without taking her eyes off the ceiling. He barely shook his head before she put it back to her lips - the routine so familiar Doozer doubted she even noticed it happening. She took another, deeper drag. Closed her eyes.

He'd heard stories of people's life essences leaving them when they died. He imagined it looked something like the vision of Viv in front of him, lying still, her eyelids smooth and metallic, smoke curling out of her in a syrupy halo of white. When she'd pushed all the pot out of her lungs she remained there, eyes still closed. She might very well have been dead if not for the slight rise and fall of her chest and the way she twitched whenever a fly buzzed too close. It took a few minutes for Doozer to realize she'd fallen asleep. He slipped the joint from her fingers and put it out in the sink. With the thermostat turned down the temperature was already dropping, especially so close to the floor.

He couldn't give her Timber's bedding. Not after what he and Carla had done in it. With his own blanket and pillow piled in his arms he crouched near her, slipping his hand beneath her head. The curves and craters of her scalp felt somehow improper - as if touching them were a violation of something he couldn't quite name. Surely she'd appreciate not spending the night with her bare skin pressed into the dusty frizz of carpet, her arms and legs exposed to the bugs hovering above. Still, it took Doozer a while to get the nerve to carefully lift her head from the floor and slide a pillow beneath it. Her skin had grown prickly and rough and reminded him of the scales of the fish he and his sister

used to catch at their grandmother's house. He could hear Viv's follicles scraping on the fabric of his pillow as it slid beneath her, the tiny sounds picking at his eardrums. He was happy to withdraw his fingers, the sense of violation replaced with something else - as though the stubble had scraped away the purity of that perfect, reflective scalp.

After draping the blanket over her he turned off the light and headed to bed with a final look at the haze of insects and, below them, the woman sleeping safely on his floor.

“Tuesday”

1.

In exactly a year of dating, Irene had only been to Doozer's place three times. Who could blame her? Between the weird furniture made of old soda cases and his somewhat harmless, somewhat creepy roommate hovering, waiting for them to go to the bedroom so he could be alone with his soft-core rentals, Irene didn't exactly have fond memories of the place. Still, anniversaries are a time for next steps and Irene was ready to figure this thing out with Doozer once and for all.

She hadn't thought that they'd exchange gifts until he insisted she drop him at the mall to buy hers. He wasn't the easiest guy in the world to shop for. Discontinued soda brands didn't magically appear on shelves. Maybe if she could have found him a buyer for those sodas, that would have worked out for everyone. Instead, she'd gone ahead and spent more than she meant to for a decent stand-alone turntable. If he was going to clutter his apartment with all those records he might as well listen to them.

As she approached the Trenchant Towers with the box under her arm the door to one of the lower apartments opened. A fat man in a disgusting wife beater opened the door, a shotgun laying on his shoulder.

"I don't know you," he said.

"Likewise." Irene was trying not to make eye contact.

"You smoke Newports?"

"Don't smoke at all. I'm a pharmacist."

That explanation seemed to work for the man, who slammed his door shut, leaving Irene to struggle with the box. It was more awkward than it was heavy, especially when

she had to slip by Doozer's crusty Geo and a wad of gnarled coat hangers to get to the Trenchant Towers' staircase. Of course the Geo's back window was already busted. Why wouldn't it be? She hesitated for just a moment. Maybe a year was a good, round number. The kind of perfectly bounded volume she could put on her shelves of memory to collect dust while she started with a fresh, empty page.

Hearing a woman's laughter coming from Doozer's apartment made up her mind for her. If things were going to be over, they'd be over on her terms. Storming up the stairs, she let the box holding Doozer's turntable slip to the floor of the concrete balcony, tucked her raven bob behind both ears, and knocked.

Apparently, Doozer thought she couldn't hear him padding to the door, or couldn't see the peep hole go dark for a second. It took three more knocks before he finally answered, a fresh Papa John's shirt blazing in the chilly light of the afternoon sun.

"You're not going to work are you?" she asked. He'd promised that this one day he'd be free. The scrunched aluminum look on his face told her he'd forgotten.

"I just have a few things to wrap up. Didn't think we'd be getting together until tonight."

"Thought I'd surprise you," she said, pointing at the box. "Isn't it great? Comes with speakers and everything." Doozer just kept staring. She suspected he hadn't bought anything at the mall. Probably never went inside. Whatever. She pushed past him, into the ridiculous apartment. "Bring it in here, let's hook it up."

She was careful not to step on any of the records littering the floor. Jethro Tull, Three Dog Night, and Cameo. Maybe the record player had been a bad idea.

She took off her trench coat, letting her tightest pair of jeans and sexiest t-shirt entice him while she plopped onto the couch. Doozer was struggling to get the record player through the doorway.

"What am I supposed to do with this thing?" he asked.

Irene glanced around the room. "You get one guess."

"But I've never listened to my records."

"Do I have to explain how a record player works?" She rose from the couch to help him with the box, setting it down next to the breakfast bar while she wondered what had happened to the sheet that used to cover the OK Soda cans. She picked at the tape sealing the box while she asked, "Who was the girl I heard laughing?"

"That was my sister," he said. No scrunched look this time. He'd either thought this through already or was answering honestly. It could go either way, really.

"Where'd she go?"

"Good question. You done in there, Carla?"

A woman emerged from the bathroom, blushing all the way to the top of her bald head. It was a good thing she was his sister, Irene thought. A smile like that was something to be jealous over, and the rash on her scalp would clear up with a little hydrocortozone.

Irene stopped picking at the tape and extended her hand to the slim woman in front of her.

"Doozer mentioned you were in town. It's nice to meet you."

"You too," the woman said. She seemed timid and unsure, but not in the same way as Doozer. Irene found herself liking the girl.

"I have to drop Viv off somewhere," Doozer said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I thought your name was Carla," Irene said to the woman.

The woman's scalp got even redder. That must be her version of the scrunched aluminum look, Irene thought. "Viv's my stage name," she said.

"Doozer didn't tell me you're a stripper."

"We don't strip." She didn't hesitate on that one.

"You two get going so Doozer can get back. I'll set up the record player while you're gone."

Doozer gave a strange look - like the one he'd given the last time she visited the apartment, when she'd reached for one of his soda cans.

"It's just that those things wear out the grooves," he said.

"That's what the grooves are for."

"Why don't you give me some time to finish sorting my albums - figure out which ones I don't care about. Come back tonight and we'll listen to one of those."

"Only the ones you don't care about, huh?"

"I don't mean it like that. The ones with no value."

That wasn't any better.

"You know what I mean. It'll be a great way to celebrate our anniversary."

"You have any Belinda Carlisle?" She winked at him.

On their fourth date they'd watched a quiz show on MTV while drinking OK Soda straight out of the can. "Belinda Carlyle!" he kept shouting at one of the contestants. "The answer's Belinda Carlyle." It was the moment she considered falling for him. The guy really knew his Go Gos.

"I might have grabbed one of their albums out of a dollar bin. I'll look later," he said as he and Carla - or was it Viv? - stepped into the chilly afternoon.

"No kiss?" She tucked her hair back behind both her ears and puckered her lips.

"I'm saving it for tonight," he said, then closed the door.

--

Doozer waited in the Geo, rubbing his arms against the cold while Viv slipped into her apartment for a change of clothes. Gordon, the unfortunate bear, had keeled over in the space between their apartments. Wet and nearly frozen, the glue holding one of the eyes had given out, the little bead lying next to a bent and trampled leg stuffed with soggy fluff.

When Viv was finished changing she skipped across the balcony, her foot kicking the little bead of Gordon's eye, sending it plummeting into the pile of Ruth's belongings where it settled in the box with the vibrator.

Viv made her own descent in tight jeans and a heavy jacket. Her head looked freshly shaven and blotchy, the rest of her skin as pale and blank as her expression – everything about her was open, ready for wigs and bikinis and makeup. Doozer focused on the paper towel she was pinching around a fresh bologna sandwich.

"Ooh, I forgot all about these," she said as she climbed in, picking up the sack with her copy of Buck Rogers and the MZB inside.

"You didn't have to do that," he said when she handed him the food.

"I owe you. For last night." She shuddered a bit. "And for the ride."

Memories of that night at the club - of using her real name - flooded him, making the delightful taste of the sandwich that much harder to bear. Creamy and rich, she really did have her mayo ratio down.

"Aren't you working at Tranito's now?" she asked.

Doozer nodded, too enthralled with the sandwich to speak.

"They don't mind if you're in the wrong shirt?" she eventually asked.

Sure enough, he was still in the Papa John's shirt he'd put on for Irene's sake. He'd never told her about Tranito's, or the \$499. "Damn it, I'm an idiot," he said.

"Go change - I'll wait," Viv said. She was thumbing through her Buck Rogers, in no rush to get on the road.

"Let's just go," he said.

To his relief something vibrated in Viv's pocket, changing the subject. Doozer couldn't imagine how she managed to fit a pager in jeans so tight, let alone fish it so smoothly from her pocket.

"You mind pulling into the Kounter?" she asked, dropping her book back in the bag while she checked the number. "I need to use the phone."

While Viv was at the pay phone Doozer tried to think of a way out of his fix with Irene. With a little luck he might make decent money on a few early runs - enough to buy himself another work shirt and maybe have something left over for Irene's present. Do that by nine o'clock and he could even make it to a proper store. Otherwise, he'd have to get her something from 7-11 or the Korner Kounter. Through the glass front of the store the checkout counter was a bleak and deserted island in the middle of a sea of over-salted and over-priced food. He'd just opened his wallet to double check just how empty it was when Viv returned.

"What's that picture on your dashboard?" She asked.

With no reflection in the afternoon light he'd been trying to forget it was still there.

"It's nothing," he said. "Got stuck there the other night."

Viv reached for it, her slender hand wedging far enough for her to pinch it between her index and middle fingers.

"Whose is this?"

He paused, not restarting the car. He could tell her about the photo. About Carla. He'd carried so much for so long, it would be good to talk to someone about it all, to make his feelings tangible in a way that not even a picture from his past could ever do.

"Found it in a driveway," he said. "Customer didn't want it. Didn't seem right to throw it away."

"I can never make heads or tails of these things," she said, turning it around in her hand. She glanced at the car's ignition. "You getting something?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"Holy crap," Viv said. She was still inspecting the ultrasound. "The name on this thing - Handel. Doozer are you going to be a daddy?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Is it with Irene?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Doozer said, taking the ultrasound from Viv's hand and balling it up a second time.

Viv sat squarely in her seat, eyes pointedly forward. "Anyway," her voice was pouty, "my friend Paprika is stuck without a ride. You mind picking her up on the way?"

"What kind of name is Paprika?"

"All the other spices were taken."

"Pepsi's not a spice."

"Paprika got the last one."

They drove away in silence, Buck Rogers and MZB a distant memory.

--

Doozer imagined Paprika as dark and exotic, with a trim waist and flowing black hair. She turned out to be thick and blond, with skin just clear enough for makeup to hide the blemishes. Doozer suspected she'd be dynamite on the stage, big breasts pushing against the bikini top, thighs engulfing the pole.

"I'll sit in her lap," Viv said.

The Geo didn't suit people of Paprika's size. Her lap suited Viv just fine – broad and padded like a white leather couch. Viv was comfortable even with her bald head bent to the side and pressed against the roof. Paprika had her thick arms around Viv's waist, her bracelets rattling with every bump in the road, and rested her pale and blotchy face against her friend's back, her nose just poking over a slender shoulder, her yellow hair tickling Viv's neck. Together the three of them warmed the cabin against the cold outside - a clown car full of strippers who didn't strip.

"You need to eat more," Paprika said.

"Then I'd end up crushing you."

"I was talking to the driver. What's your name again?"

"Doozer."

"That's a horrible name," said Paprika.

She'd been chatting since she lumbered into the Geo, ignoring the tension and hurt that had been lingering in the car like the dandruff from torn notebook paper.

"You can drop us off at the corner," Viv said.

"I ain't walking in this cold," Paprika said.

"It's not like they can dock my pay," Doozer said to Viv.

"Working for tips – it's the life, huh?" Paprika replied. "Made thirty-six bucks last night. How'd you do?"

"Broke even," Doozer said.

"What about you, Viv?"

"More than that," was all Viv offered.

They pulled into the parking lot in front of Bluebeard's. Rows of pickup trucks and hatchbacks, even a tow truck or two, formed into lines without the need for painted-on parking spaces. In the chilling breeze the pine trees lining the club's back creaked and swayed. The bouncer at the entrance was still, ominous, and scowling.

"Hey Dawg," Viv said as she and Paprika squeezed out of the Geo.

A thick rumble of words came from the giant man's throat. Doozer rolled down the window to hear.

"Can't park there," Dawg said.

"Just dropping them off."

"Got to move."

"Give him a break," Viv said. "You know how hard it is for us to find rides."

"Here," Paprika handed Doozer five Washingtons. "For gas." Then she disappeared into the club, her bracelets rattling to the sway of her hips. Viv followed, leaving Doozer to grant the bouncer's wish and drive to work, where he would begin his

second shift at Tranito's with another debt to pay and another yellow visor on his dashboard. At least Kurtz and Gage had the night off.

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During his first few deliveries the temperature kept dropping, chilling him until it was almost impossible to think of a gift for Irene, or to keep track of how long he'd need to deliver to get the money for one. Once again he'd started his shift owing fifteen dollars and adding another visor to the collection on his dashboard. Maybe he could quit, forget about paying Hux, just spend his days and nights as a permanent sentry in front of Viv's door, passing the time talking to Gordon and wondering where Carla was.

He wasn't eager for the orders - the feeble heat of his dashboard would only steam the windows and thaw his fingers enough to turn the wheel. Not even the absence of the ultrasound was making this night any better. It might have disappeared from his vision, but its effects - on him, on Carla, and now on Viv - still hung in every tiny crystal of the Geo's frosted window.

Between runs he hunkered inside the store, trying to warm up and hide at the same time. The heat of the pizza oven was putting some feeling back in the tip of his nose when Reggie held a phone receiver in the air and said, "Doozer, you got a call."

He took the phone reluctantly, like it was a mangled water mocassin whose heart just might still be beating.

"It's Pepsi." The clamour of Bluebeard's was a steady buzz of feedback in the cheap handset. Viv's smoky voice still floated into his ears. "You up for giving another ride? Pepper doesn't want to walk in the cold. Says she'll tip well."

"I'm at work."

"When's your next run?"

"I can come now, I guess."

She gave him the address of an apartment complex on Warwick, only a mile from Bluebeard's.

"You mind if I step out for a minute?" he asked Reggie.

"Do what you want. Miss your run and you're at the back of the line."

Pepper was an athletic looking, dark-skinned woman with thighs that could crush the pole as easily as they could twirl around it. She'd shaved her hair down to a soft cap of black that Doozer hoped never had to hide behind a wig.

"Damn, don't you got a heater?" she asked, sliding forward to keep the backs of her bare legs off the cold vinyl seats. Goose-bumps prickled along her skin.

"Keep staring like that, Putz'll never let you drive me again," she said. She handed him five Washingtons. The Geo went into gear and rolled slowly over the massive speed bumps littered across the road.

"You a friend of Pepsi's?" she asked.

"Neighbor."

"I don't talk about my neighbors that much." She was rubbing her hands together and blowing on them a lot. "Anyway, thanks for the ride. Cayenne's car broke down."

"How's she getting to work?"

"Boyfriend." Her hands had given up on each other and were rubbing her thighs instead.

"He wouldn't give you a ride?"

"I ain't dumb enough to ride with a boyfriend, even if he ain't mine. Putz got a thing about boyfriends. Like we going to look like whores kissing in the parking lot, cause trouble with the popos."

As they pulled onto Warwick, Doozer got an idea. "What would you like for an anniversary gift?"

"You move fast, don't you?"

"I mean for my... for this person I know."

"Give her jewelry." She'd given up the rubbing - folding her arms tight to her body instead.

"It's not that kind of anniversary."

"Jewelry works for any anniversary."

"I don't have that kind of money. I need something cheap, and something I can pick up today. Maybe from a gas station."

"What a lucky girl."

"Any ideas?"

"Look, if you ain't spending money, you got to be thoughtful. Don't buy her nothing. Give her something from the heart."

"You mean like a poem or something?"

"You write poetry?" He wasn't sure why she looked so surprised.

"No," he said.

"Then don't give her no poem. Give her something that's important to you - show her you mean business."

"What if I don't really mean business?"

"Then what's it matter?"

It only took a few minutes to get to Bluebeard's. Dawg was in his usual place - even the cold was afraid to bother him. The lot was packed with vehicles. Music escaped the grates across the windows. Viv was in there, putting herself at the mercy of men who didn't deserve her. They didn't deserve Pepper either - not even Paprika.

Pepper sprang from the car, moving as smooth as the trace of her breath frosting the air. He wondered if that ease of movement was something all the dancers had or if they learned it under the glares of their customers. Dawg put his own glare on Doozer and his Geo. It was time to get back to Tranito's and away from those head-sized biceps. Their was a crunch of gravel under the tires that sounded sinister, as if bits of bone were scattered over the parking lot.

Back at Tranito's he was still only third on the delivery queue. He didn't mind. Ten new Washingtons were in his pocket. Even if he'd earned them delivering women named after spices to men who didn't care about the women's names at all, ten Washintons were ten Washingtons. It was best not to think about what went on in Bluebeard's. Especially after Doozer admitted to himself the plan he was forming now that he was warm enough to think.

He put in a call to the club, Reggie watching him suspiciously. A woman answered. It was still early - the club only simmering with the murmurs of loneliness.

"I need to leave a message for Viv."

"No Viv here," the voice on the other end said.

"For Pepsi, then."

"So does everybody."

"Can you tell her Doozer called?"

"Why didn't you say it was you?"

"Viv?"

"Pepsi."

"Right."

He paused.

