

WHERE WE ARE

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Preface: Critical Introduction

Coming-of-age narratives emphasize dialogue or internal monologue over action, and a narrative that takes place in the past. Viewed through the lens of a young First-Generation Hispanic American male, this current draft of *Where We Are* exhibits characteristics that correspond with these conventions. Subject matter within the work discusses spiritual autobiography and immigrant narratives to explore themes of abandonment and how it interact with an individual's career, religious education, and romantic development. The text places an emphasis on internal dialogue, and much of the narrative takes place before the protagonist, Carlos Jr., reaches his twenties. This introduction evaluates the elements apparent in *Where we are* that engage with concepts presented by Vivian Gornick in *The Situation and the Story*. This evaluation is further facilitated by examining how the text is influenced by Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, and Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*.

The setting, the focus on Carlos Jr.'s youth, and the deeper understanding of himself as a result of processing those events as an adult align closely with the characteristics of coming-of-age stories.

The formal and structural considerations of *Where We Are* share the characteristics of the coming-of-age genre. The historical context and geographical imagery in the expository Part I set the stage for events in Parts II and III, presented as results of those circumstances. The text is primarily chronological, though not completely. It begins with events leading to Carlos's birth and those of his siblings. The section "Origins" is set in the early 1980s, two years before Carlos's birth. The time intervals, or the space between the narrative units which are labeled and appear modular, are varied. Emotional beats adhere to

no strict rhythm, only their placement along an imaginary timeline. The chronological scope spans to the narrator's present, at which point he and his "new family" are preparing for relocation to another city.

The setting is on the west side of Houston for the bulk of the narrative, immediately outside of the northwest quadrant of Houston's Inner Loop. At its beginning, it is situated in a neighborhood in the area that is experiencing an influx of Central Americans. Paqui, later revealed to be Carlos Jr.'s mother, is living there, having moved there with her mother as a teenager. The eighteen pages of the narrative begin here to serve as exposition, except for Paqui's year-long stint in Los Angeles: "'It wasn't even my idea,' my mother explained. 'Your grandma and her brother thought it would be good for me to start again [by moving] there'" (Hernandez 12).

Although the family eventually moves away from the block, the geographical movement throughout the narrative of Carlos's upbringing remains in the same neighborhood, but in several different areas within it. The attention put on his block, then neighborhood, and the engagement of the narrative with its surrounding cultural history serves as a way to focus the reader on earlier pivotal moments in the subject's life. His engagement also makes a case for the situations narrated later in his life when the text arrives at the narrator's present at its end.

After the prologue, in which the narrator presents the accusations of his brother and the labyrinth imagery that follows, emphasis in *Where We Are* is placed on the protagonist Carlos Jr's youth. The narrative begins in the 1980s and makes its way to the year 2016. More pages of the manuscript are devoted to the narrator's upbringing than to his early

adulthood. To boot, the bulk of pages that present his upbringing are devoted to Carlos's adolescence, beginning with the section titled "Saxophone."

The end of Carlos's adolescence is marked by his family's dispersal, the first event leading to it found in the section of the same title, "Dispersal" and ending with "The Oustings." The narrator presents many of Carlos's decisions made for him because of the constraints he contends with. At the end of the narrative, after engaging with these challenges, however, Carlos is at a place of better understanding, and he takes steps to transcend the difficulties he is able to and manage the difficulties he is unable to transcend in such a way that minimizes their obstructive effect on his development.

Where we Are eventually diverges from the Coming-of-Age convention in its chronology, however, complicating its genre classification. Compared to the resolution and contentment found in traditional coming-of-age stories, the only resolution offered is in regards to the narrator's eye health. That is, the doctors' explanations of his eye condition provide Carlos an understanding of his vision's tenuousness, "'As you approach middle age, though, your retina will start to gradually shrivel'" (141), Says one doctor about the hole in his eye membrane. Carlos additionally describes the short researched life of the other quirk, an eye freckle, "In short, it's a dark benign freckle with veins that no one's diagnosed until very recently." By the time Carlos narrates a conversation with his father in law, he informs the reader of acceptance of the possible blindness later in life.

In this draft of the manuscript, we see development and maturity in Carlos Jr. not found earlier in the narrative. However, we don't see him coming to terms or embracing his upbringing or even his current circumstances. This lack of resolution complicates the text's classification as a coming-of-age tale.

In *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick contends that the titular concepts of her book are required in any piece of literature: “Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say” (96). The context or circumstances that form the setting for *Where We Are* are tripartite. Carlos, as the protagonist of the text, faces three literal challenges. They are economic constraints—both as inherited circumstances and as a result of his financial behavior, vision problems present for as long as he can remember, and a lack of domestic stability because of repeatedly moving to different apartments located in his childhood neighborhood in Houston. Events demonstrating these literal challenges are threaded throughout a narrative that largely consists of internal dialogues, and is primarily composed chronologically.

The “Story,” or in Gornick’s terms the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer, is a collection of the different ways Carlos engages with the challenges—his development of strategies for either overcoming the challenges or learning to accept them to progress through his adulthood by working around them. The chronological presentation of these challenges, beginning early in his life—in the case of economic difficulty before his birth, even— also facilitates a comparison of the text’s form against conventions of a coming-of-age narrative. The following section defines the components of *Where We Are* with regard to Gornick’s Situation and Story.

Regarding the “Situation,” the phases of life Carlos traverses are marked by results of the financial constraints, which tend to work in tandem with the constraints themselves to remove Carlos’s agency. “Saxophone,” the first section that takes place during adolescence, presents a lack of choice he is faced with as a result of not only being subject to parental authority but economic constraints. In the section, the narrator begins by presenting Carlos Jr. in a situation that further robs him of agency: “They didn’t say playing in the middle school band was a choice among many” (32). He partially explains the pressure to play saxophone he succumbed to with his mother’s inability to leave work early enough to game the first-come-first-serve circumstances:

...we had to go to Spring Oaks during a late slot after my mom got off work. “Percussion,” I told him... “Actually, percussion’s full,” he said. “Why don’t you take this.” ... “What do you think, Carlitos? Saxophone like Lisa Simpson?” Another kid buzzed into a mouthpiece at a nearby table, where he sat with his mom and the other band director. “Sure,” I said shrugging. “If those are my choices.

The context here suggests that other children arrived at the school earlier, affording them more instrumental choices. In other words, having shown up earlier in the day would have meant he could have had his first choice. It is easy to compare this with other students, whose parents perhaps work at more flexible jobs, which is the first price of a working-class career.

Later, in “Dispersal,” Carlos is separated from his family when his mother is suddenly unemployed. ““Even if I get hired tomorrow, I won’t get paid soon enough to stay here. We’ll lose electricity, the late fees will be too much. Carlos, G wants you to stay with

her. Emily, Chris, and me will stay at your Tia Viole's.'” This scene is another illustration in which the financial challenges are beyond Carlos’s control. His engagement with this situation, however, is not shown to the reader until later in the narrative, in “The Oustings.”

The narrator, according to Gornick, must not only present situations and stories, but also illustrate how the writer engages with these elements:

“Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened” (39).

The manuscript, in its current state, depicts a struggle to make sense of its narrated events at this point. Much of the narration reveals men arriving and departing his life, beginning with the accusations of his own abandonment in the preface. The pattern presented, however, does not full “make sense” of the situation.