"Did you want something?" she asked, her voice still carrying the hint of a pout and a new coldness that Doozer couldn't bear.

"I'm sorry about before," he said. Before what? He wasn't sure. He had plenty to be sorry about.

It was Viv's turn to pause.

"Tell you what," she finally said. "Give me a ride home and we'll talk it all out. You don't have to say anything about the ultrasound if you don't want to."

"That's actually what I wanted to talk about."

"The ultrasound?"

"The ride. How hard is it to get a ride to work? For the strippers, I mean."

"We don't strip," she said. "But it's a pain in the ass. We had this girl, Chili, got fired when her dad dropped her off one night. She gave him a kiss on the cheek, got Putz all stoked about how the popos didn't know who was who. Only knew what a kiss looked like."

"Her dad dropped her off to strip?"

"We don't strip." Her voice was growing cold again.

"What if there was one guy giving all the rides? Cops would recognize me pretty quick - know I'm not a customer."

"Putz will never pay you to do that."

"Just tips. Y'all always got cash and I always got time."

"Now that sounds like something a stripper would say."

"What do you think?"

"A stripper shuttle. I bet your mom would be proud."

"But you aren't strippers."

"Oh, Doozer," she paused again. When her voice came through the receiver again it was strained, even painful. "I know what I am."

2.

The call Doozer expected to be Viv was not.

"I need you, Richard," the voice said. "Can you come get me?"

Doozer took down Timber's new address and ignored the stack of four pepperonis going to a house around the corner. Five minutes later she was in his passenger seat, hugging her bare legs with one arm while the other punched at the vents on the dashboard.

"You ever going to get this thing working?" she asked.

"Can't afford to," he said. "You could buy a coat."

"So could you."

"Can't afford to."

She had practically leapt into his car when he'd arrived, wearing only a pair of red-and-yellow-checkered men's pajamas that fit her remarkably well, and her backpack slung on her shoulder.

"What happened back there?" he asked.

"I just couldn't do it anymore."

"Did Timber-"

"Timber didn't do anything. He wasn't even there. I was just sitting in that apartment, all that new stuff around me. I couldn't do it. I had to get out of there."

Was this it? Doozer wondered. Was this the moment she would take to the road? He concentrated on driving straight, pushing the Geo to move faster, popos be damned, ignoring the flapping of the fraying Saran wrap covering the hole where his rear windshield was supposed to be.

"Why all of a sudden?" he asked.

She handed Doozer a note. At the next stoplight he glanced at it, the writing tiny and comical. Timber's without a doubt. "I love you," it read. "Both of you." Then there was a surprisingly sharp drawing of a stork with a heavy blanket in its mouth.

"I didn't know Timber could draw," Doozer said.

An impatient horn behind him interrupted. The light was green. He welcomed the distraction - he'd been nervously reliving his own note, that night at the club. What would Viv have done if she could have read it? Did she have someone to call - to take her away?

"Why are you stopping?" Carla asked as they neared the Trenchant Towers. "Don't you have to keep working?"

"Figured I'd drop you at home on the way."

Carla shuddered, whether from the cold or the thought of home Doozer couldn't tell. "Can I just ride with you for a while?" she asked.

He turned, sped up, and rolled back to Tranito's, strangely thankful that Carla was still with him at least this little bit longer. "Put this on," he said as they approached the store. He passed her the Papa John's shirt still in his car.

"You're up," Reggie said as soon as Doozer stepped into the oven-crusted air of the pizza shop. "What's she doing here?"

"That's my sister. Wants to ride with me."

"Not in that shirt."

Disappointment seeped into Doozer. "Reggie won't let you ride with me wearing that," he said to Carla when he'd left the store. She'd rolled down the window to bang the ashes out of her pipe while Reggie watched them both, checking to make sure his orders were carried out.

"Give me a minute," Carla said. She stripped off the shirt and turned it inside out, the back of the embroidered Pizza Jim's logo just a tangle of red, white, and green threads, nearly matching the checkered pajama top beneath.

"That good enough?" Doozer asked Reggie when the big man came to the door, rolling pin threatening.

"She still ain't in our uniform," the manager said.

Carla swiped one of the visors from the dash, sliding it over her hair. "How's that?" she asked.

"Just don't let her out of the car," Reggie said.

The delivery would be quick - they only had to cross the street into River Mews, dangerously close to Papa Johns. Doozer pulled his own visor low over his face.

"You do this all night?" Carla asked.

She'd slipped the inside-out Papa John's shirt over her bent legs, her knees poking out from her chest like a Bluebeard's customer's wet dream.

"As long as I can stand it," Doozer said.

"Think I could drive for a while? You can tell me where to go."

They were back fast enough that Doozer snagged another delivery before any of the other drivers finished theirs. This one was going to Fort Eustace - two large, a pepperoni and a works.

"She got a license?" Reggie asked while Doozer bagged the pizzas.

Carla had slid into the driver's seat, revving the engine while she waited.

"Of course," he said. He had no idea.

He squeezed into the passenger seat, his feet wrestling with the paper bag on the floor that was still holding Viv's books. The pizza warmed his thighs while he pulled the door closed with a wheeze. Carla's slender limbs adapted to the small driver's seat better than Doozer's ever had. Being in that seat had awoken something in her - the lost and sorrowful woman he'd picked up giving way to one full of enthusiasm. He couldn't bring himself to ask if she had a license as she put the Geo in reverse and slid out of the parking lot with a grind of gears. They launched down Warwick with the car in first, the engine screaming like an excited child. The lights of the street cast giant blotches on the rain swept windshield.

"Wipers are on the right," Doozer said.

It took Carla a few tries to find the lever, then a few more to find second gear.

"Where we headed?" she asked.

"Fort Eustace. You know how to get there?"

"I'll figure it out."

She did figure it out, and quickly. The men at the gate didn't bother stepping into the frozen rain to stop them and before he knew it Doozer was knocking on the door of a Lieutenant Colonel who wasted his coupon savings on a tip. When it was over, Carla got them back to the store almost as fast as Doozer's racing heart, the extra body keeping the car warm even as the night air grew steadily colder.

"You have a knack for this," he said.

"It's not that hard," she said with a wrench of the parking brake.

She kept proving that as the night went on: Doozer holding hot pizzas in his lap, wiping fog from the windshield while Carla navigated the city with an ease that was at odds with her struggle to keep the car in the correct gear. Doozer consulted his map a few times and gave her the occasional direction, but for the most part she had a knack for finding places as impressive as the silhouette of her head against the lights of the city, sharp and sleek, with the rain drops casting a sheen of tiny halos around her hair. The silhouette was haunting - its most familiar parts also the most foreign, like hearing a recording of his own voice played back to him.

With Carla at the wheel, delivering was more than a task, it was an experience, beautiful and fluid and wildly unpredictable. The first run had been so fast, like a tight spin on a freshly greased pole. The next, a run to Windsor Great Park, was smooth and languid; Carla rejecting the fastest route to find one full of long curves and gentle stops while the rain hummed all around them. When they'd reached the ranch house with daisies growing through the cracks in the driveway, Doozer felt like he was recovering from a massage.

She followed that performance with a rock n' roll show of squealing tires, sharp lefts, and a burst of speed as they crossed the railroad tracks running along the spine of the city. By the time they'd reached the four bedroom palace in Woodcreek Plaza where a single man was spending a Friday night with an onion pizza, Doozer was almost bobbing his head to an imaginary drum solo that kept time with clicks peeling from the Geo's engine.

"Are you really planning to stay in town?" Doozer finally asked. For the first time since her arrival, he wasn't sure what answer he really wanted.

They'd reached Charter Oak, a complex of houses so small they were really just apartments with a few feet of space in between. Carla had gotten there with a calm energy that reminded Doozer of the way she used to vacuum the living room when their mother insisted they do chores. Instead of looking at the addresses on the tiny homes, Carla meandered through the neighborhood with no clear pattern or purpose, simply letting the car weave along the road with as many turns and abrupt stops as the story she'd been waiting to tell.

She'd been living with a fiance in Nevada. Doyle.

"I didn't know you were engaged," Doozer said.

"Only in name."

"Is there another way to be engaged?"

"You know what I mean."

He didn't.

Doyle worked at a garage. One night, Carla met up with Doyle and "the boys from work" for a drink. Mary was with them, all denim and black hair and a pair of hands with oil under the nails.

"Doyle didn't like Mary very much - thought she was too mannish or something, despite all her curves."

Carla didn't share Doyle's opinion. She and Mary shouted conversation to each other all that night, starting with how silly the men looked in their overalls before moving on to bass guitars and finally locking into an argument over whether or not Joan Jett was the coolest girl rocker of all time.

"I didn't know you played the bass," Doozer said.

"Mary taught me. Started coming by our place - me and Doyle's. We decided to form a bass duo, with Mary on lead vocals and me adding harmonies. We were pretty good."

The more Mary came around their trailer the more Doyle got irritated. One night he came home from some drinks with his friends to find Carla asleep on the couch, her legs in her friend's lap while Mary plunked out the bass line to "Guns of Brixton." That was the final straw. He'd chased Mary out of the trailer. "She'll put ideas in your head that I don't want there," he said when Carla asked what his problem was.

She didn't like Doyle having any say in what ideas were in her head. When Mary showed up the next day her bass was in a pawn shop and her fist was full of cash. "Let's go to California," Mary said. Carla hocked her stereo and they headed for the highway with thumbs extended.

"What was in California?" Doozer asked.

Carla paused for a long time, rolling the Geo through the neighborhood while she breathed steadily and rolled her head in circles, first one way, then the other.

"That's where our father lives now," she said.

Doozer felt as if he was sinking into the passenger seat - falling through the car and at the same time fusing with it, stuck in place forever while parts of him shot away to float in the sky above them. His father. He'd never been a real person to Doozer - just an abstraction. Just an absence.

Carla started talking again. Maybe she'd never stopped. It took a while for Doozer to hear, even longer to make sense of what she was saying.

"What was he like?" Doozer asked when Carla stopped rambling.

"You'd be disappointed. And not in the way you think."

Doozer let Carla continue while he considered the contours of their father that he knew must be in Carla's face. Carla had tracked down their father's apartment in a suburb of Oakland. Tired and alone, he hadn't had much to say and Carla wasn't sure if she cared to start conversation.

"Turns out he was only good for one thing."

"Did he give you money?" Doozer asked.

"He told me where my mother is buried. Turns out she died around the time you were born."

Carla and Mary decided to travel from coast to coast. They dipped their toes in the frigid Pacific, then doubled back to the east.

"Mary thought it would be beautiful. We'd visit my mother then finish touching the oceans." The trouble was there was a continent in between.

They set rules about who they'd ride with. "If it was a man he had to be alone. If it was a woman she couldn't have more than two men with her."

"What if it was only women?"

"That was the dream."

The problem was that Carla and Mary had both spent their lives breaking rules. Two rides with truckers worked out fine. Then they had a run-in with a couple college boys whose clean-cut looks turned nasty when Mary didn't let one of them get handsy with her.

"They got rough, but Mary was a pretty vicious biter. We had to cool it. Mary blew some of her money on a good sized knife. Made us feel bolder."

One night, Carla and Mary had ridden with three guys in a great big pick-up truck. "Mary broke another one of our rules: neither of us was allowed to sleep unless it was just the two of us." Two of the men tried to convince Carla to join them in a gas station bathroom in the middle-of-nowhere Kansas, "which is all of Kansas." When she refused, they tried to settle for the back of the pickup. They hauled her there, determined to get what they wanted. She'd managed to get one leg free long enough to kick at the rear window of the truck's cab, waking Mary up. Mary's knife took care of the rest.

"She was stunning," Carla said. "I don't even think it was the knife that made them turn tail. She was just so ferocious, all feral teeth and a deep crease in her forehead. Never seen anything like it."

"What did you do after that?" Doozer asked.

That brought an end to their hitchhiking. They were also at the end of their cash.

"We danced at a few clubs. Mary was better at that. Did some honest work along the way, too. Reloaded our stash."

"You two must have gotten to know each other pretty well."

Carla stopped talking. Doozer felt like he'd said something wrong. He couldn't imagine what. Finally, he asked, "Was making it to the Atlantic worth all the trouble?"

"Wouldn't know. We split up near Richmond. She didn't want to just dip her toes, she wanted to swim in beautiful blue water. She headed south for Miami. I visited my baby brother."

"Virginia Beach is only an hour away."

Carla let Doozer's words hang in the air for a while.

The pizza in his lap had gone cold. "We should probably deliver this." Carla found the place. The customer didn't want it anymore.

"I'm starving," Carla said, flinging open the lid and grabbing for the biggest piece. Doozer was hungry, too. They rode back to the store with no sound between them but the light splosh of freezing rain crashing to a mush on the windshield and the steady, satisfied smacking of their lips. The saltiness of the bacon overcame the cold, coagulated cheese. It was even better than the bologna sandwich. By the time they reached the store the pizza box was empty.

"We should hide this," Doozer said.

"Won't you get charged for the pizza?"

"Can't avoid that now," he said.

"Damn, I had no idea. Why didn't you say something?"

It should have been ironic - Carla worried about Doozer's bottom line. That last delivery had changed all that. For the first time in a long, welcome while Doozer felt like he didn't know what the future might hold. A free meal was the least he could do for his sister.

"We'll make it back on the next run," he said. "You're good luck so far."

The next run that luck wore out. Carla had grown careless behind the wheel - fast and swervy. They'd just turned onto the long road leading into Colony Pines when alternating flashes of blue and red soaked the frost on the corridor of pine trees surrounding them.

For the first time in more than ten years, Carla gave Doozer a look of genuine concern. "Let me do the talking," she said. "And whatever you do, don't let them see your license."

Doozer barely heard her. Speech wouldn't come to him anyway. This was it. Of course it was Carla's fault. Of course.

The wait for the cop to approach the Geo was long and Doozer and Carla both let the silence linger - neither wanting to let accusations fly. The pine trees on either side of them loomed, the tall, skinny trunks packed together like bars on a thick, bark coated cage. Doozer's nervous hands fluttered around the car until they found the wadded ultrasound in the Geo's ashtray. Rubbing the little ball was the best Doozer could do to sooth his ragged nerves.

Finally, there was a tap on the windshield.

"You know your back window is busted out?" the officer asked.

Carla craned her neck to the left, getting a sight of the Geo's back and giving the policeman a sight of her front. "I never even noticed that," she said, settling slowly back into her seat. "My brother here is just the silly kind to do something like that." She patted Doozer's thigh, the muscles beneath his khakis tensed and hard. "What about you?" she asked the officer, drifting her other arm to rest just outside of the car, letting him imagine her patting his thigh. "Are you the silly type?"

"I'm the type that needs to see your license and registration," the officer said.

To Doozer's surprise, Carla was quick to shove a license towards the man. Doozer fetched the registration from the glove box and handed it over.

"I'll be right back," the officer said.

"Not everybody's as gullible as Timber." Doozer's voice got squeaky with tension.

"Sure they are. Just not the same way." Even as she spoke her eyes grew misty.

"You can really turn them on that fast?" Doozer asked.

"Tears are easy," she said. The last words were shaky. It was convincing, he had to give her that.

The officer was back, standing tall and faceless to the two inside the car.

"This vehicle is registered to the EZ Car Emporium," he said.

"It's new," Carla said, letting a few tears slip. "We haven't been to the DMV yet. My brother and I bought it for our daddy. For his birthday."

"That's quite a present," the man said. His voice was booming less already.

"I wanted to do something nice for him. He deserves it."

"How'd the window bust?"

"I didn't know it was busted until just now. You'll have to ask my brother."

When Doozer didn't speak she patted his leg again, pushing him to talk.

"Come on, Doozer. How'd it break?"

This act Carla was putting on so well - how did she do it? Even he believed that waiting at home for both of them was a loving father who'd smile and pretend to be touched by the gift of a canary yellow Geo with a battered roof and no glass in the back. A father who had cared for them when they were sick, punished them for bad report cards, paid for their school clothes and little-league outfits.

"I was playing baseball," Doozer said. It was the best he could do.

"You must have hit the ball pretty good," the officer said.

"Doozer's the best," Carla said, wiping beneath her eyes.

"You should get that fixed real soon," the officer said. "And watch out for those stop signs, they'll get you every time if you're not paying attention."

"I will," Carla said, her voice quiet and lovely in a way Doozer had never heard before.

The officer tapped his pen against the car door twice, as though patting the head of a small bird, then trudged away.

Doozer and Carla waited in the car, afraid to move until the blinking lights stopped and the cop car pulled away.

"You called me Doozer."

"Don't get used to it. I wasn't going to use your real name around a cop."

"What do you have against Doozer, anyway?"

"It's a stupid name." He looked hurt. "I liked it better when everybody called you Chewie."

"I never understood why they all called me that."

"Your hair was a mess."

"I looked like Bjorn Borg."

"It was easier to call you Chewie."

"Anyway, thanks for getting me out of that mess," Doozer said.

"I got you into that mess."

"It's not your fault I got legal advice from Timber." He was still holding that wad of paper, rolling it in nervous circles between his palms.

"I was talking about getting pulled over," Carla said. "The money's all you."

"You took it." His palms finally stopped moving. He was picking at the paper, searching for a loose end.

"You threw it at me," she said.

"You were screwing Timber, what was I supposed to do?"

"Not throw five hundred dollars at me." She could feel her irritation growing.

"You didn't have to screw him in the middle of the floor."

"Were you jealous?"

"You're the one who came running to me all those times. All those nights."

"Have you ever thought about what I was running from?"

"I've been too busy working."

Both of them sat, motionless in the dark, the not-quite-frozen rain sputtering around them.

"What'd you do with the money anyway?" Doozer asked.

"Spent most of it."

She knew he'd never look through her stuff. Never find the \$499 still tucked in the front flap of her backpack. The money didn't matter. What mattered, she suspected, was the tight little wad of paper slowly unfolding in the darkness, its surface as creased and broken as the palms of Doozer's work-worn hands.

"What you got there, Richard?" she asked.

"We're back to Richard?"

"It's better than Doozer."

"Seriously, what's wrong with Doozer?"

"You don't live in Fraggles Rock," she said, her voice swelling with a frustration she wasn't aware of until it was already past her lips.

"You'd never told me you hated the name so much," he said.

"You always paid me to leave before I could."

He'd finally unfurled the ultrasound enough that she couldn't pretend it was something else. They'd both waited long enough. This, she knew, was what she'd really come back for. They both needed answers to questions they didn't know how to ask.

"That little bean is all you ever care about," she said.

"You've never told me."

"There's nothing to tell."

"We both know that isn't true." He'd brushed aside the Tranito's visors to make room on the dash where he was flattening the slip of paper against the rough surface, the dim light revealing nothing in those borders of white but a little burst of static.

"What do we both know?" she asked. "Tell me."

"The sacrifice you made. So I could stay here, live my life."

"In the same town with Corton."

"What's Corton got to do with it?"

"A whole lot."

For just a moment she was the girl slipping into bed next to him at their grandmother's. Not the girl climbing on top of her brother. Just a terrified girl desperate for comfort, knowing that the only place she might find it was in the arms of the one person wholly unable to give it to her.

If she was honest with herself, that was at the heart of all that she'd done - tracking down their father, hitching across the country, the affair with Timber. She was pushing, herself as well as him, to this moment - this chance to prove to both of them that Richard's only fault, all those years ago, was being seventeen. That Corton didn't have to matter.

But that couldn't happen until Richard realized that Corton had mattered. That he still, at this moment, mattered. If only Doozer could see that. Could see how much Corton mattered. Then they both could put Corton behind them.

Wiping at her eyes, she gave her brother another desperate look, refusing to think that he was still so incapable. She'd give him time. She'd keep waiting. Keep talking. Keep explaining. Give him everything he might need to finally take her from that terrible river where the bamboo grew.

"There's a reason I was never careful with you," she said.

"That's my fault," her brother said. "I should have gone to the drugstore."

"I wanted to get pregnant."

Her brother was silent.

"I didn't think he'd want me," she said. "Not with my belly swollen. I thought it would make him leave me alone."

He was looking at her then, as desperate to be what she needed as she was for him to finally know what to do. If she didn't have the answers, how mad could she really be at him for always giving that look; that glare of expectancy and question; that need for instruction and guidance from a big sister only three months his senior.

"I was just a kid," she said. "Just seventeen. We both were."

"Sometimes it feels like I still am."

"Maybe you should stop going by Doozer."

"Richard never sounded right to me."

"Ever go by Bob?"

"That's Robert. Richard's Dick."

"Dick Handel? Yeah, Doozer's better than that."

"Maybe I should have stuck with Chewie."

She gave him another chance - more space. He disappointed her with his silence.

"I didn't want to leave," she said. "You know that."

"Then why did you?"

"How can you still ask me that?"

"We could have made something up."

"And what? Raised it as our own?"

"There are clinics here. Probably. Or in Richmond. I would have made the money before it was too late."

He was doing his best. She knew that. He was trying so hard.

"I didn't leave because of a clinic," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"What are you really asking me?"

"You know what I'm asking."

She couldn't do it anymore. It was time to take a stand. "I want you to say it. It's time for us to say it."

She waited, shivering in the feeble warmth from the vents, the car coughing with the cold as they idled just shy of a neighborhood too big and grand for their tiny lives. Doozer's eyes never left the ultrasound resting next to a Tranito's visor in mint condition.

"Am I a father?" he asked.

"There are no fathers in our family," she said. "You of all people should know that." After pausing a few moments more - giving him one last chance to come through in the way he had failed to for so long - she put the car in gear and burst away from the curb, leaving the wall of pine trees to creak, alone, in the cold, while the ultrasound and a pile of visors slid from the dashboard into Doozer's lap.

3.

Things had slowed since they'd been gone - the evening rush giving way to the steady trickle of late-night.

"Can you take me home?" Carla asked. "I'm too tired to drive anymore."

Doozer checked the time - it was past midnight. "I'll cash out," he said. "We'll go home together."

Carla stayed behind with the heater blasting against her flannel pajamas, unable to see the nervous shake that had taken Doozer as he wondered what was in store for him when he got back to the Trenchant Towers.

By the time he was done in the store Carla had moved to the passenger seat, legs curled into her chest.

"How'd you do?" she asked, her voice heavy with fatigue.

Even with the pizza and the extra uniform he'd had to buy he still left with twenty eight dollars.

"I feel like I should split it with you," he said.

"Take it off my tab," she said.

She was fast asleep by the time they'd pulled out of the parking lot. For the first time that he could remember, Doozer saw her face fully relaxed, no creases between the eyes or clenching in the jaw that lay cradled in the soft yellow glow of Tranito's interior lights, a golden pillow for a sleeping beauty just waiting for her prince to slay some mysterious dragon.

What was there to do? Surely Irene had given up - gone home. He drove by Bluebeard's to find the lights off - Viv must have found her own ride back to the Trenchant Towers. He'd have to wait until tomorrow to deal with either of them. Carla was still next to him. He owed her something deep and meaningful.

Beneath the green glow of the stoplights he pushed his Geo, hoping the rattle in the engine wouldn't get loud enough to wake her. Far too soon he reached the point of the city where Warwick and Jefferson nearly joined, each spiraling onto I-64 - one of the five places in Newport News where citizens could head north on the fastest road out of town, or

south back into the heart of it. Carla was still fast asleep in the front seat, her body curled and restful. Doozer headed south.

I-64 felt even more deserted than the city streets. In the dark the trees lining both sides gave the illusion of a vast wilderness - he and Carla hurtling through an empty world, a halo in the distance, an illuminated future that might beat back the dark on either side of them, even the dark inside the creaky car they now shared.

That halo was really nothing more than the local airport, putting Doozer in mind of flight with the sleeping woman at his side, away from the Trenchant Towers, Irene, Bluebeard's, Tranito's, secrets. Maybe they'd get a third seat for Viv. It didn't really matter. Where they were headed was what mattered. Where they might end up. For now, the road they were on could only take them to one place. They were only an hour away.

The Geo was running smoothly, the click soft and regular - more likely to lull Doozer to sleep than to wake Carla up. But Doozer kept himself alert with glances at his passenger, at those halos of light still shimmering around the eclipse of her head, the twines of red, white, and green fabric on her chest rising and falling with each breath. She didn't stir until the pull of the exit ramp caused her head to roll away from the window, leaving an unfrosted circle on the glass; a single black hole of clear night in the middle of the refracted stars.

"Where are we?" she asked, her eyes bleary and voice soft.

"About to hit the bridge."

"What bridge?" A green and white exit sign passed in and out of the headlights' dull glow. "Wait." She blinked a few more times, then her face twisted and her hands clenched. "What are you doing?"

"You've been so close this whole time."

"What were you thinking?"

The last exit before the bridge was bearing down on them.

"Do you want me to turn around?" Doozer wasn't sure what he'd done wrong. He only knew how desperately he wanted to fix it.

Carla didn't say anything. The exit neared. Doozer put on his turn signal.

"No," Carla said. "Let's get this over with."

Moments later they were on the bridge, the click of the Geo's engine out of time with the thunk of cement segments passing beneath the tires. Carla wasn't speaking and Doozer had no idea what to say. They cleared the exit and came to a stop sign. Doozer didn't know what to do next.

"Where was she buried?" he asked.

"Let's just dip our toes in the ocean and go home."

When they arrived at the beach he parked the Geo, happy to rest the tired engine a bit before calling on it to haul them back. Carla stared into the dark water hovering above the sand. Doozer realized he was rocking slightly, forward and backward, not sure what he should do next, wondering if he should just restart the car and get the drive over with.

"Here we are," he said at last.

His words pushed at Carla. She left the car, slamming the door behind her and made her way onto the sand. He tried catching up without seeming too eager. He found her standing at the water's brink. There was no moon in the sky. Ripples of white passed across the black, beckoning them both towards the water, while the crash of waves and the fizzle of foam reminded Doozer more of radio static than the romance he'd imagined. The

air smelled of seaweed and something thick and rank - probably a washed up carcass of something blubbery.

Carla stood a little beyond him, hugging herself against the wind's tight embrace. She'd rolled the checkered pajama bottoms to her thigh, exposing her knees as they trembled in the cold.

The sand stood out against the blackness - a pale string that wound in either direction before disappearing or stopping or perhaps just giving up against some rocks or a pier.

"I'm real sorry," he said into the breeze battering at their faces from the water. Carla didn't turn or respond. She might not have heard him.

He was about to speak again when she took a few steps towards the water, the darker sand pillowing around her feet as she moved. When a tiny wave rolled across her ankles she froze, standing erect. Doozer wondered if he should take his shoes off and join her - maybe she'd be better able to hear his apologies. That didn't seem the right move. No move did.

Only after several more waves had left Carla's feet mired ankle-deep in the sand did she do anything to prove to Doozer that she hadn't become frozen forever in that spot. Her hands had gone to her face, wiping at the wind-battered skin. When she walked back towards him there was no sign of any tears - the blotchiness of her face perhaps from the breeze or the smell, or perhaps just the chill that seemed to have grown up between them.

"I'm real sorry," he said again.

"It's okay. You were trying," she said. "You don't have to apologize." She leaned in to him, giving him a kiss - maybe on the cheek, yet half of her mouth overlapped with the corners of his, her lips slightly chapped.

The drive home was long and silent. Carla spent most of it with her head back against the passenger window while she flipped through the Marion Zimmer Bradley novel, reading slowly in the highway's intermittent glow. Doozer ticked off each mile marker as it passed. It was a pointless exercise, he knew - they could never get anywhere close to zero in what was left of the night. It was nothing more than a countdown to anticlimax. Carla drifted back into sleep too soon for even that.

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Carla opened her eyes to an apartment complex that looked like so many others. Apartments were better than trailers she'd decided - unmoving and with help just a thin wall away. This complex was smaller than most, its three sides wrapped tightly around her, the lights from the porch shining in her eyes. It was the bear, pathetic and frozen, resting against a strip of brick on the second story, that reminded her that this was more than just another apartment, it was her brother's apartment and, for the time being she supposed, hers as well.

He'd already left the car - was waiting by the bottom of the stairs next to the pile of boxes that the nice lady from downstairs had left when the not-so-nice man from downstairs threw her out. That was one good thing about her backpack - she'd never have to worry about it disintegrating in a frosty rain.

With that backpack slung over her shoulder and ignoring the thrill of cold, wet concrete beneath her bare feet, Carla joined her brother, careful to avoid the wad of coat

hangers reaching for them with its jagged, unforgiving edges. She smiled. Ruth, it seemed, must have had a backpack of her own, and quite a few changes of clothes to fill it.

Carla stood next to her brother for quite some time before she bothered to notice he wasn't moving. She'd thought he was waiting for her. He wasn't. He was staring at the door nervously, repulsed by the music creeping through it.

"Come on," Carla said to her brother, pulling his arm as she moved towards the stairs. "The Cranberries aren't that bad."

When they reached the top of the stairs it was Richard's turn to pull at her arm. "Wait," he said. "You'll want me to go in first."

He opened the door, letting the music run freely into the night while a new duo of voices took aim at him. Viv and some other girl. Both exploded at Richard, Carla was too tired to figure out what had them so mad. There were a lot of hands on hips and a good deal of yelling. She focused on how warm the carpet felt under her numb feet, the fibers soaking up the wetness she'd tracked in.

Viv was tense, her face squinted with the effort of staying mad at Richard for whatever it was Richard had done. She'd forgive him by morning, Carla was sure of that. It had taken a while for her to admit it, but Carla had come to like Viv quite a bit. There was a peaceful quality to her, like a living room just soiled and unruly enough to allow its inhabitants to relax, not worry about spills, or stains. No wonder Richard thought so much of her.

Carla knew immediately that she would never like this other girl, this Irene, and not just because she was yelling so ferociously at her baby brother. This woman's living room,

Carla knew, would be pristine - the sofa so white and spotless that it would show the touch of all but the cleanest of hands. Carla had no idea what his brother saw in her.

"She's also your sister?" the woman was asking. Carla decided to listen to this part.

"How many more sisters am I going to meet?"

"No, Irene," Viv said. "Carla really is his sister."

"Then what does that make you?"

Carla lost interest again. There was noise around her - the music, the shouting. She slipped her backpack from her shoulder and dropped it, making sure the bulge in the front pocket was pressed into the side of the couch. Some phrases slipped through her fatigue, giving her a sense of the battle taking place in front of her

"You live next to a stripper?" Irene was asking.

"They don't strip," Carla said. She was so tired, the refrain was automatic.

For a while Irene and Viv had their own reckoning, then Viv was having a go at Richard. "I called for an hour, why didn't you pick me up?" she asked.

"I'll make it up to you," Richard kept saying. Carla wasn't sure who he was saying it to. Richard didn't seem sure either.

The music continued to rattle out of a record player in the corner by the exposed OK Soda cans. She'd told Timber to leave the beige sheet. He hadn't listened. Carla had no idea where the record player came from.

"Did you even get me anything?" That sounded like Irene's voice.

"I was going to write you a poem," Richard said. Even exhausted Carla knew that was the wrong thing to say.

The first thud of something against the wall didn't seem worth paying much attention to. The second and third earned a look.

Albums had begun to fly.

"Those are Mint Minus," Doozer was screaming as Irene hurled records from a stack on the Pepsi Clear end table, Dark Side of the Moon, Thriller, Led Zepplin - one by one they spun across the room to either batter the wall or Richard's arms as he shielded his head.

"Viv, help me out," he was saying.

"You're on your own." Viv stormed through the still-open door. Carla followed after a copy of Urban Chipmunk almost caught her in the temple. Outside, the concrete chilled her feet again.

"Sorry about my brother," she said to Viv, who was already halfway into her apartment. She stopped.

"It's not your fault," she said.

"It kind of was."

"I just wish he'd let me know." Yep. She'd already more or less forgiven him - what difference did a small spill of neglect matter?

A different kind of thud made Carla check the open door to her brother's apartment. Irene had run out of albums and tried chucking a case of Pepsi Clear. Richard was, for the moment, quite safe. The screaming still hadn't stopped.

"They always like this?" Carla asked.

"Couldn't tell you. I met Irene this morning."

"You hang out with her all night?"

"Unfortunately."

"That bad, huh?"

"She's really pretty sweet. Just - parts of her always seemed a step ahead, and parts a step behind, you know?"

"No wonder Richard likes her."

Irene's voice had risen, coming through clearly even over the wailing of the new record player's tinny speakers.

"Your sheets smell like sex, you bastard!" Irene was screaming.

"That was Carla," Richard said, his arms still shielding his face.

"I'm supposed to believe you had sex with your sister?"

"Timber!" Richard shouted.

"You slept with Timber?"

"Carla and Timber."

Carla closed the door, muffling the screams and the music.

"Thank god," Viv said. "I can't stand The Cranberries."

Carla leaned against the railing, letting her head fall forward into the rain, a cascade of hair falling around her, caging her face. She felt Viv join her.

"Your brother's quite the character," Viv said.

"You have no idea."

"What was it like growing up with him?"

"Do we seem grown up to you?"

The rain had gathered on the back of Carla's head, running along the strands surrounding her face.

"I wish I could do that," Viv said. "The rain just runs into my eyes."

"Why do you shave your head, anyway?" Carla asked.

"The night I found the cigarettes in front of my window - in my old place - I'd been washing my hair. Went through the whole routine, blow-dry, brushing, all of it. I just couldn't stand knowing he'd seen all that. I shaved it the next day. Some part of me thought maybe he wouldn't still want to watch if I didn't have that hair anymore. It sounds crazy, I know."

"Not that crazy," Carla said, standing straight until her flat belly pressed against the cold railing, her hair splattering against the inside-out Papa John's shirt she still wore.

"The music's stopped," Viv said. The rain was beading on her naked scalp, like a white, fleshy beach coated in tiny pearls.

"We should keep the door closed anyway," Carla said, enjoying the patterns of the water running off of Viv's head.

"You ever think about dancing?" Viv asked.

There was a shriek from Richard's apartment - a wail so sharp and desperate that Carla and Viv both raced to the door. Before they could reach it Irene burst into the night, her trench coat wrapped around her and her bob flailing around her head in black. Behind her, Richard stood where a coffee table should have been, the front half of Born to Run in his hands, the back half lying at his feet.

"A year. A whole god-damned year!" Irene shouted as she stepped onto the slick stairs. At the bottom her trench coat caught on the ball of hangers, ripping off a square of brown fabric as she yanked it free then, in a burst of her frustration, put a swift kick into

the brake light of Doozer's Geo, shattering the flimsy glass while her other leg slipped from beneath her. She fell to the wet pavement with a splat.

"Don't watch me!" she screamed, sprawled in the slush and grime of the parking lot. "Damn you, don't look at me."

With a huff of sliding shoes and nails scraping on the Geo's paint, she righted herself and kept on, out of the parking lot and off to a street somewhere where she'd find her car and drive back to the other side of town.

"She seemed upset," Carla said when Richard joined them on the balcony.

A blotchy hand print was growing on his right cheek, the darker shades of red mixing with the yellow light to turn half of his face a brilliant, glowing orange.

It was more than either woman could stand. The laughter started somewhere deep inside them, sweeping through the places where their pain lodged, restless and eager for a place to go. It worked its way into them, then, through the fibers and sinews of their body, flooding that place in the back of the skull until their heads felt heavy with it. It was a sharp and painful laugh - the explosive kind that does violence to the body. It swelled out of both of them, flowing into their extremities, leaving their chests empty of breath and, eventually, soaking them in achy convulsions they couldn't control.