The last event of Carlos’s adolescence is found in “The Oustings,” and his decision to live with a friend despite his family again having a proper residence, exhibits an aspect of the story, described by Gornick as the protagonist’s engagement with the situation: “Only my brother was home, watching TV on the couch when I came to get clothes and a few other things to take to the Barrowses’. ‘You staying at Mike’s again?’ He asked. ‘Yeah.’ He looked me up and down, at all the junk I was carrying in my arms” (Hernandez 55).

This is a scene that creates some questions for the reader, and a missed opportunity for the narrator to question his contribution to the cycle of abandonment his family has been subject to. According to Gornick, self-investigation of this kind characterizes literary work:

So it is with the other in oneself that the writer must seek and find to create movement, achieve a dynamic. Inevitably, the piece builds only when the narrator is involved not in confession but in this kind of self-investigation, the kind that means to provide motion, purpose, and dramatic tension...To see one's own part in the situation—that is, one's own frightened or cowardly or self-deceived part—is to create the dynamic (4).

Gornick's quote describes the narrator's opportunity for self-examination in the scene. Why was he blind to seeing the abandoned state he was complicit in subjecting his brother to? If their family's culture is defined by abandonment for an alternative life, why was he blind to his own desire for a better place costing another abandonment experience for his brother? The scene. It is also an opportunity for the narrator to reinforce the complicated navigation imagery of the labyrinth in the beginning.

The earlier-than-expected dispersal of his family is also complete at this moment: “[MY brother would] sleep in that two-bedroom townhome alone for weeks before finally going to stay with Ben at his parents’ house” (Hernandez 55). This final departure from his family's home came as a result of their separation when they were forced to leave their apartment two years prior. These examples illustrate the “Situation and Story” that Gornick refers to in her book.

Within *The Situation and Story*, Gornick refers to a “monster” with which the subject contends: “For the drama to deepen, we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent” (3). This idea is not yet formed in *Where We Are*: the question of who or what in the text plays the role of the monster. The “Labyrinth” section, for example,

metaphorically illustrates the narrator's profound preference for a meandering life over an ambitious and targeted approach, "I want to drift through it, groping the walls, aimlessly. In the middle, I imagine a satisfactory answer will be there" (Hernandez 3). An archaic understanding of labyrinths, particularly the Labyrinth of King Minos in Crete, posits that a monster must be found in the center. Carlos mentions this by ending the module with a simile: "I wouldn't have to make my way back out of it, instead retrieving the answers like a beast's carcass."

In *Where We Are*, more than one potential candidate who could serve this archetype exists in the text: Chris as accuser early in the text, Carlos Sr. as the family's first abandoner, and even perhaps the part of Carlos Jr., who is inept with his personal finances, vehicles, romances and work, which sabotage his efforts to transcend the challenges of his youth.

Chris accuses the protagonist-narrator of leaving his family behind. To support his verdict, he employs the assumption that Carlos's motivation to improve his social condition primarily so that he may return to his family and offer them assistance. The narrator must begin to engage with this accusation through the many generated memories of his upbringing, some that precede his own birth. We see that his father has left even before the birth of the narrator's younger brother, born only eighteen months after him. The closest explanation through narrative and family lore is that the brothers' father has left for a family that is closer to their father's aspirations than his own mother. When the narrator tells of his father's second visit, he mentions the father's promise to return on his way back to the good life. The thematic importance involves the debts, of gratitude and otherwise, that one owns to their roots.

The narrator cites his wife's quote from the conversation she had with Chris, "'But now he's going to graduate, and instead of finally being able to help again, he's moving to Colorado to struggle for longer, and still not make enough money to help'" (Hernandez 1). The quote is riddled with assumptions as the narrator provides, "This is all in violation of the unspoken deal my family, particularly my brother, made with me. Unspoken by them, and unknown to me" (1). The explained assumptions are a result of Carlos when ceasing to contribute to his mother's financial situation, vaguely explaining that "he can't afford to." He does not clearly specify what his decision was a result of. The narrator engages with the abandonment perceived and what brought it about, to understand how the conversation was relayed to the rest of his family:

"All the men leave us. My dad left us for a woman with more money and a family of better stock. My sister's dad left us for Mexico and alcohol. Even my uncle, the last patriarch of our family, passed away and left us. That was the first time I left. Then my mom left, along with my sister, until my brother finally left" (2).

Were the narrator to agree with the expectations Chris describes, this reasoning could create a dynamic that moves the narrative forward. What motivates Carlos, though, is escaping, merely leaving his surroundings and circumstances. This is apparent as early as the desperation of his adolescence, in "Stuck": "I'd have to dive headfirst for this to work, I thought. Still, I'd have to fall at just the right angle. If it didn't work, I'd end up paralyzed. That'd be much worse" (Hernandez 39). Here, he ponders ending his life, considering the more likely chance that this manner of attempt would actually result in more difficulty, and depending on the results, an even more captive experience.

This escapist and mildly suicidal moment demonstrate the influence taken from Weil's *Waiting for God*. She shares a similar sentiment, though hers is a direct response to her perception of her brother's fortunes. "At fourteen I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me" (Weil 65). Where Weil's affliction comes via a defeatist, arguable envious attitude, the narrator in *Where We Are* is frustrated with his lack of agency, and a crowded lifestyle as a result of his mother's choices, not his own.

Weil proceeds to resolve her own situation via profound insight in the same passage, "After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment." *Waiting for God* is an epistolary spiritual and philosophical text. Therefore, the resolution of her conflict is stated as an argument for further exploration of her spiritual development. In the case of *Where We Are*, however, Carlos finds solace in the pursuit of his own Truth, which begins in the scene where Carlos lays in the back of the SUV, questioning God, then voraciously reads the Bible early in the mornings of his own accord.

Returning to the speculation of Chris as Gornick's monster, another illustrative example is the earlier-mentioned scene from "The Ousting" in which Carlos leaves Chris on the couch. As a result of the siblings' mismatched assumptions, the narrator must begin to engage with Chris's accusation through the many generated memories of his upbringing,

some that precede his own birth. This is a trait of his character that could be described as monster-like. Also, the way the narrator lingers on the image of Chris on the couch alone speaks to Gornick's contention that the monster's loneliness must be revealed. Chris and Carlos do not interact closely throughout the narrative, though. No evaluation or benchmarks of Carlos's progress in sewing what his family can reap are discussed by the two. Therefore, besides the couch scene, sufficient tension and conflict are not provided to decisively classify his brother as a "monster."

Carlos Sr. abandons his family before Chris is born, which leads the family down a path of difficulty as a direct result in many ways. Most obvious are the circumstances of "Starting Over in LA," which is the first division the family without a father experiences. Paqui explains, "Chris was so young, and I couldn't afford to take you both. There was no room at Tio Foncho's house" (Hernandez 11). Carlos Jr. also continues to engage with his father's behavior when he was present, as is apparent in "G Thinking She's My Mom." This is the section when Carlos discusses helping his grandmother under the table, and then hearing her grandmother's co-workers reminisce about Carlos Sr. upon noticing Carlos Jr.'s resemblance to him, "On one of those Sundays, my grandmother introduced me to a co-worker who knew my father. 'You're identical to him,' the woman said about my resemblance to Carlos Sr. On the way home, my grandmother told me that woman was one of Carlos's 'work wives.'" Here, Carlos Jr. struggles to understand how his father got away with such behavior, asking his mother how she handled it.