Viv clutched at her belly, forced words out. "I'm sorry. This isn't funny." That didn't help her. They were trapped in the kinds of laughs that didn't know any moral code. They weren't even sure what they were laughing at - whether the angry pharmacist with high expectations or the pizza delivery man holding half an album, or maybe even themselves - a barefooted nomad in checkered pajamas and an inside-out polo and a stripper who didn't strip whose bald head was shellacked in non-frozen rain - or just the

sheer absurdity of this place, this apartment, this town, this world and the many people who couldn't help but inhabit it.

Whatever the reason, they let the ecstasy of their aching bodies push into the city's frigid air, Carla paying no attention to the shock of wetness pressing into her back as she lay on the concrete balcony, Viv not bothering to check the frigid metal railing digging into her side as she clung to the bars for support. It was only when the quivers of painful joy slowed that either woman bothered to notice that Richard had left them, closing himself in his apartment to deal with it all in his own way.

“Wednesday”

1.

Viv was dancing in Doozer's apartment. He couldn't look away. This wasn't the stage performance of circles and sparkling wigs; of catcalls and thrusting hips. This dance was her own, her arms swinging in playful arcs in time to "Brown Eyed Girl," her head bobbing to the space in between the beats, her feet only moving when they cared to. Her spins didn't need a pole, they weren't about showing every side of her - more like a child trying to make herself dizzy for the sheer joy of it. The breakfast bar, the couch, the space where a coffee table wasn't, the tightly drawn blinds, all became props for her, something to fall against, to run her arms over, to push off from. She was dancing only for herself, with no thoughts of money or an audience, all while somehow avoiding the maze of albums and a case of Pepsi Clear still lying on the floor.

Doozer was already guilty of too much. To watch her dance was too much of a violation. Opening the bedroom door, he stepped into view, bracing for the disappointment of her dance ending.

Only it didn't. She kept on, sweeping him into an awkward sway as he tried to keep up with her. Her slender features seemed to have broadened somehow, bringing a glow to her cheek that he wasn't used to. When the final chord struck, Doozer was more sure than ever that "Brown Eyed Girl" was too good a song to be so short.

"Morning," she finally said. Her skin was scrubbed clean, her head blotchy from a fresh shower and shave.

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?" Doozer asked.

"Your sister told me everything."

"So what do you think?" he asked.

"I think you're a good brother," Viv said.

Carla hadn't told Viv all of it. Not even close.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"You don't have anything. I already checked."

"Carla's not here?"

"She's getting ready at my place. We didn't want to wake you."

"Getting ready for what?"

"Bluebeard's. She's going to get a job. So are you."

Doozer didn't know what he had to do with Bluebeard's. He was certain he didn't want Carla to have anything to do with the place. He'd rather see her take to the road again, to leave him alone with his toil than think that she might endure what he'd heard men yell at Viv. Worse was the thought of the early Bluebeard's crowd - of her turning into the erotic daughter or sister of those men so full of loss; of the desperate and lonely paying her for the intimacy he still longed for.

Viv's MZB novel was lying open on the couch. "Did I forget to lock my car?" he asked.

"I climbed in through the back window. You really need to get that thing fixed. I scooped out as much of the snow as I could. I think my Buck Rogers is pretty much ruined."

"Did you say snow?"

"You haven't seen this yet?" She avoided the albums on her way to the window, then pulled open the blinds. Everything was coated in a thick rug of white that the city hadn't had time to stain.

"Don't worry," she said. "I think your Geo can handle it."

He wasn't ready for just how dazzling the brightness grew as he stepped closer to it. It didn't look like the city anymore at all - more like a spot in the country where the hills were boxy and the valleys perfectly flat - except for the irregular drift in front of their apartment where a shell of snow covered Ruth's belongings, a lost past hidden beneath a heap of white. There were no traces of the dirty leaves or the dusty street corners, just a pure, frozen blankness beneath a clear, cold sky.

"You think Bluebeard's will be open?"

"It'll be one of our busiest nights of the year."

"And what am I going to do?"

"You wanted to run a stripper shuttle, this is your chance. I've already called all the girls - gave them your work number."

Doozer called Tranito's, expecting a recorded message. Instead he got Em.

"Get down here," she said. "We're slammed."

"We're open?"

"Only place in town."

Doozer hung up - paying rent seemed more real than it had in days. Not even the sight of Carla, her hair freshly washed and curled, her body draped in a coat that didn't hide the too-short shorts, could quiet a hope in him that his debt to Carla might not have ruined him as completely as he thought.

"Hurry up," Carla said. "I want to audition before the crowd gets too big."

"I have to change," Doozer said.

"Change later. Let's go."

With his work shirt and a pair of khakis tucked under his arm Doozer hurried out of the building behind Viv and his sister.

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"What's the manager's name again?" Doozer asked as they pulled into the parking lot.

"Putz," Viv said. "But try to avoid calling him that. He hates his name."

"Why doesn't he go by something else?"

"Says stage names are for the help."

Doozer laid his work shirt on the dash in front of him to see how bad the bloodstains had gotten - checking the shattered brake light had been a mistake, letting Viv use his Tranito's shirt to stop the bleeding had been a bigger one. Carla climbed over Viv, eager to get to the club where a handful of customers were already looking to get an early start on the evening. Viv had drawn her hoody tight, then put her beanie on top of that - her baldness two layers from the eyes of the Bluebeard's customers.

"I can't wear this," Doozer said, checking the stains across the chest and sleeve.

"You need to look professional," Viv said. "That's the whole reason he'll hire you."

"I won't look professional in a shirt covered in blood."

"Everybody'll think it's pizza sauce - make you more legit."

Doozer put on the shirt.

At the door he extended a hand to Dawg and offered his name. The bouncer didn't budge.

"Is dog short for something?" Doozer asked.

"It's just Dawg," Viv said. "Stop stalling."

She took Doozer by the hand and dragged him through the portal to the place he'd sworn to never visit again. There was a casual dance happening on the stage to a song too lazy to quit. He couldn't find Carla anywhere - probably going to change; to get ready for her audition on the pole.

Putz was pulling a few beers from the taps when Doozer and Viv approached. He made them wait. Doozer was growing anxious. The song was repeating its chorus - it couldn't possibly last much longer. Carla might be next. Doozer needed to go.

"This is the guy I was telling you about on the phone earlier," Viv said when Putz finally joined them. "We call him Doozer."

"What kind of name is that?" Putz's voice sliced through the light noises of the bar, like a yard trimmer through a rustle of windswept grass.

"I don't know, Putz," Viv said.

"You ain't getting no sass with me, are you?"

Viv gave Doozer a pat on the shoulder before slipping away to greet a tall, dark man and his girlfriend, who looked like she'd been to the place plenty of times before. Doozer was nervous to talk to Putz alone.

"First thing - you want to work for me, you ain't allowed to touch the girls like that."

"She touched me," Doozer said.

"That's worse. Tell 'em to keep their hands off. You a professional..."

The way he trailed off Doozer couldn't tell if it was a statement or a question. "I deliver pizza," he said.

"How you going to do both?"

"I have time if you have money."

"Don't talk like that - make the place sound like a whorehouse."

There was a smattering of clapping as the music ended.

"I'm only interested in getting them here," Putz said as a menacing hush took the place, his voice floating in the dusty air before a new song filled Doozer's ears, the bass steady and familiar. Only Carla would audition to "Psycho Killer," Doozer thought.

"Getting home ain't my business," Putz went on. "I'll give you two bucks every time you bring a girl on time."

"Plus tips?"

"That ain't my business." He pushed a pad at Doozer. "Give me your number."

With a pen he found in a rocks glass he wrote the Tranito's number in shaky red lines, keeping his eyes on the bar even after his writing was done.

"That's right, don't look," Putz said. "You look and it's over. In fact, you don't even need to come in here. Dawg'll pay you. Gotta keep it clean. We don't want no popos getting ideas."

"Neither do I," Doozer said, his words lost in the jangle of a guitar joining the bass pulse. He offered his hand to the bartender. Putz ignored it, walking to the other side of the bar where he took orders for the only drink the place offered. Doozer fled with his eyes low. The few men already at the bar clapped as a new dancer took the stage.

When he reached the parking lot, he offered his hand to Dawg again.

"We're coworkers, of a sort," he said.

"Lot's going to get full. Need your car out of here," Dawg said.

Doozer was eager to get to his Geo anyway. Tranito's was busy, the strippers who didn't strip would be calling, and Papa John's would be closed, letting Doozer drive all night without the worry of a manager catching sight of his face.

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The pile of deliveries had awoken something in Reggie - there was a redness in his eyes, not unlike the drivers after a long, smoky run, that gave him an almost demented look as his hands moved through piles of dough, slapping as long as his skill could manage before slamming the gummy ball on the counter top and crushing it beneath the rolling pin - the snow could give him gusto, but could do nothing for his technique. "Grab some and go," he said, the moment Doozer walked in.

"Am I the only driver that made it?" Doozer asked, his pride warming some of the frozen parts of his body.

"They're all on runs already," Reggie said.

The racks were full of pizzas. Doozer reached for the top order.

"Don't be a fool," Reggie said. "Take anything headed in the same direction. And put on a clean shirt."

"This is the only one I've got with me."

"Load your bags while I get another. You'll need a jacket, too, you going to survive tonight."

"Don't forget my visor," Doozer said. He'd wanted to avoid the jacket but Reggie was right - losing a finger to the cold would cost a lot more than a Tranito's coat. With the

orders coming in so fast he'd pay back the \$45 he owed the store real fast, then get to work on what he owed Hux.

With his new clothes and a stack of six orders he headed for the door.

"No freebies," Reggie said. "No matter how late they are. Customers don't want to pay, they can go somewhere else."

With the "thwap" of a frantic rolling pin in his ears, Doozer teetered into the cold where his Geo was waiting for him, ready to take on the drifts. The challenge of driving in weather like this would be a nice respite - a way of putting Bluebeard's out of his thoughts while he stuck to the immediate challenge of getting food to desperate houses and his Geo free of the snow.

All of Doozer's orders were on the Jefferson side of town. He pretended to consider his routes, knowing that there was only one way he'd ever go: Industrial Park, where the crunch of snow sounded like claws on his baseboard. There was nothing showing him where the pavement ended and the ditch on either side began. The road was straight until it reached the train tracks, and those tracks and the dark planks beneath them showed through the white, offering a target. He ignored the fear, blaming the shake in his arms on the cold. The Geo gathered speed - enough to slide up the incline as the road met the tracks; even enough to skate across a particularly high patch of white. Doozer refused to slow down. Fate had dealt him too many blows of late. Today was the day for things to turn in his favor. He was sure of it.

The Geo leapt over the tracks, its back end flapping as hard as the strips of plastic still clinging to the frame of his rear windshield. Before him was a sheet of white. Only a fence marking the edge of a gravel pit gave any direction. The light bounced from

everything in the landscape, more blinding than the deepest flurry. Doozer focused on the steering wheel, trusting that a straight line would see him through.

When he finally made it to Jefferson he felt triumph clear out some of the debris of the previous night. The Boulevard had been plowed faster and more carefully than any other road in the city. He'd made it. It was, indeed, the start of a glorious afternoon.

The first order went to a single mother who didn't say much - just tipped him four Washingtons. Next was a pair of young men in a townhouse at Whitewater who had dealt with the snow by drinking through their day off. Each tipped him a Lincoln for his troubles. Doozer wasn't sure if they were generous or confused. He didn't ask. The third delivery earned a three dollar tip, the one after that another four. At a two-story colonial in Windsor Great Park a tall, well-dressed woman insisted on giving him a thermos full of hot chocolate as well as a fresh Lincoln. "The cocoa's a bit old - it's all we had in the house." It was a good trade for a pizza that only avoided freezing by the feeble heat of his choking engine.

The final customers, a family of two mundane parents and three sloppy children, a pair of boys and a young girl who hadn't been in from their snowball fight long enough to lose their red noses, were so happy to see him they rewarded the two hour delivery time with another Lincoln and a pile of pennies from the little girl's piggy bank. Her hands were as cold as his when she handed the coins over, a few dropping onto the welcome mat in front of the door. "They're like mini-Lincolns," he said to her, sending her skittering behind her mother's legs. Doozer climbed back into the Geo, ready to load up another pile of orders. The tips from this run alone had paid for his jacket - the commissions more than covered his newest shirt and the fourth visor sliding across his dashboard.

Before leaving the Jefferson side of town Doozer called the store to check for messages. Sure enough, a girl named Cayenne, who lived in Lee's Mill just a mile from Bluebeard's, needed a ride. It was good news, he supposed. Still, with his sister joining Viv he had two reasons to dread that club.

It was on the way back through Industrial Park that he uncovered the run's brightest jewel. He spotted a rusty Nissan wedged in the ditch, its hood buried in a pile of snow just starting to speckle with the dust and grime of the city and its machines. Standing in Doozer's earlier track, his Tranito's jacket pulled tight around his tall, skinny frame, was Kurtz, his hand pressing a joint to his lips as the cold convulsed the rest of his body.

Doozer's brakes didn't do much good on the icy street. Kurtz nearly dropped his joint when he jumped out of the way.

"You could have killed me, man!" Kurtz screamed at Doozer when the Geo finally did slide to a stop.

"You'd have made a nice snow angel," Doozer said.

"You think that shit's funny?"

"You want a ride or not?" Doozer asked.

"Shit, man. It's cold out here." He wanted Doozer to know that was the only reason he'd take the help. His limbs barely bent into the small passenger space. He never asked Doozer if he minded the joint.

"We're going to have to make a stop on the way," Doozer said.

"Where the hell you got to be?" Kurtz asked.

"Picking someone up."

"I need to call and get my car towed. There's money to be made."

"It won't take long. Just a quick pick up and drop off."

"What are you talking about?"

"I pick people up. Take them to work." It was as vague as he could figure out how to be.

"Who?" Kurtz didn't seem to believe him.

"People."

"What's this person's name. I got a right to know who's going to be in the car with me."

If he was going to concentrate on keeping his own car out of the ditch he needed Kurtz to shut up.

"Cayenne," Doozer said.

"What the hell kind of name's that?"

"It's a stage name."

"That shit sounds like a stripper name."

"They don't strip."

"You serious? You actually picking up a stripper?"

"They don't strip."

"That's some shit, man. That's some shit."

Doozer didn't want to hear that anymore. All he could think about was Kurtz that night at Bluebeard's, his bloodshot eyes staring while Viv twirled herself in tight orbits.

The night he'd accidentally used Viv's real name. In front of Kurtz.

Kurtz.

Kurtz who knew Doozer lived at the Trenchant Towers; who knew Viv was his neighbor.

"You ever smoke?" Doozer asked. He wasn't sure what he wanted the answer to be, just knew he was nervous.

"You're funny," Kurtz said, taking a big drag from his joint.

"I mean real cigarettes."

"They ain't got THC in them, they ain't real."

Doozer's nerves drained right along with a hesitant hope. The guilt was there to stay.

They were back on the slushy pavement of Warwick. Evening was settling in, and with it a fresh gauze of clouds. There wasn't much time before Cayenne would be joining them. Feeling he had the upper hand with Kurtz, Doozer decided to do some talking of his own. "That was pretty messed up, what you did. Ditching me that night. You know I didn't want to fire you from Papa John's."

"It ain't like I was the CEO or nothing. That ain't why I ditched you."

"Then why?"

"I don't know - it was just something to do. I don't really got nothing against you, man. You're all right."

"You and Gage give me a lot of crap."

"You ever hear us saying nice things to each other?"

"But y'all are friends."

"We get high together, if that's what you mean." He took another long drag, then stared out the window, his eyes glazing with more than the buzz from his joint. "It's like

hot potato, man. Only with shit. One guy gives it to me, I give it to the next, he goes to the next - or maybe he gives it right back to me. Long as we just laugh and keep it moving, no harm done. Trouble with someone like you is you want to hold on to it, keep that shit all to yourself. No one wants to see a man burning his hands on shit."

"So if I joke back you'll leave me alone?"

"Until it's your turn with the shit again. I don't know, man. Just don't pretend you're in a knife fight. Nobody's going to laugh at that shit."

They were almost to Lee's Mill.

"I need you to move to the back," Doozer said.

"She hot? If so she can sit in my lap."

"The manager won't like that."

"You ain't tell me if she's hot."

"You tell me."

They found Cayenne on the corner of Warwick and Lee's Mill, her boxy body braced against the still, damp cold.

"Snow's too deep," Cayenne said, nodding towards the drifts that had gathered behind the speed bumps. "You'd never get out of there."

Doozer thanked her while Kurtz climbed into the back. The tall driver had to dangle his legs out of the broken window. "Don't step on the gas too hard, I'll slide right out."

"Can you put out your joint?" Cayenne asked. "I go into work smelling like pot, Putz'll have my ass."

"Who the hell is Putz?" Kurtz asked.

"The man does the canning."

"Anybody you work with got a regular name?"

"Regular names ain't sexy."

"What's your real name?"

"Edith."

"Damn. You're right."

Doozer was too distracted to pay much more attention to Kurtz and Cayenne. As they neared Bluebeard's he couldn't escape thoughts of his sister working there - her face and body blending with that horrible memory of Viv on the stage until they were one silvery mass spinning frantically, as though the motion could ward off the leers of the men around them. Even knowing that he wouldn't leave the car, pulling into the parking lot set his nerves on edge more than the trip through Industrial Park ever had.

The sign by the road stood out brightly against the black trunks of the trees, its white and orange light reflecting off the snow. Putz had changed the lettering to read, "Tired of the Cold? Our Girls Are Hot Hot Hot."

The entire parking lot was plowed - piles of filthy snow framing a square of white, speckled with brown and crowded with heaps of frosty vehicles.

"That shit looks like used toilet paper," Kurtz said.

"I can't believe the city plowed this already," Doozer said.

"The plow guy's a regular," Cayenne said. "Putz'll hook him up with drinks."

"I'll hook him up too if he'll plow my car out of the ditch." Kurtz said.

"It ain't the drinks makes him so willing."

"I could be talked into swinging on a pole, too."

"I'd like to see that."

"Bet you would."

Doozer knew the look on her face. He couldn't believe Kurtz was getting anywhere with Cayenne. "You're going to need more than a plow to get out of that ditch," Doozer told Kurtz, spoiling the moment. "They're going to have to tow you out."

"Don't remind me about that shit, man. Damn."

"I can't believe how busy y'all are," Doozer said to Cayenne.

"They got nowhere else to go," she said. "And say what you want about Putz, he keeps the place nice and warm."

She left the car, giving Doozer a Hamilton for his trouble. Kurtz gave her his pager number. "Give me a ring when you get inside - then I'll have your number." Doozer hoped she was only being nice when she said she would. Back on Warwick he let the swish of the Geo's rear distract him from memories of the dance club. Kurtz wouldn't let him forget.

"You pick up strippers," he kept saying. "That's some shit."

"They don't strip."

Kurtz was so busy marveling at Doozer's shuttle service he didn't even bother to relight his joint. "It's still some shit," he said. "You're the shit, man. Driving around, delivering pizzas and getting paid to pick up strippers. That's some shit."

Doozer didn't have any idea what to say to that. The crunch of snow beneath the Geo's tires kept the silence that draped over them from being awkward. When they reached Tranito's, Kurtz unfolded from the car while Gage pulled in next to them.

"What you riding with him for?" Gage asked through his window, which was open despite the cold.

"Planted my shit in a ditch."

"Should have known you'd do some stupid shit," Gage said as he lowered his bulk from the truck.

"I don't have three hundred pounds of body weight giving my tires extra traction."

"You ain't got three hundred brain cells ain't smoked out either."

"You keep your window rolled down for your health?"

"You see my shit broken down on the side of the road?"

"My shit ain't broken, just stuck. Maybe you should show off some of that F250 shit you always bragging about."

"Right on, where your stupid ass get stuck anyway?"

"Industrial Park."

"You'd have to be stupid trying that road."

"Doozer did it, too."

"Like I said." When Gage grinned he looked like a caught fish with his cheek pulled to one side. It was a look Doozer had seen from every driver at one time or another - a look he'd always taken to mean he wasn't one of them. After Kurtz's talk he saw something different. He could almost feel the flaming pile of shit, swollen from Gage's exchange with Kurtz, landing in his own hands. He still couldn't think of something to say.

Gage shook his head, then followed Kurtz into the store, giving the car-less driver a reassuring pat on the back. Kurtz pulled his pager out of his pocket, the little device vibrating eagerly in his hand. Cayenne could do better.

Under the streetlights the snow looked like the foam on an orange cream soda overflowing a narrow glass. Doozer had finished his run and two shuttles. He'd already gotten calls for two more. Ginger and Pepper. They lived in opposite directions. He could get a load of pizzas in between.

"How many dancers does Putz need?" Doozer asked Ginger when he picked her up from the trailer park south of the club.

"It ain't Putz that needs us. Nights like this we make a fortune. City all shut down - people feel like it's the end of the world or something. Might as well blow their money on a pretty girl."

Pepper had a different explanation. With a stack of four orders steaming against her thick, rustly coat, she explained, "Word got out about the new girl. Guys are always eager for something fresh." Pepper's hair had somehow grown almost two feet since the last time he'd seen her. As he pulled the Geo onto Jefferson he checked for traffic in both directions just to have an excuse to look at the glossy black tresses spilling from her head. It gave him something to think about other than the "new girl."

"And from what I hear," Pepper went on. "This new girl is something. Paprika called me and said she's bringing down the house - making Putz real nervous."

"How's that?"

"I ain't seen it myself. Pap just said she pushin' it."

There must have been something showing in Doozer's face to make Pepper quiet down about it all.

"How'd it go last night?" she finally asked. If she'd been trying to make Doozer more comfortable she failed. He knew Pepper couldn't know all of it - the argument with Carla, the beach. The past. Hell, she probably didn't even know that the new girl was his sister.

Pepper gave him a strange look. "Damn, boy. I was just wondering what you got your girlfriend."

"Oh," Doozer said. "That." He'd meant to think about Irene at some point - just hadn't gotten around to it yet. "I went with the poem."

She whistled. "Boy." She paused and shook her head. "How'd that go?"

"She tore up my favorite album cover."

"Must have been a pretty sorry poem."

"I never actually wrote one."

"Boy, I'd have snapped your record in half, you pull that shit on me."

"I only had the cover. Born to Run with the graffiti lettering. It's rare." Saying it made Doozer realize how ridiculous it all sounded.

She shook her head again. "I know that record."

"Not the record, the cover."

"All I got to ask is why they cut out the black man?"

"He's still on there - part of him."

"Figures - white man leaning on the black man, then cutting him out when it's time to take the picture."

"They cut out most of Springsteen on the cover of Born in the USA," Doozer said. He'd hoped the conversation with Pepper would go better.

"That ain't the same thing," she said. Her arms crossed, the folds of her heavy coat scraping together.

They were on Industrial Park, alone in the snow. Doozer checked his rear-view mirror anyway. He wasn't sure what else to do. There was the thunk of the train tracks beneath them and the gouge in the blanket of snow where Kurtz's car had been stuck. They were bearing down on Warwick.

"The man did have a fine ass, though" Pepper said.

Doozer knew there was a reason he'd been looking forward to picking Pepper up.

"I like your new hair," he said.

"It's an investment. Men love long hair."

"Maybe Viv should try it."

"She did once, but she's too tender-headed. Now she got nothing to attach it to."

Doozer was barely listening. They'd reached Bluebeard's and he was having a difficult time making his way through the crowded lot. A police car squatted in the handicapped spot where Doozer had let the other girls out and a litter of men puffing cigarettes were camped in the last free space, some with their backs resting against the dark pine trees that bordered the icy concrete. Doozer pulled up behind a large pickup truck and turned on his hazards - the blinking lights flickering the snow from bone-white to urine-yellow and back.

"Can't park there," Dawg shouted from his usual spot - those head-sized biceps still bulged so big his hands looked almost child-like.

"Damn," Pepper said. "Didn't expect it'd be hopping quite like this."

She'd slid from beneath the stack of pizzas and was smoking a cigarette in the cold while Doozer stuffed his head in the Geo's hatchback, untying a satchel of props Pepper had brought from home.

"Got to move!" Dawg yelled at him again.

Doozer was struggling with a strap on the satchel that had gotten caught on the seatbelt. While he worked, there was an eruption of screams from inside the club.

"Damn," Pepper said. "Something's going down in there."

"Got to go," Dawg said again.

Doozer almost had the bag free. He lifted his head to glare at Dawg. "It'll take longer to put this back in," he said.

"Not my problem," Dawg said.

One glance at those biceps convinced Doozer not to explain that it was, in fact, Dawg's problem.

The screams in the club hadn't stopped, instead growing steadily more intense until, like a cork springing from a champagne bottle, the heavy door popped open and a tall, skinny man poked his head into the frigid night air.

"Get in here, fellas!" the man screamed. "Bitch just took her top off!"

"Damn, she really pushin' it," Pepper said, tossing her cigarette into the snow and marching towards the back entrance without her props. What good could they do now?

Doozer didn't notice her. He'd forgotten about Pepper's bag. Forgotten about the stack of pizzas in his front seat - about Hux and rent, about the roughly three hundred dollars of his and Tranito's money that he had stashed in his front pocket, about Putz and his rules, about Dawg and his biceps, about anything but the words he'd just heard this

wretched, skinny man yell to the brutes milling near the tall, chilly pine trees. All he could think about was how desperately he now had to, somehow, put himself between Carla and these men - how violent his need had become to protect her.

"Got to go," Dawg said again, lowering his arms to his sides. It was the first time Doozer had seen them uncrossed. That didn't stop him from bolting past the giant man and into the club.

Inside, he couldn't see the stage for all the men standing on the pews, their arms raised, their money filling the air like flour falling away from a dough in mid toss. Doozer pushed through the men filling the gaps between pews. He couldn't hear what song Carla had chosen through the noise of all the yells, just felt the sweaty bodies writhing against him, tasted the beer in the air. The men were working as hard as any dancer, their frenzy putting their limbs into spastic motion, pushing each other in the hopes of getting closer to the stage. Still, Doozer wiggled forward, his skinny body fitting in the tiny cracks that briefly opened in the thick wall of frantic men. The closer he drew to the stage the more violent they became - unwilling to give up the space they'd claimed - that they'd earned - to finally watch more than a girl in a full bikini. Doozer took an elbow to the head; a punch to the gut; even an arm wrapped briefly around his neck, determined to choke him if that was what it took to keep him from gaining ground.

When it was clear that he could get no closer he planted a foot on the nearest pew and leapt, letting the pressing crowd close around the space he'd suddenly left open, giving him a carpet of limbs to balance on as he looked desperately towards the pole as if some primitive reflex were lodged deep in the muscles of his neck.

There she was. She moved around the pole with practiced ease. She'd put pink dye in her hair, leaving the strands a bleached, fleshy color that, when her feet were still, helped obscure the ridges that her ribs left in her skin - the belly button winking at him from her flat stomach. When she spun, the hair pulled away, revealing her nakedness - her breasts on display for every man who'd fought close enough for a view; her bikini bottoms riding up to leave all but the slimmest crevice of her body exposed to their rabid gazes.

It was like seeing Carla on the floor with Timber all over again - Doozer knowing that he should get away as fast as he could, that staying would only make it worse, only push his thoughts and memories to places he didn't want them to be; yet he couldn't help himself, he couldn't not see Carla in that way he'd seen her all those years ago - when she had, for that one brief moment, stopped being his sister, stopped being the girl with no mother, stopped being the teenager smoking cigarettes by the river, and become a woman full of desire; a woman who filled him with desire; a woman in control of herself; a woman in control of him. It was the moment he'd held onto all these years. All he could do now was relive it, no matter how much he knew that he should leave it behind. All he'd ever done was relive it.

Only this time, Carla wasn't alone. After a few spins she would leave the pole to dance closer to the men, leaving the shiny column of brass open for Viv to practice her moves, her own body as open and receptive to the men's leers as Carla's - maybe even more so, as on top of her head she had cast off her wig, freeing the deepest intimacy she could reveal for all to see. She had stripped. Stripped more than any other dancer in the place could.

The mash of limbs beneath Doozer was tossing him back and forth, not wanting to let him stay afloat, but unwilling to give him the space it would take to drop back to the floor. He kicked and struggled to keep his head up - to keep watching the spectacle of Carla and Viv trading the pole between them while the men screamed with such an unleashed thrill of excitement that they didn't even form words - it was a guttural, ugly noise that mixed with the stink of the place, the dark edge to the faint music. Still, Carla and Viv danced.

Until Carla stopped. Stopped and pointed at her brother while Doozer bobbed across the top of the crowd. She reached for Viv, putting an end to her dance mate's spin on the pole. They both peered into the crowd together, squinting against the spotlight for a few seemingly silent instants before the screams of the men became tinted with anger - fury rising in them as their delight was interrupted.

Then, the still looks of his sister and his neighbor, the dark mass of masculine bodies, the musty darkness of the club, all receded in a burst of stars and pain. Dawg had caught him, unleashing the power of those biceps on the side of Doozer's jaw. The noise muted to silence and the image of the women frozen on stage receded into a telescoping black that closed them both in its fold. His only lasting memory of that final moment was the look of rage and concern that broke upon both their faces, and his own relief at knowing that, at the very least, he wouldn't have to watch them stoop on hands and knees to gather their considerable pile of Washingtons.

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Doozer's vision ebbed in and out. His face pressed against something cold and wet and white. Screams rang in his ears as his brain tried to uncloud. He pulled himself from

something soft. The snow. His shirt was spotted red. From his nose. And his lip. Not exactly a knife fight. It would have to do. There were footsteps crunching quickly. And voices. Angry voices. The screaming in his head wouldn't go away. His vision became clearer. Something was happening inside Bluebeard's. People were spilling out. Where was Dawg? The screaming wasn't in his head. At least not anymore.

On legs that didn't care if he stood or not Doozer stumbled towards the club, nearly falling flat when the door burst into him. A police officer with a mustache raced from the building, sliding to his car and flicking on the lights - twists of red and blue coating the parking lot while the cop screamed into his radio.

Doozer still wanted into the club. The people leaving weren't making that possible. There was a fight going on inside. Through brief glimpses Doozer was able to see Dawg swinging those arms, mangling anything in their way, while plastic cups full of beer pelted him. The stage was already covered in those cups - the entire club looked wet and sticky, and coated with a soggy film of forgotten cash. He couldn't be sure, but Doozer didn't see any of the dancers in harm's way.

"You stay right there," the cop said. The officer was talking to Doozer. "You started all this."

His head had cleared just enough to remember that getting picked up by a cop was going to be more trouble than a bar fight. "Just let me go," Doozer said, reaching for all the cash in his pocket. After his last run it was almost \$300. \$140 of it was his, the rest he owed Tranito's. He had another sixty in his wallet if that was what it took.

"That a bribe?" the cop asked.

"It's all I've got."

"So it's a bribe?"

"Take everything."

"Yeah, you're trying to bribe me."

"You don't want it?"

The officer swiped the money. "Just wanted to be clear. Get out of here," he said.

Doozer dragged himself away. He was swelling in places. He needed rest that he couldn't afford to take. He owed Tranito's. He owed Hux. He owed, it seemed, everyone.

It was getting late. The city was going to sleep. At Tranito's, Kurtz and another driver were waiting by the bagging table, sullen to see the spigot of cash going dry.

"Where the hell have you been?" Reggie asked.

"Long delivery," Doozer said.

"You look like hell," Em said.

"Got in a fight."

"He's always playing at that shit," Kurtz said. "It weren't funny the first time."

"Hell if I'm letting you deliver looking like that," Reggie said. "You're cashing out."

"Hang on," Doozer said, backing out of the store. "I'll cash out when I get back. Won't be long."

Doozer got in his Geo and drove away, pointing the car towards Fort Eustace Boulevard and the only open gas station in town. The cash in his wallet wasn't enough to cover what he owed Tranito's, but it was enough for twelve scratch-offs. He bought a single long strip of games and carried them back to the car. With the engine running, the

heat turned as high as it would go, and his head throbbing with more than the aftershocks of Dawg's strength, he scratched at the tickets.

One by one they gave up their latex coating, slowly revealing loser after loser. Each one fell from the car, sticking in the snow, the most recent ticket pressing on the one below while another felt the raking of a mini-Lincoln cutting across its cardboard before it, too, was tossed into the cold. Together, those tickets gathered, scraped and frozen, until finally, when they were all used up, a crinkled mess of a photo joined their ranks, waiting for that time when the thaw would let them all come together in a single soggy mass of missed chances.

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Doozer's shirt and jacket were already soaked and soon his snow-dusted hair would be just as wet. The cold had tightened every pore of his skin into a hard little nub. He'd already plowed his Geo into a massive drift that had formed around Ruth's belongings, swallowing Hux's Prelude, the last thing he needed was to hurt himself on the icy stairs. His concentration robbed him of the view of Viv smoking a joint on the railing until he was almost upon her.

The cold didn't seem willing to bother Viv – jeans and a sweatshirt were all she needed against it. Flakes of snow gathered on her head, glittering silver for a moment before melting into drops that made it look like she was sweating, failing to give it the glow that had once been so captivating. When she lifted the joint to her lips a wide and dark bruise, floating like an oil spill on a sea of blue-veined white, showed in the orange light.

"What happened to you?" Doozer asked.

"Dawg didn't control the crowd. Somebody had to do it."

"You okay?"

"They got the worst of it until Putz gave me the boot."

"Guess there's not much market for a stripper who's beaten up half the clients," he said.

"You'd be surprised. Carla got fired, too. Putz blamed her for starting the riot."

"Cop blamed me for that."

"Probably both right." Viv stood straight and took a deep drag from the joint, holding her breath while she grinned at Doozer. The longer she waited with her lungs full the more nervous Doozer became, as if Viv had sucked up his skeleton right along with the smoke. At last, she exhaled in a hazy stream of white. "How's your jaw?" she asked.

Doozer could feel swelling. He didn't want to think about what he'd look like in the morning any more than he wanted to think of what to say to his sister as she joined them from Viv's apartment.

Carla was wearing the same bra that had teased Doozer those first few nights of her return. She'd added a pair of pajama bottoms, the plaid clashing with her winking midriff and the hair that she'd pulled into a ponytail, still a defiant pink. She joined Viv at the rail, taking the joint and adding its smoke to her lungs. "It's cold out here," she said, then headed back to the apartment with a shiver. Before she reached the door she offered the joint to Doozer. "Come on, baby brother."

"Sure," Doozer said.

"I thought you hated this stuff," Viv said.

Doozer brushed his throbbing cheek. "I can't afford Aspirin," he said.

With his head still spinning from Dawg's right hook - from the punches he'd suffered on so many nights - he put the joint to his lips and forced the smoke down his throat. It burned until he had to spit it out. When he got a good lung full the second time he held it, wanting to get as much out of that drag as he could, hoping not to need another.

"Don't go bursting any blood vessels," Viv said. She took the joint back and led him into her apartment, full of the sweet smell of pineapple, ham, and weed.

She filled her apartment with a balmy heat that purged the chill from his body immediately. Her unit was a mirror of his, the bedroom to the right instead of the left, the natural arrangement of the living room pointing the sofa in the opposite direction. The legs of a coffee table suggested that its top was deep mahogany, though a crust of magazine clippings, wrinkling with the warmth of the place, made it impossible to be sure.

"Excuse the mess," Viv said. "It's for an art project."

"It looks great," Doozer said.

"I haven't really started yet."