The closest explanation Carlos Jr. offers about his father's abandonment is that he left for a family that was closer to their father's aspirations than Paqui's: "... the grandmother I've never met was reminding her son of a promise he made years ago, to

marry a woman from their rural riverside community. The woman's name was Noris, and her family had made something of themselves" (Hernandez 11). When the narrator describes his father's second visit, he mentions the father's promise to return on his way back to the good life. "I waited for weeks, then months, then years. I kept waiting, thinking I'd see him again someday" (2). In the next sentence, attempts to invite Carlos Sr. to the wedding are unsuccessful, reiterating his intentional abandonment. "I stopped waiting when the wedding invitation my then fiancé sent him was returned to her. She threw it away." This is presented early in the narrative, and finally, active engagement with Carlos's father is put to bed in the present when Carlos Jr. says, "I was fine with that" in the final sentence of the same section. This line suggesting Carlos had little difficulty with his father's unknown whereabouts in early adulthood defeats the case for classifying Carlos Sr. as monster. The reader can see a struggle with his absence throughout, but he is not a primary saboteur in the manuscript.

Finally, the strongest case for a monster within the text has to do with who Gornick describes as the "other in oneself." That is, Carlos's own lack of moral agency, his reluctance to make productive decisions, and his resentment towards others' privileges continually threaten his productive activity, as he withdraws to internal dialogues and monologues often, prioritizing the abstract over the concrete. The most telling examples take place during "Part II: The Five-Year Wash," particularly in the sections "Rock Bottom" and "Tisdale Motors."

In "Rock Bottom," Carlos retreats to an obscure part of his workplace at the luxury hotel for a bout of self-pity and regret: "I watched the bartenders from a distance, from which I could hold them between my thumb and forefinger" (80). This illustrates his mental withdrawal from the current circumstance or the shift he is supposed to be working during.

The last sentence in “Foothills” serves as a transition into Tisdale Motors, depicting Carlos’s lack of agency: “I hadn’t even listened to the terms of the loan, just the monthly payment, and how important it was to take out a warranty on this car that had over 50,000 miles under its belt” (68). When the scene is actually narrated, Carlos sits silently while the two men converse, and even negotiate terms of the deal while Carlos takes in his surroundings.

Several moments in the text depict a mentally induced stagnancy that Carlos exhibits. But the difficulty with which Carlos grapples is not defined by his mental processing. Rather, it is found in moments where Carlos finds himself in situations he is unhappy with, that are, despite his placing the responsibility on other at times, his choices. It is Carlos’s mental absence, or lack of intentionality, in many of his decisions that result in his profound dissatisfaction with the circumstances of his early adult life. Carlos-as-protagonist, whose volition is constantly at odds with more pressing decisions, serves as the strongest case for Gornick’s monster, the other in himself that he grapples with throughout the narrative.

David Shields, in *Reality Hunger*, writes, “The man who writes about himself and his time is the man who writes about all people and all time” (163). It is this precept that the memoirist uses to justify his literary endeavor. I was reluctant to read Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* at Alexander Parsons’s recommendation. I imagined his profound intellect and privilege which ran contrary to my lineage and upbringing as a partial explanation for this reluctance. I was therefore intimidated by the prospect of reading his work.

The opening lines in which Nabokov presents the scope of his work, however, changed my outlook on the book. In them, the reader understands that the author intends to bookend an entire life, rather than a period of time within it:

“The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred beats an hour)” (Nabokov 1).

Calling into recollection the above quote from Shields’s *Reality Hunger*, Nabokov introduces us to his ruminations on life and mortality. And in narrating the trauma of his contemporary, Nabokov is implying he has arrived at these ruminations through observation of not only himself but others: “He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then he realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence.” *Where We Are* is informed by this in its exploration of others in similar phases of their lives.

For example, the section in which Carlos struggles with non-traditional university life also features that of his best friend’s, summed up with, “One of us said, ‘We’re too old for this shit,’ and the other nodded in agreement. ‘Yeah’” (114). Here, the importance is placed more on the situation’s difficulty than on the struggle to remember particulars such as who exactly is being quoted. The vagueness of the speaker’s identity speaks further to the collective sentiment of the two, their shared difficulty. And though the two are similar aged males, they experience dramatically different early lives. Michael’s parents remained present throughout his life. They live in a house located in a part of the neighborhood where

residents can spend leisure time in the front yard at two in the morning without concern for their safety: “Around two-thirty in the morning, we were on Mike’s front lawn...Periodically, a neighbor’s enormous chocolate lab could be seen making his night-time rounds” (115). It is through this collective sentiment that readers may begin to relate their experiences, of feeling out of place, of lacking vision, or heading down a non-traditional route.

Returning to the discussion of Carlos’s vision also indicates influence taken from *Speak, Memory*. In particular, the second chapter of the memoir regards Nabokov’s synesthesia, a condition he shares with his mother, “On top of all this I present a fine case of colored hearing. Perhaps “hearing” is not quite accurate, since the color sensation seems to be produced by the very act of my orally forming a given letter while I imagine its outline” (16).

Where We Are discusses the narrator’s own vision complications. He is entranced by the sun (15). He is drawn close to objects, “I asked my mom via text message recently, ‘How did you know I needed glasses as a four-year-old?’ She said, ‘You kept getting so close to everything’” (16). Nabokov’s hallucinations invigorate his imagery throughout the essay.

In a similar manner, though running emotionally contrary to Nabokov’s figurative use of his quirk, Carlos uses his blurred vision as a thread that contributes to his aimlessness. He learns, however, to embrace the uncertainty of what lies ahead on several levels, as is mentioned in the “Vision: Diagnoses” section: “I’m okay with it” (142), which is in contrast with his father in law’s, “What? No, I hope I die before I go blind.” In effect, we see Carlos accepting the circumstances he unsuccessfully denied in the section “I Once Was Blind”:

It wasn't yet lunchtime when a terrible headache crept in, when my face hurt from squinting, and my neighbors became frustrated with my constant questioning. I started to cry. "Carlos, come over here. What's the matter?" "I can't see. I don't know what we're doing right now, and I'm lost" (Hernandez 28).

Carlos-as-character's acceptance enables Carlos-as-narrator to employ his vision experiences as a thread throughout the work.

This acceptance also speaks to Nabokov's embrace of the future in *Speak, Memory*: "The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are, the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members" (205). "Reaching out and groping" means forward-thinking. The further the future one can reach for, the better. Apollo, the sun god, lights immense distances, which sets the stage for the tentacle imagery.

Additionally, when interpreting "science" as the literal aspects of a narrative recollection, and "poetry" as the artistic aspects, we understand the pursuit of writing is to create a harmonic balance between these two. Here is the passage taken from Nabokov, who references his contemporary to follow up on the previous quote about Apollo's tentacles: "Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time." The narrator in *Where We are*, in addition to providing feelings at points of time—in the "I Once Was Blind" section, for example, when he denies his vision problems—also provides the science, or what can be seen about his impediment. "“We pronounce it ‘Chirpy.’ It stands for Congenital Hypertrophy Retinal Pigment

Epithelium. In short, it's a dark benign freckle with veins that no one's diagnosed until very recently" (141).