Hanging over the sofa was a massive tapestry of a horse with flames spewing from its nostrils, a lasso around its neck holding it in place while its long, powerful legs flailed at something outside the window of the cloth. A ceiling fan turned slowly in the backwards dining room, pushing the warm air to their level. That was where the blue and red lights hung, inclining everything in the apartment towards purple except for a bass on the sofa whose polished surface refused the light, confident in its yellow.

That bass didn't seem interested in making his acquaintance. He tried to find somewhere else to sit. The best he could do was a large, solid looking speaker sitting opposite the sofa, where a TV should have been, the handle on its top keeping him from

being too comfortable. A vintage New Kids on the Block poster looked down on him, the strange lighting turning the boys faces an over-exposed blue. Knobs pressed against the back of Doozer's legs.

"I didn't know you played the bass," Doozer said.

"Isn't it pretty. Carla's going to teach me."

While Viv disappeared into the kitchen, Carla picked up the bass and fell with it onto the couch. Her hand idled to the floor and, with a tug, revealed a long chord snaking through the magazine clippings, winding through the room, coiling a few times, then plugging into the front of Doozer's speaker chair.

"Should I turn this on?" he asked.

"Let me plug in first." She missed a few times, scratching the instrument's perfect polish before finally sliding the plug home. "Now go for it."

Doozer fumbled between his legs to find the "On" switch. As soon as he did he felt a vibration shudder up his spine, mirroring the shakes already in his brain. Carla's pink hair and bare midriff were growing staticy on the couch. Focusing on her long, flat fingers steadied him a bit as they slid and plucked regularly at the bass. He followed the neck as it jutted into the smoky air, then gave up, closing his eyes to fully take in the music punching at his buttocks and sending rushes of blood through his body. With the pot descending on him he couldn't tell if he was hearing "Under Pressure" or "Ice Ice Baby," but he gave himself to it either way, feeling the beat enter, dancing with his heart for just a moment before seeping out of his rapidly opening pores. Dum dum dum da da da dum. Dum dum dum da da da dum. He leaned back until his head pressed against the New Kids poster. Dum dum dum da da da dum. Dum dum dum da da da dum. He realized he wasn't

wearing his jacket anymore, but didn't think it was worth wondering when it had come off, or how.

Viv was back. Doozer didn't remember opening his eyes, but there she was. One hand pinched together three glasses full of ice, the other cradled a bottle of whisky. "Let's do this right," she said, her body swaying subconsciously to the music, ever a professional. Doozer took one of the glasses, hungry for the cold ice. Viv poured before he could put the glass to his lips. The bruise on her hand looked darker and more painful in the strange light. The whisky, too, looked odd, more like the cherry schnapps he'd stolen from his mom when he was in the 9th grade than it did a grown up kind of drink.

Viv left the other two glasses empty on the coffee table, on either side of a jewelry store ad that featured a blonde woman who was too busy admiring a diamond ring to notice she was standing on a cloud overlooking a waterfall. It seemed like it should be funny, but Doozer couldn't figure out how to laugh. Little swabs of sweat were mixing with the melted snow on his brow, dripping onto his t-shirt, putting periods at the end of the red lettering.

Viv was gone again. Since his eyes were open anyway, he let them linger on Carla lying on the couch, her tail of hair teasing the pickups while the headstock of the bass slapped at the horse tapestry, turning the bass's knobs, knocking the strings out of tune as the music thumped and prickled through Doozer's body. Carla's hair put a scratchy sound in the mix that went all the way to his scalp.

He was thirsty. The whisky was cold and soothing for just a moment before coating his throat with a burning sensation that stayed in his mouth and nostrils, getting stronger every time he breathed. He remembered to breathe. He sipped again, eager for

the cold ice and cool liquid that soothed for just a moment before the burning set in again, only worse now. Eventually all that was left was the ice, which was all he'd wanted in the first place. He put a cube against his tongue, the melt trickling down the back of his throat. The burning had moved into his stomach. He was still thirsty.

"That didn't last long," Viv said. She'd changed into an oversized t-shirt that left all the focus on those lips and that nose. She handed a loaded pipe to Doozer. Carla was still plucking at the bass, the repetitive riff melting into an improv that shook Doozer's whole body. He put the pipe to his lips and sucked while Viv lowered a lighter to the bowl. He breathed deep. Held it. The bass thumped smoke into every corner of his lungs. Viv took a drag. Doozer was suddenly very aware of the swell in the front of his khakis. He let the smoke go in a quiver that pulsed with the music and was in perfect unison with Viv's own stream, which blended with his in the space before them, casting a mesh of smoke over the skittering image of Carla – hand moving frantically in syncopated rhythms while her face scrunched up with either concentration or the effects of the weed. Had she smoked any? Doozer wasn't sure.

Viv's hand descended on his ponytail. She was leaning against the wall, her shoulder pressed into the face of one of the New Kids. Maybe Danny. Doozer couldn't remember. "You ever think of cutting this?" she asked.

"Can't. It's my lucky charm." Again, something felt funny, but the laughs wouldn't come.

"But you're a pizza driver..." she said.

"Ex pizza driver," Carla's words were a cutting echo as Viv talked.

"...and a stripper taxi..." Viv added.

"Ex stripper taxi."

"...with an asshole roommate."

"Ex roommate."

"Seems to me you ought to lose it."

"I've had it so long."

"It's not a security blanket. You aren't Linus."

It took a moment for Doozer's brain to catch up.

"I could shave it for you," she said.

"That'd make me Charlie Brown."

"You're funny." She didn't laugh.

"I'd like that."

"To be funny?"

"To be Charlie Brown."

They both took another hit from the pipe.

Carla's face had gone blank, only her fingers moving, her eyes fixed on the popcorn ceiling. She was mumbling something under her breath. Maybe she was trying to sing.

Viv was back at Doozer's side. He didn't remember her leaving. A softer, more constant buzz tickled and pulled at his scalp, competing with the thunk of the bass against his skull. His lips felt dry. Licking them made his mouth fuzzy with scraps of his own ponytail. He still had his glass. The ice couldn't wash away the hair in his throat. Maybe more whisky could make it all go numb.

"Look at this!" Viv shouted in triumph. She held Doozer's disembodied ponytail tight in her fist, a spray of hair wagging out of reach of the rubber band that still held most of it together. "You want it?" Viv dangled the limp hair near his face.

His throat was so dry he wasn't sure he could speak. He shook his head - maybe yes, maybe no. When he plunked the back of his scalp against the poster, the crinkle of paper was sharper than before, unmuffled. He felt a tug on the follicles when he rocked his head from side to side – she'd left some stubble; Viv would remain the most unhaired of the three.

Her perfectly round and shiny head had moved to the couch. She hung the ponytail from one of the nails holding up the lassoed horse tapestry. The hair hung there, like a talisman – a trophy of a shorn delivery driver/stripper taxi. Ex. Viv forgot the hair immediately. She held a glass of whisky to Carla's lips, letting her drink without letting up on the thunk of the tuneless bass. When the whisky disappeared Viv replaced it with the pipe, holding and lighting it while Carla drew the smoke into her lungs, her fingers still never missing a beat.

For all of the oddness swirling around him like second-hand smoke, a nagging sensation cut through Doozer's buzz, reminding him of something he couldn't place. He closed his eyes against the terrible familiarity of his predicament, finding it a struggle to keep the pounding bass settled in his stomach. His face itched from the stray hairs, but his arms didn't want to do anything to help. That, too, should have been funny, he thought. A stale sauce of images swirled through his mind – Putz's cleft chin, Timber wearing nothing but shorts, Reggie's rolling pin, a photo of an unborn child - just a pea, really, that after-
feeling of a roller coaster doing murder to his stomach, tossing a pizza that hovered

endlessly in the air, spinning wider and wider and wider until it covered every crevice of Doozer's mind; spinning past even that, circling his bald head, wrapping around his kakis and yellow t-shirt before finally smothering his face, robbing him of his breath and causing him to jerk his eyes open.

The bass had stopped, replaced with horrible sounds like a microphone being dragged along the floor, scratching at his eardrums and his skin. His eyes circled the room, spinning as quickly as his thoughts – the tapestries, the magazine clippings, Viv topless, the guitar cable, empty whisky glasses, Carla's hands on the back of Viv's hairless head, the ponytail on the nail, a burnt-out pipe, the two women grinding the bass between them. It took him a bit of fumbling to turn off the bass speaker, his wrist bumping painfully into his erection, which had either returned or never left. Even without the squeak of the bass the quiet was still interrupted by the crank of cheap furniture springs as Viv and Carla replaced the bass rhythm with one of their own. Their kisses were drunken and sloppy, sounding like slimy mushrooms being poured into a plastic tray.

Doozer couldn't escape through the front door – that would take him too close to the sofa. He let gravity peel him off the speaker – only thinking of putting distance between himself and the scene in the living room. It wasn't until he had spent some time with the short-fiber carpet pressed against his throbbing jaw that he realized he was on the floor in Viv's bedroom. Back on his feet he stumbled to the bed and let himself flop onto it.

Something hard and rectangular broke his fall, one of its corners wedging against his ribs. The familiar rustle of pizza crust on cardboard set his mind to work again, filling it with thoughts of snow and icy road before Dawg punched all that away to leave distant

memories of Viv and Carla exposed on the stage - the men were still there, throwing their Washingtons and shouting their obscenities.

Doozer had nothing obscene to say; he didn't need any Washingtons. All he needed was a sleep that wouldn't come. The pain in his jaw, his head, his ribs, his heart - none of them were letting go of a mind trapped in a maze of whiskey and pot and whatever had just happened to him while he sat on that bass speaker. He couldn't do anything about any of it but wait - until the morning, until Carla left, until Hux came for the rent.

The thirst - that was something he could do something about - a whole set of soda-based furniture was only a door away. Rolling off of Viv's bed, he stumbled back into the living room. He had no idea how long he'd been in the bedroom, only that it was long enough for Viv and Carla to finish whatever it was they were doing and fall asleep in a tangle on the couch. He didn't want to look, turning instead to the window where a welcome tinge of blue mixed with the orange light of the balcony as morning first threatened to end the night.

Only the light wasn't streaming through the blinds as it should have. Something was blocking a patch of it - big and hulking, and pressed close to the glass. It was him. Viv's stalker had arrived.

“Thursday”

1.

"It's him! It's him!" Doozer kept screaming.

Viv and Carla hardly moved on the couch. Doozer kept screaming as he ran for the door.

Outside the cold hit him first, then the weight of a body running as fast as the slick concrete would let it. Snow engulfed Doozer's back while his front folded into a layer of blubber that might have smothered him if its owner wasn't trying so hard to get up and get away. In the scramble Doozer got a look at the man who'd been tormenting Viv for over a year: tall and broad, with a black goatee etched into a sun weathered, rusty face, and hair that curled from beneath a baseball cap. He wore a flannel beneath a beige work jacket, and his jeans ended in a pair of Nikes.

That pair of Nikes was sliding down the stairs, the large man banging his knees into the railing and toppling over the last few steps before he flailed back to his feet and barreled into the street where his white pickup was still idling - its tracks cast behind it like a pair of fishing lines stretched across Oriana and into the currents of Warwick Boulevard. The snow in front of the truck was clean and waiting to be spoiled.

"It's him! It's him!" Doozer screamed into the rich blue of the morning.

"What the hell's going on out here?" Hux was standing in his doorway, backlit and immense.

"It's him!" Doozer yelled again. The pot and booze hadn't cleared enough for him to say much more than that.

"Him? You mean the guy that burned my car?"

Words were so hard to come by, it made the most sense to just agree. "Yes," Doozer said. "It's him."

The truck was still in the road, the tires struggling for grip on the crust of snow and ice - jets of slush kept bursting from beneath it every time the big man revved the engine.

"I'll kill that sumbitch!" Hux yelled, his whole body jiggling with the effort of bolting back inside his apartment.

"What's going on?"

Viv and Carla had emerged onto the balcony, both squinting in the feeble light. They'd put their shirts back on, huddling together against the cold.

"Your stalker," Doozer said from the bottom of the stairs. "It's him."

Another jet of slush spit from the truck, then the squeal of tires finding rubber, the truck's back end listing for a moment, then the machine moving forward, crunching through the snow.

"Sumbitch is getting away!" Hux yelled. He'd covered his flabby body with a heavy coat - didn't bother with anything more than sandals on his feet. Tucked under one arm was a large shotgun that he carried with a lack of worry that filled Doozer with plenty worry of his own. Hux only stopped his hurry when he realized that his Honda Prelude was stuck deep in the snow, victim of the massive drift that had formed around Ruth's ruined life's-worth of possessions. "Sumbitch!" he yelled.

"Richard will drive," Carla said. She and Viv didn't bother putting on more clothes - both bounded down the stairs barefoot, ignoring the ice in their eagerness to claw at the snow holding onto the front of the Geo.

"Here," Doozer said, swiping the Tranito's visors from the dashboard and handing them out to his passengers.

The four of them hacked at the snow with the brims of the visors until it seemed they'd cleared out the worst of it. Viv and Carla rushed into the front of the Geo while Hux lifted himself through the broken window and into the hatch. Only the thick trunks of his legs fit, the rest of him popped above the roof of the car, his shotgun mounted and pointing forward, turning the Geo into a canary-yellow tank.

"Not with the rifle," Doozer said. The situation was slowly clearing his head.

"Just get in," Carla said to her brother.

"Put the rifle away," Doozer said to Hux.

"I'm keeping it with me," Hux said as he stuffed it next to his thick thigh, the barrel pointing out the Geo's back. "Just in case."

Shaking the pellets of wet from his shirt, Doozer realized for the first time just how cold he'd become. Dropping into the driver's seat he started the Geo and asked Viv to put it in reverse.

He floored the gas pedal, trying to get the car free of the ice without realizing how much Hux's weight in the back added to his traction. The Geo shot from the Trenchant Towers parking lot, into the snow-filled street where it spun slightly then high-centered on a tall swell of snow. The pickup truck's taillights were already nothing but pricks of red in the distance.

"Shit," Carla said. "Get this piece of shit moving."

He ran back to the Trenchant Towers parking lot to grab the visors they'd all tossed aside, passing them out again. It took less time than before, and soon they were piled back

into the Geo, each still holding a visor - just in case. When Hux had settled his weight in the back again, Doozer pressed on the accelerator, lurching the Geo forward. With a few twists of the steering wheel he settled the car into the stalker's tracks, trusting them to lead where they needed to go.

"Come on," Carla kept saying. "Stop being such a pansy."

"It's okay," Viv reassured him. "Just follow the tracks."

Hux was quiet behind them, his face in the wind swiveling back and forth as though he was looking for the stalker in every direction even though the tracks only went one way.

They took the Geo across Oriana to Denbigh Boulevard where, as the morning light turned the snow a powdery blue, they found their man. On the overpass where Denbigh cleared the highway, a pair of tracks went half way up then faded into a spiraled mess of snow, the truck having lost control and sliding back down the ramp and into the curb.

The man - Viv's stalker - stood at the edge of the road, staring at his truck as though searching for a solution. When he noticed their slow approach he took off up the overpass's sidewalk, his Nikes slipping on the icy pavement. Doozer took his foot off the gas, letting the Geo slide to a safe stop at the bottom of the bridge.

"We can take his license plate down. Talk to the cops."

"Screw that," Carla said, leaping from the Geo, her bare feet propelling her swiftly across the snow. Viv climbed out after her, following more slowly. Doozer hesitated for only a moment. When he saw the stalker slip again, falling flat on his stomach, he realized that Carla would, indeed, catch up to the man. At that moment, Doozer knew he had to be a part of whatever came next. Putting his Adidas to the test once again he left Hux alone

in the Geo, sprinting past Viv, desperate to reach his sister and the man she was intent on bringing down.

She was running with an eagerness that was frightening, even to her. She couldn't see the man's face as he clutched at the thick metal hand rail on top of the concrete railing. She didn't need to. She knew what this man - what so many men - had done. With a final burst of speed she caught up to him, leaping from the snow to land her thin body on the center of his back, toppling him forward, his face planted in the snow. Carla ignored the feeling of his foul hair under her fingers as she pressed his head down harder, desperate to connect it with the concrete, to keep his mouth and nose from taking in air. With his hands and legs still sliding, unable to find purchase, she reveled, for a few glorious moments, in the feel of his muscles flexing uselessly beneath her, in the quivers of fear she swore were moving up his spine.

Then, his hands dug deep enough to grip a crease in the concrete and with a single heave he rose, tossing her into the road where the snow broke her fall even as it froze her exposed skin. Rising to his full height, the man stood over her, his hand reaching to the back of his jeans to unsheath a large hunting knife, its serrated edges glowing in the indirect light.

"It ain't worth all this, now," the man said, the knife pushed in front of him. "I just like the one without the hair."

With a new rage pushing her forward, Carla sprung from the snow, ducking under the knife to ram her shoulder into his gut. His hand caught her waist and tossed her again, this time into the railing where the frozen concrete punished her arm, shoulder, and head.

The man's silhouette moved towards her, the knife no longer just a warning - it was high and ready to strike - when another body joined the fray.

Her brother crashed into the man's side, toppling him to the snow once again where the two of them tussled, kicking up powder amid a series of grunts and yells. It was a difficult struggle, the wetness making it impossible to take hold of anything, leaving Doozer to pummel with elbows and knees and, occasionally, his head. He took the blows from the man willingly. It didn't matter who was getting the best of it, as long as Doozer was inflicting damage. Those thoughts gave way to a slice of pain in his shoulder, pulling a scream from his throat even as his reflexes kicked the man free for a moment, his knife withdrawn from the gash in Doozer's skin. The man slipped, dropping to his knees for only a moment before a kick to the face sent him crashing to the carpet of white covering the middle of the road.

Viv stood over the man, angling herself to put another kick into his gut, doubling him over as his feeble sweep with the knife ended with a thud in the snow. Even with the thrill of the fight coursing through her she could feel the throb in her naked ankle where the bones and tendons had whacked at the man's rib cage. It wasn't enough to stop her from doing it again, pulling a loud grunt from his disgusting mouth, nor was that kick enough to stop the man from wrapping his arm around that ankle, yanking Viv to the ground before the man rolled away and regained his feet.

Viv rose as well. Carla, too, had recovered herself and stepped into the street. Doozer held his wounded arm to his side as he joined his sister and his neighbor, unafraid of the knife that had already tasted his flesh.

Then Hux had his say. A single burst from his shotgun. The clap of sound an anti-climax compared to the mess it left in its wake. The scatter of buckshot tore through the man, dropping him one last time to the snow, where he shuddered more violently than even the cold could justify, then went still, his knife falling uselessly to the street, his chest looking like a pizza with extra sauce and a ruined skin of messy cheese.

"Sumbitch!" Hux yelled. He had left the Geo, making it half way up the overpass before finding his range.

Carla, Viv, and Doozer didn't say anything. Hux had taken away any chance that words could matter. Carla kicked a bit of snow over a pack of cigarettes that had fallen from the man's pocket during the fight. "Hope Hux doesn't notice he smoked Marlboros," she said.

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For the children of Newport News a second snow day brought a period of rest. They'd spent the first day home from school making snow angels and building snowmen. Now, without the pressure of getting dressed and ready for school, they slept, tucked tight under their blankets, sleeping off the joy only a day full of snowball fighting can bring. That left the neighborhoods quiet and still as the sun slowly bleached the snow from pale blue to blinding white. It also made Doozer worry less about the blood.

He and Hux had been driving around various neighborhoods, making sure that there wasn't just a single trail of tire tracks leading straight from the dead body to the Trenchant Towers. They'd been at it for a couple hours. Doozer's shoulder ached. His jaw ached. His head ached. The Geo's gas gauge was getting close to "E."

"We've got to get back," Doozer was saying. "Someone's going to notice my shoulder."

"Not enough tracks yet," Hux kept saying. His heavy coat made going home a little less pressing. Doozer didn't have that luxury. They'd already dropped Viv and Carla off after Viv's violent shivers bumped the Geo out of gear a few times. Doozer didn't mind them being gone - there was too much to talk about and no words to start the conversation. He preferred keeping things logistical with Hux.

"It's full daylight now," Doozer said. "We've been seen by half the town."

"Nobody's paying any attention until that body makes the news."

"My car tends to stand out a bit."

"Ain't my fault you like yellow."

Doozer welcomed this kind of talk - simple and distracting and idiotic.

"Just take a spin through Tillerson, then we can call it a day," Hux said.

"None of it will matter once the snow melts anyway," Doozer said.

"Roads ain't going to melt today. It's freezing outside."

"More snow will cover the tracks, too."

"Too cold to snow."

Doozer didn't know what that meant. He gave in anyway. He really didn't know what would happen at home. He wasn't sure he was all that eager to find out.

"I still can't believe you shot him," Doozer said.

"Sumbitch."

Doozer was enjoying the talk with Hux less and less. He couldn't put Carla and Viv off forever.

Back at the Trenchant Towers, they were huddled on the couch in Viv's apartment. In the daylight the place looked completely different - the horse tapestry not nearly as grand, the New Kids Poster not quite so blue. The remains of his ponytail were gone - tossed outside or thrown in the trash or maybe just fallen behind the couch. The bass guitar lay next to the coffee table on a bed of TIME clippings that had somehow gotten even messier. The two women shared a single blanket - Viv still shaking despite having had plenty of time to warm up, Carla quiet and focused on a far away place that Doozer could only guess.

He took his place once again on the bass speaker. They sat like that, the three of them, in the quiet. Below, they could hear Hux shouting into his phone, making arrangements none of them wanted to know about.

"Well," Doozer finally said. "We got him."

"Did we?" Carla asked. One side of her face was scratched, and she held her right arm awkwardly.

"I was talking to Viv," Doozer said.

Viv lowered her head.

"We're leaving," Carla said.

"Where? Who?"

"And we're taking your car."

That was new for her - the bold declaration. Doozer wasn't sure where that change had come from. He wasn't sure he liked it.

"You'll need the car gone anyway," Viv said. "The cops will track it down eventually."

That was when he realized who Carla meant be "we." Viv and Carla. Doozer was being left behind.

His eyes bore down on Carla, searching for some sign of what she wanted from him. Instead he saw only a look he'd never seen before - it might have been pity, it might have been frustration, or it might have been compassion. "That's it?" he asked. "You got what you wanted and now you're going?"

"I didn't get what I wanted. That's the thing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her eyes were really quite pretty in the natural light - all the swirls of color muddying into a light tan, rich and glossy.

"There's no reason for me to be here," she said.

"I'm just supposed to wait until next time?"

"There's no reason for you to wait. There's nothing to wait for anymore."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's why I have to go."

"Where?"

"California first."

"To see our father?"

"I keep telling you - there are no fathers."

Viv spoke up then, her voice more sure than Doozer had ever heard it - certainly more sure than when she used to insist she didn't strip. "She's taking me to the Pacific," she said. "Then we'll figure out what's next."

"In my car."

Carla reached into her backpack and withdrew a roll of Washingtons and Lincolns bound tight with a rubber band. "This is more than that piece of shit is worth," she said, tossing the money to Doozer. He didn't need to count it to know how much was there.

"All this time?" he asked.

"It was never what I wanted."

"Why'd you take it?"

"You wouldn't have known what to do if I didn't."

"I don't know what to do now."

"Pay your rent."

"Hux isn't going to be charging me anything for a while. Not after this morning."

"Then consider it an investment - in whatever's next."

Doozer felt the weight of the roll in his hand. It was a weight he'd been carrying for so long, though he still didn't know quite where it came from. Carla seemed to know - she clearly had no intentions of telling. Whatever it was she'd come for, he knew it had been up to him to give, and he had, once again, failed her. Maybe he always would. Maybe that was what she needed to know. Whatever the reason, this time Carla was leaving for good - their chances of ever being the half-brother and half-sister who snuck into Busch Gardens together were as dead as the man frozen in his own blood on the Denbigh Boulevard overpass. All that was left was to help them pack.

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Before Doozer and Carla got to work cramming what they could into the back of the Geo, Doozer slipped into his apartment, breaking open a case in each piece of soda-furniture, then jamming three cans into the snow. When the packing was done, he retrieved the

sodas, then the three of them huddled into the front seat, Viv in the middle struggling to keep her swollen ankle comfortable in the tight space. Thoughts of the last time Doozer had been in the passenger seat surfaced. That night - the deliveries, the drive to Virginia Beach - would be, he realized, the last time he and Carla would be alone together. If he'd known, he would have cherished it in a way he couldn't now. It was so rare to know the end of something was coming before it came. Popping open the three cans - a Pepsi Clear, an Apple Slice, and an OK Soda - he was determined to make this ending one they would all remember - that they would all cherish.

"You can't get these anywhere," he said. "There's probably no one else on Earth who has all three."

"How are we going to decide who gets which can?" Viv asked.

"I figured we'd rotate," Doozer said. "Try them all."

"Why don't you take the Pepsi," Carla said to Viv, then started the engine and pulled onto Oriana towards Warwick Boulevard. "Oh my god," she said, pulling the can of Apple Slice from her lips as though it were a rotten anchovy. "This one's horrible!"

"Damn - who would drink this stuff?" Viv asked after tasting her drink.

"This one's not bad," he said, taking a deep sip of the OK Soda.

"I like the picture on the can," Viv said, taking it from Doozer while she turned over the Pepsi Clear, which had aged so long it was translucent at best. The can was bitter on Doozer's lips before he even tried what was inside - the drink itself was somehow rank with acid yet milky at the same time. He nearly spat it out.

The Apple slice was overly sweet and tangy, coating the mouth and refusing to let go. "We're done with these," Carla said, tossing the Apple and the Pepsi out the window. They spent the rest of the short trip passing the OK Soda between them.

"You going to toss that one, too?" Doozer asked when the can was empty.

"I think I'll keep this one," Carla said, tossing it onto the dashboard. "A souvenir."

They'd reached the intersection with Tranito's on one corner and Papa John's on the other. "This is my stop," he said.

"You really aren't ever going to change," Carla said, her voice quivering with the same confusing mix that had flooded her face earlier, only if Doozer listened close enough he was sure he could hear a bump of pride poking against her scorn, like a timid black olive pushing through a layer of extra cheese. She'd pulled into the parking lot in front of Papa John's, the Geo a single yellow dot in a perfect, unblemished field of white.

"You're the best neighbor I ever had," Viv said, giving him a hug that couldn't possibly last long enough, her bald scalp brushing against his own closely shorn head.

Doozer climbed out of the Geo, giving the gnarled hood a final tap, then came to Carla's side of the car. She leaned out of the window to talk to him one last time.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I'll be okay."

"We both will," he said.

"In our way, I guess."

He leaned towards her and their lips met in a kiss without precedent, without explanation. It was a gesture that broke something between them even as it wiped something else clean, and when it was over they were left strangers who knew only each

other's name. Then, in a grind of gears and a little jet of snow, the Geo pulled away and was gone forever.

Doozer trudged through the unblemished snow of the Papa John's parking lot to the front door. The store was dark. As he expected, the managers had already changed the locks. Walking around the strip mall to the back, he found one of his hopes on this day finally coming true. No one had thought to change the small lock in the service entrance that hadn't been used in years. Doozer almost fell tugging on the wooden door that had swollen into its frame. After it came free he stepped into the store that had been his respite for almost ten years.

The storeroom was fully stocked - massive cans of black olives, mushrooms, and pizza sauce on a tall wire rack. The sink with its three chambers was clean and shining in the feeble evening light that filtered from the front of the store. The mops were their usual mess in the corner.

He walked to where the office crouched on his left, the walk-in fridge humming to his right. The air would be dry when the store reopened - they'd have to remember to leave the dough trays out to cure a little longer than usual. In the front of the store the oven sat idle, the links of the conveyor belt frozen and ready. The driver's station was a mess as always, the bags tossed without thought into a pile beneath the metal table, one corner of the city map free from the wall and bending towards the cash-drop slots. Doozer slid his hand across the map, pressing the piece of faded tape back into place so it could hold at least a little while longer. The phones were all silent, the pizza-making line empty of ingredients. The slapping station didn't have even the finest dusting of flour. Doozer

pressed himself into that little corner of the store, wishing that he could toss a dough one last time - another ending he'd not had the chance to know.

He reached into his pocket, then. Finding the roll of cash Carla had returned to him. The dough station was as good a place as any to leave it. On the back of a coupon for two large two-topping pizzas he wrote in the bold block letters that all the drivers appreciated: "I'm sorry. Richard." His set of keys was the last item to add. He paused. Not wanting there to be any confusion, he added "Doozer" in parentheses next to his name.

In the customer area he dragged one of the two metal chairs with the red padding to the front window and sat, watching the shadows of the pine trees creep across the street, darkening the snow from white to mottled gray. He didn't want it to end like this. Not with such a whimper. Behind the counter he found the switch to turn on the marquee, its brilliance setting the snow in the parking lot alight except for the two dark lines cutting in parallel across it where a Geo used to be.

Back outside the store he took a full breath of the evening air. Tranito's was busy again. Doozer liked to think about Reggie growing nervous now that the Papa John's marquee was lit.

As the shadows of the pine trees coated the road, Doozer closed his eyes, picturing Viv and Carla on I-64. They must be past Williamsburg by now, already free of Newport News. Soon they will be free of the Peninsula, then they'll be free of the state, then they'll be free of all but the road that will stretch in front of them. The Geo will keep rolling along. Its tires will reach through the ice for the concrete underneath, maybe succeeding, maybe falling into a reckless slide. On a straight road will there be any way to know the difference?

Doozer pulls his jacket tight to his body and lowers his shaved head into the wind even as the cold pushes through every crevice of him, a numbness spreading, coursing through his shoulders and knees, clutching at the base of his neck until, eventually, it gives way to warmth, first in his fingers and toes - then spreading through the spaces that the cold has hollowed out. A gentle warmth - calm and soothing, like a lullaby from a woman Doozer was never lucky enough to know. All the while the Papa John's marquee drapes its clean light over him, its strips of green and white lettering casting the corporate brand into the heavens, the icy sheen on the road replicating the words "Papa John's" in reverse hundreds of times over for any dyslexic angels that might be gazing down on him as he walks along a wide spread of white, spongy snow, the powder circling off in the wind, paying no attention to the dark turmoil of the city so hard at work around it.

#

“Afterword”

In the Spring of 2014 I took “Fiction Forms” with Professor Robert Boswell. Over the course of the semester he had us write the frame of a novel whose genesis was a social milieu of our choosing. He emphasized that we were not to think about plot or character, just write about a setting in which there exists some social hierarchy. The characters, he insisted, would come to us. He was right.

I had chosen to write about my experiences delivering pizzas for Papa John’s in the mid-1990s. The assignment brought me back to the days when drivers had to know their delivery area from memory rather than consulting a GPS and, should they get lost, had to stop at a payphone to call for directions. We worked exclusively in cash and checks, and spent our nights listening to our post-grunge music on Disc-Man players that plugged into our cassette decks. More importantly in regards to the assignment, there was a clear social order to the place – the in-store workers were teenagers still in high school, most of whom didn’t yet own a car. The managers were in their mid-twenties, a mixture of mothers supplementing their household income and college kids supplementing their tuition. In between were the drivers, mostly recent high-school grads who hadn’t figured out what was next. For them, the money was good and the opportunity to spend most of a workday alone listening to music had an undeniable appeal. It certainly did for me.

I enjoyed writing about it all – recounting various humorous anecdotes. There was the battle to see who could get the most outrageous vanity license plate through the DMV (the winner was RENOB). There was the kitten that someone brought to work and eventually let loose in the pepperoni tray (that someone just might have been me). There was the driver who rewired another driver’s dashboard so that turning on the headlights set

off his car alarm. There was the retaliation in the form of a paint-gun drive-by shooting. There was the feeble attempt to explain to other businesses in the strip mall that we had no idea where the paint coating their windows came from, and how dare they assume that we were to blame. And there was also a lot of pot. A lot.

It was fun to write, but for the longest time there was no story. As I tried to capture the feel of the place I found that the more successful I was, the further I got from having any kind of coherent narrative. This job was, after all, a collection of fragmented experiences in which we spent most of our time alone while taking our collective breaths and gathering ourselves before heading off into the real work that would become our lives. My year at Papa John's was a year of stasis, and no one around me was yearning for much more than a few big tips and some good weed.

Then, I remembered Jake. Jake didn't fit into the social fabric of our little pizza shop. We all thought he was ancient, though in retrospect he was probably in his late twenties or early thirties. Yet despite his age he worked inside the store with the high-school kids – somehow, despite over a decade in the pizza industry, he had never become a manager. He wasn't a driver either because he didn't have a car. Instead, he'd show up to work every day on his bicycle. And he was happy – or seemed so – making pizzas with an eagerness that didn't make any sense to the rest of us. He took pride in his work, which didn't make sense to us either. And he absolutely loved to slap dough.

Given his dedication to his work and his general good nature, it was only natural that we hated him. Looking back, it is clear to me that we simply didn't know any other way to react to him – he was too disruptive to the world we were all creating. He took it all in stride, responding to our merciless attacks every once in a while with a friendly

come-back of his own, but otherwise treating all of us with the respect and kindness that we refused to show him.

One night, I gave him a ride home (his bike had been in the shop the whole week). He talked about the different pizza places he'd worked over the years and described his collection of restaurant tools that he'd gathered from each job. Then, when we reached his apartment he turned to me and, with a look more serious than I had ever seen on his face, asked if I'd like to come in and hang out for a bit. For just that moment, there was a hint of loneliness in his voice. I had nowhere to be. Yet for reasons I can't entirely explain, I refused, saying I had to go meet up with some friends. He left the car with a friendly thanks, and that was the end of it.

Only that wasn't the end of it. I've always thought back on that night – on that moment when a guy whom I had pretty heartlessly and openly mocked, nonetheless reached out for a moment of human connection – a moment that I shunned for no reason. But the questions have always remained – who was this guy and what had led him to make working in low-end corporate pizza chains his life's work? Why did he endure our constant mockery, and what did he think of it all? More importantly, who was Jake when he wasn't at Papa John's? What did he do with his time? Who were his friends? His family? What had he dreamed for himself? What were his biggest regrets? What worried him and what made him happy? I'll never know. But as soon as I remembered Jake and his bicycle and his dough slapping I knew that the goal of my novel would be to imagine the answers to these questions.

Of course, none of this really occurred to me at first. When I remembered Jake and knew, in that mysterious way that writing reveals itself to an author, that he would be – had

to be – my main character, my first reaction was “You’ve got to be kidding me – that guy?”

But I did know, almost immediately, that it would, indeed, be that guy. My understanding of why I had to write about him came later, but from the moment I remembered Jake there was no doubt in my mind that he would be my leading man and that, no matter how much I might want to, there would be no changing it – Doozer had been born and there was nothing I could do about it. Two years later, I’m still finding out about Doozer, and still struggling to tell his story.

In the process, a number of elements have come and gone with each revision, and I quickly learned not to get too attached to any scene, or passage, or chapter, or series of chapters, or character, as all of them might end up in my trash folder eventually. All, that is, except one. Though Carla didn’t exist at first – in fact she wasn’t even in the first full draft of the book – she, like Doozer, burst upon the story with a momentum that I instantly knew would be permanent.

In its earliest incarnation the book was a love story in which Doozer sacrificed his career for the sake of a woman at Papa John’s, a woman he then loved from afar – across the street at Tranito’s. At Professor Boswell’s very early suggestion, I set out, in my second draft, to explain Doozer’s hang-ups in regards to this “relationship.” What made him so willing to give up so much for this woman, yet kept him so reluctant to show his feelings to her? What did his prior relationship history look like?