In its nascent phase, *Where We Are* seeks to reconcile the disparity between science and poetry via the narrative and metaphorical significance of his vision throughout the manuscript. This is directly influenced by the second-chapter ruminations in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*.

The question of what one owes to their roots is again considered much later in the piece when the narrator mulls over a short speech he had made while at his wits' end:

"I was trying to be a Hispanic Robin Williams, addressing inner-city public school kids wearing polo shirts instead of privileged white adolescents wearing red coats. For this, I felt somewhat embarrassed, despite the honesty of my sentiment. This was what I got for outgrowing my roots and leaving them behind" (144).

In *Where We Are*, the narrator, as a working adult, is grappling with the realization that the roots he struggled to get comfortable in still present a divide. The early termination of his contract is fodder for the narrator to connect his failure to complete the contract as further proof of his removal from the demographic in which he was raised. Ultimately, though, it presents the question of how one shares space with others when the sentiment is shared that lack of resources, financial or otherwise, has forced them into the area out of desperation or lack of agency. This is the same question asked of the narrator about his family. The question is explored, and in some places informed, with influence from the many mentioned texts.

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Table of Contents

Prologue: The Verdict.....	1
Part I: The Beginning & The End.....	3
Waiting	3
Labyrinth.....	4
Origins	5
No School for Paqui.....	8
Paqui Goes into Labor	9
Quiet Baby	10
Nightmare Nanny.....	11
Birth of Chris	12
Starting Over in LA	13
Alternate Reality	15
Galveston Water	17
Birth of Emily	19
Vision, a Lack Thereof	21
Hammerly	21
Lice Haircuts.....	22
Howl at the Moon	22

Westhaven.....	23
Naked Lady.....	26
Hands in Pockets.....	28
Emily...Michelle Cano!.....	29
I Once Was Blind.....	30
Brown-Headed Stepchild.....	31
Ingrown Toenail.....	31
Saxophone.....	34
G Thinking She's My Mom.....	36
Fake Letter	37
Specter at Tia's	39
Mall with Cale	40
Stuck	41
Just Ask Him.....	42
Gifted Fender	44
Sarah: The First Attempt	44
Schlitterbahn	46
Tio Robert Last Christmas.....	47
Dispersal	50
Sarah in a Business Suit.....	52

Shadowdale Oaks.....	53
Band Banquet.....	54
Held Up.....	54
Pinky Toe.....	56
The Oustings.....	57
Part II: The Five-Year Wash.....	65
Vision: A Further Decline	65
Restaurant Life.....	66
Foothills	68
Tisdale Motors	72
Crash	73
Rock Bottom.....	76
7-Day Binge.....	78
Total Loss	93
Jim’s Suggestion.....	94
Weighing it Out	95
Let’s Do It.....	98
Danny’s Office.....	98
The Repo Incident.....	99
Getting The Saturn.....	104

Vicky the Microcosm	112
Angry French Class	114
Mike's Lawn.....	120
Study Buddy	124
Synoptic Stephanie	126
Big Star Ask.....	137
Part III: Soft Relocation.....	146
Vision: Answers.....	147
They Want You to Fail	148
The Girls	151
Steph's Pets.....	155
Chris's Pets	158

Prologue: The Verdict

I am abandoning my family. Just like my father before me, my mother's father before him, and my grandmother's father before him. Just like these men before me, I'm enticed by something better elsewhere. I'm so enticed in fact, that statistically speaking, I'm willing to make less money and pay more for the change. The motive behind these allegations: I have misaligned values, and spend more time dreaming and contemplating than serving and contributing. This is all in violation of the unspoken deal my family, particularly my brother, made with me. Unspoken by them, and unknown to me.

The tip of the following synoptic iceberg came in the form of a text message my brother sent me while I was across the country: "You're dumb for moving to Colorado. Or your reasons are dumb, whatever one you want to choose."

When I received that text, I was aware he'd been spending time with my wife back in Houston. Rather than confront my brother about his tactless approach, I approached my wife, who summed it up by quoting him:

"He stopped helping mom out financially so he could go finish his degree in Huntsville. Okay, cool. Then he went to grad school, which is fine because that way he could get a better job. But now he's going to graduate, and instead of finally being able to help again, he's moving to Colorado to struggle for longer, and still not make enough money to help."

Born and raised in Houston, I've spent twenty-eight of my thirty years of life here. Those other two years were spent in Huntsville, a college town just seventy-five miles north of my hometown. The distance is short enough that one could often return, every weekend

even. I did that for the first half of my time in Huntsville, to keep leading worship in Houston.

Men leave us. My dad left us for a woman with more money and a family of better stock. My sister's dad left us for Mexico and alcohol. Even my uncle, the last patriarch of our family, passed away and left us. That was the first time I left. Then my mom left, along with my sister, until my brother finally left.

For months, there was an apartment, basically empty, that we were all supposed to be living in.

Part I: The Beginning & The End

Waiting

We all get out of Carlos Sr.'s car after a trip to the Galleria. My brother and I are wearing the best pair of Nikes we've ever owned, and I'm holding a stuffed Foghorn Leghorn doll. Our father gave us all this. My sister didn't get shoes; she has a different dad. It's a weeknight just before winter break, so I'm still in my middle school uniform, khaki pants and a polo shirt.

Dad's heading further south towards El Salvador and promises to stop by here in Houston again on this drive back home to New York.

I wait for weeks, then months, then years. I keep waiting, thinking I'll see him again someday.

I stop waiting when the wedding invitation my then fiancée sent him is returned to her.

Labyrinth

I'm scribbling my way down a labyrinth, with no idea who or what is at the center. I want to drift through it, groping the walls, aimlessly. In the middle, I imagine a satisfactory answer will be there. I wouldn't have to make my way back out of it, instead retrieving the answers like a beast's carcass. The choices: will I be the guy who slings the carcass over his shoulder, donning my victory proudly, or the guy who drags it by its ankles, keeping it behind him, but at a distance?

Origins

Westview Street is a mile north of I-10. Known as the Katy Freeway where I'm from, I-10 dissects the western part of Houston. On the block's east end, where it intersects Gessner Road, is a McDonald's that has been there all these years. Ditto the Wendy's restaurant across the street, on the south side of Westview. The convenience store, a Stop-N-Go, sits on the west end of the block. Between the fast food joints and the Stop-N-Go are three apartment complexes. In the eighties, this part of Spring Branch, an originally German community, experienced a surge of Central American immigrants, most of them undocumented. It would be eight years before my mother could leave this place.

At the Stop-N-Go, the neighborhood boys loitered and flirted with the teenage girls, who were stopping in to pick something up at their families' behest. It was 1983. The boys wore t-shirts with the sleeves ripped off. They wore stonewashed jeans. Carlos was nineteen.

Paqui was seventeen. She'd noticed Carlos's fair skin, thick, soft head of hair, and colored eyes. She was fascinated by his eyes. Teenage girls acted like they were stopping in at their families' behests, just to grab milk or something. Perhaps they were, but they'd still talk about the boys who were present, cat-calling, winking at the girls. All of this was Spanish conversation. Who winked at who? Did you hear about so and so? I heard this person hooked up with that person.