I got to work. First, I wrote about his most recent relationship, which was with a pharmacist on the rebound. Her name was Irene and since that first encounter neither Doozer nor I have been able to shake her – or perhaps she hasn’t been able to shake us.

Then, I delved into a high school relationship with a girl named Becky. The scene eventually hit the cutting room floor, but it revealed something incredibly valuable about Doozer. He had a sister. The scene in question ended with Doozer and Becky basking in the romantic glow of a bug zapper behind a Baskin Robbins after an awkward and painful hand job. She asked him about his family and the creative process took over, reshaping the entire novel:

“I had a sister,” Doozer said.

“Had a sister? Is she dead?”

“Not that I know of. She ran away six months ago.”

I still don’t know what compelled me to write those lines, but they raised several very obvious questions and I wanted answers. For that I needed Doozer and his sister to spend some time together. Always on the lookout for ways to reinforce the role of setting in the story, I thought back to the times my brother and I used to spend crabbing in one of the tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay. It was actually pretty tedious and boring, and involved more arguing than it did crab catching – it was perfect for Doozer and Carla. I framed the scene with a trip to their grandmother’s house in which their mother’s boyfriend was going to meet their grandmother for the first time. I had hoped to find a happy moment in Doozer’s life – something to show that there was light in his otherwise dark past.

Oops.

As I wrote the scene with Doozer and Carla at the river, Corton decided to show up. I wanted to jump inside the pages and scream to Carla, “run!” But the experience of Corton showing up at that river was similar to the experience of first remembering Jake – I

knew, immediately, that I couldn't change it no matter how much I might want to. Also like the birth of Doozer, this moment brought with it a host of problems to solve, though in this case those problems weren't so much about craft (in fact, from a craft standpoint, Corton solved more problems than he created). Instead, Corton's raping of Carla immediately raised a series of ethical concerns – concerns that I do not take lightly.

Ironically, the same week that I first wrote that scene, I happened to be teaching a unit in a class on graphic novels in which we discussed the phenomenon of a female character suffering for the purpose of forwarding a male character's plot/character development, a device that is so common in comic books that there is a short-hand term for it: fridging. Coined by Gail Simone in 1999, the term references a story in *Green Lantern* #54 in which Kyle Rayner (the Green Lantern) comes home to find his girlfriend Alexandra DeWitt's body dismembered and stuffed in a refrigerator. DeWitt's gruesome fate made for a shocking cliffhanger and motivated several months-worth of Green Lantern stories, but DeWitt herself never received much attention once her role as a plot device was complete. Simone argues that this happens far too often in comics and she compiled a massive list of female heroines being killed, raped, or depowered and posted it to the internet on a webpage called *Women in Refrigerators*.

I don't ever want to be on that list, and not just because I work in a different medium (and haven't been published). But what to do? A few brief attempts at rewriting the scene fell flat. The violation had happened and pretending that it hadn't wasn't going to work. The other option, then, was to deal with it. After all, Simone's objection is as much about the nonchalance with which violence happens to women as it is with the frequency. If I were going to avoid "fridging" Carla my best course of action was to make

Carla's sexual violation more than a catalyst for the plot, but to make it integral to the emotional stakes of the book, and to give her an active role in those stakes. I was determined to tell her story and to wrestle with the consequences for her as well as for Doozer.

That, of course, is no easy task, and it is one that I am still very much wrestling with. In every draft, Carla's role in the story has grown – from not existing at all, to appearing in one flashback, to showing up in multiple flashbacks and a brief scene in the novel's present, to arriving at the beginning and replacing the love interest, to becoming the book's leading lady – a counterpart to Doozer whose story is entwined with his own. I suspect that her role will only increase in future drafts – I've even begun to wonder if hers is, in fact, the story I'm really telling, and that Doozer is merely Nick Caraway to her Gatsby, chronicling the events of her life from an unsafe distance. If that is the case, I welcome the change, as I have found myself growing fonder of Carla with each successive draft.

Influences – Past and Present

When I enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Houston in the Fall of 2013 I did so with the full intent of putting my PhD. In literature behind me. Ironically, it was my most successful piece of scholarship that ultimately inspired the shift. In that piece, an article entitled "Trumpets, Horns, and Typewriters: A Call and Response Between Ralph Ellison and Frederick Douglass," I argue that Ralph Ellison's privileging of artistic craft over explicit politics in literature is, ultimately, a political act of its own,

and one that places him in dialog with the same African American literary tradition that he is so quick to criticize on the grounds of what he sees to be its artistic failures. I wrote this article in 2006, and had it accepted for publication in *African American Review* in 2007. Two years later I had written another 150 or so pages of scholarship and wrapped it all into a massive document I decided to call a dissertation, yet nothing I had produced had even begun to approach the quality of that article on Ralph Ellison. It didn't occur to me, at the time, to ask why. Instead, I put the dissertation behind me and focused on my job as an instructor at Rice University, my days as an active scholar behind me.

In a serendipitous twist, that 2006 article, accepted for publication in 2007, didn't actually see print until 2011. A change in editors and other publishing delays at *African American Review* had kept the article in just as much limbo as I felt my career had suffered after graduate school. But the delay had one very positive effect in that the eventual publication gave me an opportunity to finally reflect on what it was about that article that worked where so much of my other scholarship fell flat. The answer, I realized, was the term so central to the article's thesis: craft. While the intellectual questions of literary scholarship were interesting to me, they weren't my passion, and the time I had devoted to scholarship had taken me away from the very aspect of literature that drew me to it in the first place – the ability of well-crafted fiction to create an aesthetic experience. Ellison understood that difference and argued for the importance of artistic value in fiction. Six years later, I was finally ready to listen to him.

I did not, though, study literary scholarship in vain. Instead, my years studying the American literary canon have offered me an embarrassment of riches in regards to models to follow and influences to celebrate. Emily Dickinson, Pauline Hopkins, Herman

Melville, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edith Wharton, Toni Morrison, William Faulkner – it feels like, over the years, I’ve poured all of these writers into a massive literary pot in my brain and if I can add a single ladle-full of that stew to my own fiction then all of the years I spent working on my Ph.D. will have been worth it.

In addition to Ellison, though, the other writer whose work I return to time and time again when my own writing stalls is Mark Twain. The endless wit and satire of his work is something that I will probably spend the rest of my career hopelessly chasing and his ability to deploy that humor regardless of the seriousness of his topic is something that I hope to emulate in both my novel and any work that might follow.

I found Twain’s relentless approach to humor to be particularly useful as I’ve worked through drafts of my book. Two of his works in particular have stood out: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. The latter of these provided a useful model for my main character’s relationship to the community around him. The novel opens with Mr. David Wilson saying of a barking dog, “I wish I owned half of that dog . . . [b]ecause I would kill my half” (8). The townsfolk, failing to see the humor in his statement, instead take him at his word and end up deciding that he is a Pudd’nhead, a name that sticks for the rest of his time there.

Doozer suffers a similar fate, and his attachment to his unshakeable nickname follows a similar pattern. Also, the dramatic irony of Twain’s opening move is one that I hope my novel emulates to some degree. When Doozer approaches the Tranito’s drivers at the novel’s start he, too, attempts a joke, pretending that he’s just been in a knife fight, only to find that the joke goes right over the heads of the stoned kids he’s trying to amuse. This is a preface to a dynamic that continues throughout – that though Doozer is, in fact,

more clear-headed and engaged in his work than anyone else in the store he remains an outcast whose coworkers see him as a useless fool.

We quickly come to realize, though, that Doozer is anything but a fool, and that for all his apparent silliness he is, in fact, haunted by a depth of tragedy that his coworkers can hardly imagine. In this regard I found *Huck Finn* to be an invaluable resource, not as a model for any particular scene, but as a reminder that the darkness in Doozer and Carla's past doesn't preclude the importance of humor in their present. My novel began as a heavily satirical piece, almost to the point of farce, so when the themes of sexual abuse and incest crept into the narrative I grew nervous. Was it appropriate to insist on making my reader laugh even as one of my characters wrestles with a past in which she was raped repeatedly by her step-mother's boyfriend? Would my reader find it overly jarring to go, in a single scene, from Doozer's discontinued-soda-furniture to an ultrasound of an aborted fetus that was the product of his union with his own sister? I wasn't sure, and I remain unsure if I've pulled it off. But in *Huck Finn* I have found proof that it *can* work, and that the results can be astonishing.

After all, a purely literal description of *Huck Finn* reveals some pretty dour stuff. A young, formerly homeless child has finally found a place to live, only to have his raging alcoholic father steal him away and lock him in a cabin in the woods where he beats him and nearly starves him to death. Desperate for survival, the boy finally manages to run away and, along the way, joins with a man who is trying to escape the bonds of slavery – one of the most horrific practices in our nation's history. The two suffer a series of indignities and humiliations before the slave is captured and is going to be sold down the river where he will probably be beaten and worked to death, leaving the boy with what he

believes to be an impossible dilemma: let the slave suffer and probably die or spend eternity burning in the fires of hell. This doesn't exactly say "comedy." Yet *Huck Finn* is hilarious. I imagine I could spend a lifetime figuring out the specific mechanisms of humor in the book, but what has been most useful to me at this point in my writing process is simply the reminder of what a juxtaposition of humor and tragedy can accomplish.

On a somewhat lighter note, I also have a deep appreciation for Twain's pursuit of local color and his attempts to render diverse dialects in his fiction. I have attempted to do the same in my novel. Newport News, located on a large Peninsula that it shares with two other towns, is an incredibly diverse place with no racial majority. It is both a port town and an area with a massive military presence, so there has always been a constant influx of different people, cultures, and accents, yet all of it is shaped by a certain cultural air that is distinctly southern. All of this provides a crucial backdrop to Doozer's story, and in Twain I continue to find useful examples of how to balance the particulars of my narrative with the broader context of its setting.

Given the important influence of Twain, it should probably come as no surprise that I also cite among my influences the "Mark Twain of Comic Books": Harvey Pekar. A file clerk in Cleveland who spent his life self-publishing an autobiographical comic series called *American Splendor*. His mantra that "[o]rdinary life is pretty complex stuff" is at the heart of all of his work, and allows him to find both the humanity and the beauty present in such mundane acts as going to get the mail or waiting in line at the grocery store. Pekar's insistence on avoiding unnecessary artifice, focusing instead on the grit and detail of a particular setting, character, or situation has been a useful guide as I have tried to structure a novel around the daily life of a pizza driver.

What has proven most useful, though, (and admittedly something that I can still learn some lessons in) is Pekar's refusal to condescend. As a file clerk working in the Cleveland medical system, Pekar came into contact with an astonishing variety of people, and as an avid walker he was frequently able to incorporate different demographics of Cleveland's population into his stories. Yet no matter how brief an encounter might be, Pekar is always able to show his characters as complex and fully-realized people. This is something that I aspire to in my novel, and am well aware that I have not yet achieved. At some point, though, I hope that every customer Doozer delivers to, every coworker that he interacts with, and every citizen of Newport News that he encounters can register with the reader as a complicated individual with a complete interior life. In pursuit of that goal, Pekar has been and will remain an important model.

I would also be remiss if I failed to mention those works that I have consulted precisely for their direct relationship to specific elements of this novel. There is a (shocking) dearth of pizza delivery based literary fiction, so I was pleased to receive Professor Boswell's suggestion that I read Ann Beattie's *Chilly Scenes of Winter* shortly after completing the first rough draft of my novel. Beattie's novel wrestles with similar problems of a strained family and a young man wrestling with a dead-end job and an obsessive and inappropriate love. She has also provided another model for humor, especially in regards to banter between characters.

I was also very fortunate this past summer to stumble upon another work that has had a surprising and profound impact on my novel. During a sale at my local comic book shop I came across a graphic novel entitled *Melody: Story of a Nude Dancer* by Sylvie Rancourt. The book is an autobiographical account of the author's days as a stripper in

Montreal in the 80s, that she wrote even as she was performing in strip clubs. The art is simple – almost childlike – making it nearly impossible to find the nudity and sex that permeate the story to be erotic or titillating. Instead, Rancourt gives a frank account of the life she is living and the people that inhabit her world.

I bought the book simply as an opportunity to learn more about the erotic dancing world that I was trying to represent in my novel, but ended up finding the formal properties of Rancourt's storytelling equally useful. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the work for my own fiction was her refusal to pass judgement on her profession – she neither condemns the life that she is living nor romanticizes it in any way, and while she is quite open about the seediness of many of the characters that she encounters and the blatant misogyny that permeates the place, she is also remarkably generous in her depictions, often using thought bubbles to show the complicated inner lives of the very same customers who are asking her to perform acts of extreme degradation. What Rancourt ultimately conveys perhaps more than anything else is the profound sense of loneliness that fills the dance club, and the ways that that emptiness follows her into her own personal life. Reading this book led to massive revisions of the dance scenes at Bluebeard's and gave me fresh insights into who Viv is and why she might be drawn to a man like Doozer and, in the end, a woman like Carla. As I continue to revise the novel, and especially those scenes, Rancourt's book will be one that I will continue to revisit.

Of course no discussion of influence would be complete without mentioning the faculty that I have had the privilege of working with for the past three years, and in that time I have found the completely contradictory advice they've given me to be absolutely invaluable.

Honestly, that wasn't sarcasm.

The single biggest influence on the book has been Alex Parsons, whose close attention to detail and willingness to call me on my biggest flaws has been extremely helpful, despite my best efforts to keep it from being so. His most common criticism has been a lack of emotion in my work – that I have a tendency to fall back on humor in my writing as a way of avoiding the deeper emotional stakes.

Me? Deflect with humor? I refuse to believe it.

Now that was sarcasm.

I resisted this idea at first on intellectual grounds – because what better way to prove my emotional literacy than through intellect? But what Professor Parsons' comments got me thinking about was the role humor played in my writing – if I didn't want to admit that it was a means of avoidance, why else might it crop up in my fiction so often? The answer is vitally important to not only this book, but to all of my work, and the answer that I developed is one that I deeply believe in.

It seems to me that the root of most, if not all, humor is an acknowledgement of some form of absurdity. From slipping on a banana peel to Donald Trump's hair, we laugh at things that aren't what they're supposed to be. At its worst, that can mean the dismissal of others by treating them as absurd – hence an internet full of racist and sexist memes. But at its best, that absurdity can have a cathartic, healing effect. To render something absurd is to declare that it is unusual – not normal. To laugh in the face of pain, then, is to say that the pain is temporary – that its existence in our lives is exceptional and therefore will – must – pass. To laugh is to hope.

By contrast, seriousness in the face of tragedy – the insistence on gravity and the refusal of humor – gives the tragic event the legitimacy of normality. To refuse to laugh at grief, to refuse to see pain as a form of absurdity, is to treat it as the usual state of things. In short, to despair.

Armed with this philosophy, I was resistant to Professor Parsons' insistence that I stop trying to be funny and let my characters and my fiction feel. Fortunately for me, and unfortunately for him, he has read multiple drafts of my work and has thus had enough time to disabuse me of this notion. With his criticisms in mind I worked through a couple drafts in which I refused to let myself fall back on my usual repertoire, instead letting every emotional impulse, even the darker ones, spill onto the page. The result was a book that went from being shallow and satirical to creepy and off-putting. I was confused.

Once again, I owe Alex for getting things back on track. I expressed my frustrations one day in his office and he reminded me of a very important aspect of my story – whether we ultimately approve of his behaviors or not, if we're going to spend 200+ pages with Doozer, we have to be rooting for him in one way or another. He couldn't just be creepy, nor he could he just be silly. He had to be human.

That night, I finally realized the greatest flaw in the story. If Doozer was a version of Jake, I was still the eighteen-year-old asshole making fun of him. As I worked through page after page of the manuscript I realized that almost all of the humor happened at Doozer's expense – we didn't laugh with him or even for him, we laughed *at* him. I hadn't rendered his pain absurd, I had rendered him absurd and, in doing so, dismissed him. In this most recent draft, then, I have done my best to treat this character and his

circumstances with more respect; to finally let him in on the joke and even contribute a punch line or two of his own.

It was with this new approach and a brimming confidence that I was finally accessing the story's emotional stakes that I turned in the first two chapters to a recent workshop led by Professor Boswell. His advice at the conclusion of workshop: "Be funnier."

Done.

Told ya, Alex.

But seriously, when I looked over the manuscript and revisited some of the works that I had been reading as models, especially Professor Boswell's earlier recommendation of *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, what I noticed was that what Professor Parsons and Professor Boswell were telling me was essentially the same thing. After all, if grief is, in the end, an unnatural state of things, then the most painful moments should also be the funniest. Rather than deflecting emotion with humor – a strategy already limiting by its very nature – I could use humor to open up a space for a greater emotional resonance. I did need to be funnier, because by being funnier I could be more emotional, and vice versa – the better balanced the two are the higher the register of each can be.

Finding that balance has been, and will probably remain, one of the central challenges of this novel and by no means do I think that I've figured it out. I still agree with Professor Boswell that in its current form the novel needs more humor, but in the interest of not allowing myself to get too comfortable I continue to push the novel in other directions for the time being. In my next draft the pendulum will most likely swing the other way in the hopes that, with time, I'll find equilibrium.

In the meantime, I will simply continue to write. Working on this novel has been at times painful, tedious, harrowing, frustrating, and maddening, but it has also been incredibly rewarding. What I have found most surprising about the process has been the deep affection that I have come to feel for these characters and if I continue to heap misery upon them it is only because I want to know them better. I hope that anyone who reads the novel will feel the same way about them, because I firmly believe that Doozer, Carla, Viv, Reggie, Timber, Pepper, Paprika, Putz, Kurtz, Gage, and Hux are all worth knowing. I might not have gone into Jake's apartment all those years ago, but I went into Doozer's and what a fascinating place it turned out to be.

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