Once, Paqui said to Roxana, "Do you know Carlos?"

"Oh, you think he's cute?"

"I just love his eyes, they're so beautiful."

"You like him!"

“I don’t know about that.”

“Want me to tell him you like him?”

“You don’t need to do that; it’s not important,” Paqui asked herself why she even mentioned him.

Carlos had indeed been winking at Paqui, smiling at her and trying to chat her up. Paqui didn’t want to share this with Roxana. Roxana was obsessed with boys, and with sex. It was hard to say which she was more obsessed with. Carlos was too experienced, already out of the high school bubble. He didn’t even live with his parents anymore. Sex was a thing for Roxana and Carlos. If Paqui came up in conversation, they’d try to make it a thing for her, too.

Over the weeks, Carlos’s flirting became advances, requests for dates, more than just the winks and cat-calls. But Paqui wasn’t ready for something like this, she didn’t want her mom finding out. Carlos wasn’t a virgin. Carlos would want sex. That was another world. That was what adults did. Paqui was trying to learn English and keep up at school. She was on the basketball team. She had homework. She had to take care of her little sister while her mom worked at the hospital or spent time with her husband Max, who was Paqui’s stepfather.

More weeks passed, and word got out that Roxana and Carlos had slept together. Paqui tried to not let on how it affected her. She tried to move on, get back to her teenage responsibilities. This further affirmed her sentiment, that she wasn’t part of their world. She

hoped not to have a reason to go to the convenience store, to not have to risk running into Carlos.

Carlos came to Paqui's front porch one evening. "I didn't know you had a thing for me," He said. "Roxana was being aggressive; I couldn't help it. If you had a thing for me, why didn't you ever give me your number or flirt back?"

"It's OK," Paqui managed. "Don't worry about it." Why would Roxana spill the beans? Since when had noticing someone's pretty eyes mean there were feelings involved? She wanted to go back inside. For now, all she could do was keep leaning backward as Carlos kept leaning increasingly closer.

"You want to go out with me?" He said. "You want to date me?"

She said she didn't know. She was trying to be evasive. His eyes were sketching a bedroom scenario into Paqui's. This was not her. This was more her older sister's kind of thing, maybe not promiscuity, but flirting and boyfriends for sure. Paqui couldn't say yes; she never quite said no. But Carlos was so comfortable with himself. He flirted with everyone. That was his style. Aggressive. Aferrado.

Carlos Herverth Hernandez was persistent though, and quick. He was quicker than Paqui could realize what was happening.

Francisca was home one day when her daughter Paqui walked in. She'd noticed her daughter spending time with Carlos, noticed that he'd been coming around to visit often. Now that they were finally alone in the same room together, she could ask, "¿que te hizo?"

“‘What did he do to me?’ What are you talking about?” Paqui was now on the couch, concentrating hard on the TV, doing her best to portray a teenager unwilling to engage in a conversation, not someone hiding something.

“So you’re a woman now. If you’re doing woman things, I guess you’re getting married now, too. That’s what women do.”

A few nights later, Francisca, Carlos, and Paqui were gathered at Francisca’s house. Paqui was the only one not talking. “You better take care of her,” Francisca said. “You can’t be fooling and flirting around anymore. And Paqui, you need to get a job.”

“I’ll work at Whataburger with Carlos part-time until I graduate.”

“Just make sure you’re working,” Francisca said.

Carlos assured Francisca he’d take care of her daughter. They went down to the courthouse.

No School for Paqui

In the eighties, bonds were proposed for the Harris County Housing Authority to rejuvenate the area of Spring Branch where so many Central American families had ended up. They were voted down by the surrounding Homeowner’s Associations. Even today, zoning proposals are hard-fought, only being ratified when Federal mandates require it. Paqui was loading her backpack to catch a school bus one morning. She and Carlos now lived in a one-bedroom on Westview Street, on the same block. Bedsheets played the role of curtains on the bedroom windows. The mattress had no frame and sat on the ugly, brown, eighties style drab carpet, which was even more unsightly in the closest thing one can get to living in projects, without actually living in projects.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He asked.

“Getting ready for school.”

He said, “Las mujeres nada más van a la escuela a putiar. Tu ya no vas a ir,” which means, “Girls only go to school to be sluts. You’re not going anymore.” Putiar is the keyword here, which converts slut into a verb, as in, “Slutting at school.”

“I’m a senior. I’m about to graduate.” She tried to protest. But she was a teenage girl, trying to protest to a twenty-year-old man.

“So what? What do you need school for? We need to be working. Just work more hours at Whataburger. You can work at the hospital, too.” Carlos was still working at Whataburger and the hospital. Back in the 80’s you couldn’t live off a single minimum wage job either.

Paqui Goes into Labor

My grandmother Francisca came to see my mom, to make sure she was doing okay. She hadn’t seen her in months, even though they lived on the same block, but in different buildings. In that magical way mothers do, Francisca immediately noticed it.

“What’s different? You’re pregnant aren’t you?”

My mother kept working at Whataburger through her first pregnancy. By this time, she’d gotten her high school diploma. My father worked two jobs, the one at Whataburger, and one at the hospital where my grandmother worked, Memorial Hospital. She worked there until she was forced to retire in 2004.

Today, Memorial Hermann is a medical complex: several buildings topped with an elaborate helipad. Its lighting changes color depending on the next federal holiday that approaches. Green and red for Christmas, and so on and so forth. The complex boasts a

Westin Hotel with a sky bridge hovering over Gessner Road that connects to Memorial City Mall across the street. The hospital and the mall straddle Gessner, where that street intersects with the Katy Freeway, Interstate 10. A mile north, Gessner intersects with Westview Street, the intersection where Wendy's and McDonald's still stand, several renovations later. Back then, the hospital was a single thirty-story building.

Late in the pregnancy, my grandmother had started coming over to keep an eye on my mother. When my mother changed underwear for the third time in one day, my grandmother knew it was time.

My mother's Medicaid plan prevented her from giving birth at Memorial City Hospital. Instead, they went deeper into Houston, where the bayous course through the inside of Loop 610.

Quiet Baby

I was born Carlos Herverth Hernandez, Jr. at Jefferson Davis Municipal Hospital, the first of three siblings. Built atop a Confederate cemetery near Buffalo Bayou, Jeff Davis Hospital shut down when Ben Taub opened a new, more modernized campus in 1985, the same year I was born.

While in labor, my mother shared a room with a German woman, who had fair skin and light eyes. Somehow, the German woman's baby had my mother's complexion--darker skin and black hair. I had the same complexion as the German woman.

In an old Polaroid photo, Carlos Hernandez Sr. has puffy seventies hair, and is smirking at the camera. His light green eyes are glowing, sketching things into the camera lens, behind which is my mother's eye. He wears only a pair of blue underwear while cradling me, an eight-pound bundle. The year was 1985.

I came into the world aware only of light and shadows. The plan is for silhouettes to become portraits as our eyes learn to work together, two as one. At some point, earlier than I can recall, while my eyes were learning to collaborate, something stunted that, converting light into asterisks. My vision has worsened every year since I was three.

“You were a quiet baby,” my mother tells me. “So quiet, it made me more worried than a crybaby would. I never knew if something was wrong. Even if you were hungry or needed a change, you would just move around, uncomfortable.”

“There was one time you cried in so much pain, and it was my fault. I was washing your little body, and I noticed your foreskin was swollen. I tried to pull it back, but it was stuck. So I took you to the emergency room, where the doctor explained to me how to clean around the area. He told me had to pull the skin back quickly because that was the least painful way. It was so red when he pulled it back, and right then you cried harder than you’d ever cried before. I cried too; I hated myself for putting you through that so early.”

“Why not just circumcise me then?”

“Your dad didn’t want to. I should’ve done it anyway.” This is what she always comes to when I ask her stories about my dad. What she should or shouldn’t have done.

“I should’ve never dated him.”

“I should’ve ignored him and my mom and not married him.”

“I should’ve been a musician, and a writer, like you.”

Nightmare Nanny

There’s a scar on my left hand. It resembles a piece of thread buried under the skin.

I was a toddler, and mother was picking me up from the nanny when she saw the serious burn on that part of my palm. The nanny also lived on Westview, and when my mom asked her what happened, she stammered. “I don’t remember what her chicken shit answer was.”

The same way my mother found out about Roxanne and Carlos two years prior, she found out about my father visiting the nanny I was in her care. There never was a straight answer for the burn.

The scar stays white when my palms go red. I can still run my index finger along it. I don’t remember injuring that part of my palm in any other way.

Birth of Chris

My brother Christian Roberto Hernandez was born at Memorial Hospital, a mile south of Westview Drive, eighteen months later. He was not a quiet child. Even in the womb, my mother tells me he kicked more aggressively, always fidgeted, caused her more indigestion. Whereas my birth was so tranquil it concerned my mother, my brother’s was the exact opposite. The moment Chris scrambled out of the womb (as I like to imagine it), he urinated all over everyone in attendance. He remains a pisser to this day, for better or worse.

While my brother was marking the birthing room as his territory, my father was back home in San Miguel, El Salvador, at the bedside of his gravely ill mother. While he was at her bedside, the grandmother I’ve never met was reminding her son of a promise he made years ago, to marry a woman from their rural riverside community. The woman’s name was Noris, and her family had made something of themselves. Noris was now doing much better than Carlos’s current family or my mom’s current family, and she’d made it all the way to Long Island.

My mother got along famously with one of her sisters-in-law who lived in Arizona. After recovering from my brother's birth and still not hearing from my father, in the days before cell phones and before she could afford a pager, she took us with her to visit the aunt I was too young to remember meeting. Everyone was still speaking in Spanish. My father called his sister while my mother was there. These were the days when people picked up another headset on the same landline if they wanted to eavesdrop. Naturally my mother picked up, to hear him say to his sister, "I'm in New York now. I married Noris."

"Carlos, I'm here with your sister," my mother blurted into the receiver.

"I'll talk with you later."

Starting Over in LA

There's a photo of my mom at Disneyland holding my brother as a toddler, who's wearing a bright yellow shirt. Behind them is a spewing fountain. This photo was taken sometime during her brief stint in Los Angeles, when she left me in Houston, intending to send for me later.

"Chris was so young, and I couldn't afford to take you both. There was no room at Tio Foncho's house." I'd asked her about her time in LA hoping she'd clarify one of my earliest memories, of me being wrapped up in a pellet of sheets on my grandmother's living room floor. In this memory, I'm eighteen months older than my brother, who looks to be about eighteen months old in the Disneyland photo. This is one of the first hazy memories I can pick out of my farthest past.

“It wasn’t even my idea,” my mother explained. “Your grandma and her brother thought it would be good for me to start again there. I could barely even drive. I could sneak to school while your dad went to work, but I couldn’t steal the car to practice driving.”

She was working in one of Tio Foncho’s clothing factories, sewing fabrics. She wasn’t particularly good at it either, being a self-proclaimed tomboy with no prior experience in sewing. On the contrary, she was more known for destroying things, her skateboard, her clothing while injuring herself. As a child in El Salvador, while her big sister would sneak around with boys, my mother would wander outside of the neighborhood skateboarding. Once my aunt locked herself in the apartment to gossip with other girls instead of keeping an eye on my mom—they were ten and fourteen—my mother fell down a concrete staircase and tore her chin open. The faint scar is visible if she lets you concentrate on that part of her face for long enough at the correct angle. She once brought home a raccoon cub. They kept it until its claws hardened and sharpened excessively, naturally destroying so many things in the home.

My mother tells this memory to explain why LA didn’t work out: When she couldn’t keep up with the other women on the production floor, my uncle decided to have her make deliveries in one of his work vans instead. Her inability to drive, coupled with the savage urban driving of Los Angeles (also found in Houston for that matter) had her shoulders up to her ears, and her chest up to the steering wheel, praying the “Our Father” quickly and repeatedly until she arrived at her destination.

She always says she lasted three months in Los Angeles. She’s stuck with that amount of time since the first time I heard her tell it. She likes to tell me she came back

because she missed me too much. “You could’ve just sent for me,” I tell her when she recounts this. Then she explains further. “No, I didn’t even like Los Angeles.”

Recently, I was talking with my great uncle, who took my mom in three decades ago. “She was here the better part of a year; I remember it well. It’s hard to maintain a business like that in the States. The labor is difficult for a worker, and expensive for an owner. I liquidated that business soon after she left.”

Alternate Reality

I often think about this alternate reality, in which my mother becomes acclimated, gets situated in her own place, and learns how to be a confident driver in Los Angeles. The first time I thought about it was when I joined my grandmother on a trip there.

I was twenty, working and studying full-time on opposite ends of Houston without a vehicle, trying to make another twenty-year-old have the same feelings for me that I’d had for her, and constantly having problems with her because of it. The week she finally called it quits, I caught some sort of flu, missing work and classes for a week. I was bed-ridden at my grandmother’s for that week, who’s always gotten standby plane tickets from a nephew who lives in San Antonio and works for a major airline. This time, she got one for me so I could join her. When we came back from our trip, I’d have no job and would drop out of college, ensuring I’d be staying with my grandmother for a while.

The year I spent with my grandmother as a three-year-old affords me her confidence often. On the plane, I said, “¿Por qué siempre Los Angeles?”

She said, “Please don’t tell anyone I said this, but if I wasn’t so worried about my kids, and their kids, I’d be living in Los Angeles.”

I didn't blame her. My life and health had fallen apart by the time I ended up at her house with the flu. One of my cousins, a junior in high school at the time, was living in the room adjacent to mine with his girlfriend of the same age because they were expecting a baby. Occasionally, a cousin would show up to play catch-up with her, have dinner with her, ultimately not leaving before borrowing money from her for some emergency. When I moved out, I was promptly replaced by another cousin. Those rooms always had people living in them. It was like our family had a halfway house. But it works because tenant-relatives contribute whatever their current situation allows, which means my grandmother can avoid depleting her meager retirement funds.

I said to her, "So stop worrying about them and go. I'm sure your brother would help you." Since the loss of that factory, her brother has added two-thousand square feet to his house. He sent one of his kids to study at USC. He owns a successful pupusería, what one calls a Salvadoran restaurant. He's even a pastor at a charismatic church. Over lunch with my second cousin, the one who went to USC, I asked him what my grandmother is like during visits, which happen several times a year, sometimes lasting up to a month.

"She just hangs out at home, helping my mom clean all day. I always try to take her places, but she never wants to go out. She always just says she's content where she is."

I told him, "She's retired. She mostly watches novellas at home, anyway. I think to her just being in a different city is enough," He's only a few years older than I am.

On the plane, my grandmother's response was, "Stop worrying? These are my children. These are my son's children, God rest his soul. How can I not be there for them?" Just like any other time she's reminded of my uncle, she starts to tear up and her voice gets shaky. So the conversation ends.

I wanted to say, “Don’t you see? That’s *why* they keep coming back. You’re their safety net. If acrobats used their safety nets as often as our family uses theirs, they’d never get any work.” But I didn’t say it because now we were in a moment of silence for my uncle Robert, the patriarch of our family, the oldest of my grandmother’s kids, who died unexpectedly when I was fourteen.

She wipes the remaining moisture from under her eyes with a tissue, sniffles, and sighs. “No, I could never leave them.” I went back to staring out the window at the tiny desert dunes of the West, wondering how long it would take to hit the ground falling from the altitude we were at.

Today, my mother lives in one of my grandmother’s rooms, and another sibling of my grandmother’s, who just moved to the States, lives in the other.

Galveston Water

In this memory, I’m three or four years old, and my mother is back in Houston. I’m not. I remember the salty primordial broth that is Galveston seawater. Off the coast, the water is brownish, in stark contrast to the deep blue with white flecks it seemed to wear when seen from the muddy beach. I’m clinging tenaciously to my father while a woman—not my mother, floats with us offshore. Each time water rises, it sings my sinuses, blurs my vision. This is what I can remember: the water, the woman with the ocean-blurred face, and the sound of my dad telling me to hold on.

Another memory from these days: I am staring at the sun—the brightest, crispest of lights, distinct and prominently protruding from the sky, unmistakably a perfect white circle

against a blue sky, littered with clouds that could be shaped into anything. It was that protruding white orb, with clearly defined edges, the sharpest thing in the sky, that captivated my gaze—until my mother realized I was staring directly at it, and snatched me out of the trance by my plump white arm. “You’re going to go blind,” she hollered, dragging me into our apartment, which might as well have been pitch dark compared to my previous surroundings. When the sun would set, I’d say God’s eye was following everyone inside. When God fell asleep, we should go to bed too, since he couldn’t protect us after dark.

I asked my mom via text message recently, “How did you know I needed glasses as a four-year-old?”

She said, “You kept getting so close to everything.”

“Do you remember the specific moment?”

She never responded.

In the summer of eighty-nine, my brother and I played outside all day, in the courtyard in front of our porch, from where my mom would watch. It was cooler outside during the months when we couldn’t afford the utilities. A crew of Mexican guys hung out on a porch nearby. Two of them were siblings, most of them were cousins. On days they couldn’t find work, one of them would come chat my mom up, hang out with her while she watched us play. He wore torn jeans, black shirts with Skid Row on them. Had a tattoo on his back in large gothic letters: EMILIA. He wore a red paisley bandana around his forehead. They were some of the only Mexicans on Westview.

His older brother sold weed, but the guy with the tattoo wasn't involved with that. He did smoke it every once in a while, though. Mostly, he liked his birongas, Busch or Bud in a brown paper bag. It was what the guys did on days when they couldn't find work that paid under the table: grabbed a tall boy in a paper bag from the Stop-N-Go, and hung out on the patio drinking.

I practiced tying my shoes while sitting on the couch armrest, so close to getting it right. My mother was in the kitchen, always in the kitchen these days. "Do it again," she kept telling me. "That's how you learn. You have to do it by yourself." She was right.

I ran to the kitchen to show her my tied laces. She cheered. "I know what the baby will be," I say.

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"A Girl."

"Really? How do you know that?"

"I just do."

Birth of Emily

My grandmother met me at the bus stop on Westview Drive, near the end of pre-kindergarten. I was pleasantly surprised, telling her about my day. I didn't speak much English yet. I could never remember P.E., so I just made up two letters every time. She corrected me. When my excitement ebbed, I asked her why my mom didn't pick me up.

"She's feeling sick today," she told me. "You'll see her when you get home, though."

I walked from a sunny day into a darkened bedroom. The bedsheets my mother lay under were checkered blue. A Gun's n' Roses Tapestry was draped over the window. The guy from the neighbor porch is in bed with her. I couldn't remember when or how he'd come around; he'd always been here. He wore bandanas, black shirts with rock and roll. He'd be my sister's dad, not mine.

In the summer, my sister Emily was born at Memorial Hospital. In our apartment on Westview Drive, I cradled her. She was darker than my brother or me, like her dad. My mother had her arms around mine, just in case. I would help bathe her. I would help change her for number one, but not number two. I would feed her bottles of milk and pacifiers.

There's a photo of my swaddled sister on checkered blue sheets. I'm resting my chin on my fists, which are on my elbows, which are on the bed. I'm staring and smiling at her with placid eyes.

When my mom didn't text me back the story that demonstrated my need for glasses at such a young age, I asked her in person.

"You always stood so close to things, and I would have to tell you to back up. Once, from the kitchen, I heard Fernando yelling angrily. When I leaned out of the kitchen to see what was going on, I saw that he was yelling at you for being too close to the TV. I saw your little face, you looked so scared and confused about it. It hurt me, bad. I knew right then this wouldn't work out, but we had Emily now, so I didn't want to believe it. I made you an eye appointment."

Vision, a Lack Thereof

I remember being in an optometrist's office for the first time, answering the "fuzzy or better, number one or number two" questions. Posters and diagrams of eyeballs were on the walls. I was nervous, trembling even. I had to blow the words out of myself in puffs, hitting consonants hard to get the whole word out before what felt like cotton in my mouth choked them out. "FU-zzy." "BET-ter." The doctor explained to me that I'd always need glasses, and I'd have to come in for new ones every year.

The cornea, that miraculous prism that bends light in the most precise of ways. Like slips through an endless network of vacuum tubes, light moves through the optic nerves to the brain. There, lights become chemicals and shape the world around us.

For years, my glasses were large tortoise shell frames in the tackiest of shapes. Today, young people take selfies with them. Back then, though, I was typically the only child in the room with frames that thick and massive. I broke them often.

Hammerly

We left the apartments on Westview Drive and moved into Spring Woods Village Apartments in 1990. The complex was still in Spring Branch District, three miles north of Westview and Gessner, across the street from my new kindergarten, Westwood Elementary. The furniture we brought from the old place made this place look mostly empty. Roseanne played on the TV. In our living room was a fireplace built into a white brick wall, the first time I'd seen a thing like that. They brought outside walls into the apartment, I thought while running my hands across the smooth painted surface of brick and mortar.

Lice Haircuts

We all have full, thick heads of hair. Always have. Once we got lice so bad, my mother had our heads shaved instead. By a professional, my mom decided. Just because we didn't have much money didn't mean we had to look poor.

The owner of Carmen's hair styles marveled at my resemblance to Carlos Sr. She hugged my mother excitedly, introduced us to her daughter, who was a few years older than we were and sweeping floors. She was gorgeous, I remember.

Then, like now, my four-year-old brother's hair was coarser than mine. Clippers hurt him so he would cry every time. When my turn came, I stepped through his rich black trimmings on the floor and climbed into the chair.

The buzz of the clippers entranced me, drowning out the novellas playing on the waiting area TV. The gown she draped over me felt like a blanket, and I became sleepy. Carmen started asking me things like, "Does your mom tell you how much you look like your father? You're such a handsome young boy, just like him." I felt I was plumper, but I didn't say that.

"What's he doing now?" I shrugged. She asked other idle questions like these, to which I also shrugged in response.

Howl at the Moon

This is the first memory I have of Fernando shouting at me: It was late, after nine o'clock, on a Saturday night. The sky was a dark, rich purple with lavender haphazardly smeared across it. Dingy orange bulbs repeatedly flashed over us on the highway. In our old blue Crown Victoria, we thumped rhythmically over the highway. 83.7 FM The Arrow was playing Credence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising."

On the highway, we approached dense forestry. It was a stretch of Highway 6 that feels short and long at the same time. In the time of this recollection, I knew it as the road that got us to Bear Creek Park. When we would go on this highway, it felt like we were on a country road, in the middle of a road trip, for ten minutes while we passed between neighborhoods in suburban Houston.

I imagined we were in some dark forest, pretending we were at risk of being stranded and wolves were chasing us. The true part, about the car potentially being stranded, grounded fantasy in reality. Fernando was driving, and wasn't in a good mood. I started howling. No one else was talking, and my siblings weren't playing along with my game. So I howled louder. "I really sound like a wolf," I thought, getting really into this. "If I keep howling convincingly, maybe they'll all join in." I was getting more and more immersed in my role, in search of a certain buzz that would vibrate my skull if I could get it just right.

In the middle of my best and loudest howl, Fernando shouted, "Shut up, Carlos," and I did, a lump forming in my throat. The only sounds once more were "Bad Moon Rising" and the thumps along the highway.

In twenty years, my mom will tell me how much this hurt her.

Westhaven

Just before first grade, we moved again, to an upstairs apartment another mile west of Westview and Gessner. There was a courtyard with a pool. Rather, there was evidence of a pool. A kidney-shaped design made of large bricks was in the courtyard. The bricks outlined concrete, and it seemed unusual compared to the two other courtyards with no brick-outlined kidney shape. One of the first friends we made started feeding us lore about a period of time

he could remember when that courtyard was still a swimming pool. I know better now than to believe he was around. He was six or seven years old at the time, and even if he had been around when the pool was, he could never remember the level of detail he'd provided in his anecdotes. A seven-year-old divulging lore and anecdotes. Even at that age, we knew to take his stories with a grain of salt.

This was at a time when I feared nothing. My mother would scold us for bringing tiny frogs home in toy packages. We would give no thought to climbing trees as high as we could, and if we got too high up, it wasn't an anxious thing if we struggled to remember the steps necessary to backtrack. We used to jump off a toolshed, hang over the railing of the second story balcony, and then let go for a fall of a few feet. At school, we'd tell our peers who lived in houses that we made nothing of jumping off second story balconies where we lived.

My mother didn't enforce film and game ratings. We played *Mortal Kombat* as soon as it was released, blood and all. I have a faint memory of watching Johnny Depp be devoured by his mattress thanks to Freddy Kreuger, which spewed thirty Johnny Depps' worth of blood while it chewed on only one of him.

And then, from what seemed like one day to the next, I began to fear everything to different degrees.

As far as films were concerned, *Candyman* did it for me. I was seven and my cousins, who were nine and ten, had brought it to our apartment to watch on a Saturday night. I fell promptly to sleep once it ended, no problems. I then woke up at three in the morning in a cold sweat. I was on the couch and suspecting something may be lurking behind it, but I had to pee. Should I look over the edge before getting up? Should I just get up naturally like nothing happened? Around me in different parts of the living room slept my brother and two

older cousins. I'd be the first to go if Candyman was behind the couch. I looked at my brother and cousins for what I thought might be the last time, and got up to go to the restroom, all the blood leaving my head and racing through my pacing heart. Somehow I survived the ordeal.

Once on a Monday, my brother and I came home to see an orange cord running along the wall, coming in from the window of the living room. We asked what it was.

"The power's out," was all my mom said. There were candles everywhere. In the restroom was a votive. Even though a Da Vinci Jesus was painted on it with a thorny illuminated heart, with the crown of thorns on his head and tears streaming from his eyes, something about votives and candlelight evoked a sense of satanic ritual. I avoided using the restroom at all costs until my mom forced me to take my nightly shower.

My mom has always bought those giant bottles of Mane and Tail or placenta shampoo. They'd last a long time, and they were apparently nourishing for curly, coarse hair like hers, her boyfriend's, and my siblings'. I had fine, soft brown curls. Anyway, she made me take a shower, no matter how much I protested the darkness. In the past, I'd been able to use my poor vision as an excuse, but because everyone was showering in dim light, I wasn't special or exempt. I still remember this shower as one of the most terrifying moments of my life. I must've taken eight seconds flat. As for the shampoo, it had a distinctive smell, a cheap shampoo smell as I consider it now. The other thing about my mom's shampoo habits was that she almost never bought the same one twice. She probably moved on to Alberto V05 or some such brand after this bottle. But every once in a while, she'd buy this jug of mane and tail shampoo, and every time she did, my eighty-second-long showers would be terrifying.

That night, we watched the Monday night movie on our TV. Every once in a while, that cord would be hanging out our window, sometimes to return the favor to our neighbors, sometimes to request the favor again. Looking back, it was all so democratic. But for the rest of my upbringing, every time I'd come home to flip on a switch, the anticipation would give me pause. Would the lights come on when I flipped the switch? I even remember a few moments in my earliest twenties, when Nathan moved out because I wasn't paying my share, wondering the same thing some days.

Naked Lady

When I was six years old, God developed into a man who created everything and was still staring, blinding us, mad at us for being insubordinate. My cousin took me out to the lot behind the apartment complex where we lived. Out there was a sun-bleached porn magazine he'd stumbled upon, something I'd yet to see in my life. So he showed it to me.

The next morning, in my first-grade classroom, I spent the day fighting to prevent myself from mentally superimposing my classmates' heads onto the naked sun-washed bodies I'd seen the day before.

Soon after, my cousins discovered a VHS tape in our coat closet. They'd watch it with us while my mom was at work. When my brother and I started watching it without them, we couldn't hide the evidence as well as they could. Here's how that went: It was a Monday, and Mom was making a huge pot of beans that would last us through the week. The smell of cumin had spilled out of the kitchen, into the sala, making its way to my brother and me, who were sitting on the hand-me-down couch. Framed on the wall to my left, the Caucasian Da Vinci Jesus's heart burned while he stared. I was forgiven, yet he kept staring at me. I avoided eye contact with him. When his eyes caught mine, they were playing for

keeps. I was a seven-year-old wondering how painters do that. A tingly warmth was in my face, hottest in my ears. I felt I was probably blushing.

I wanted swift corporal punishment, to get it over with quickly, to go hide in my bottom bunk. Chris probably wanted the same swift punishment. Mom: Please, just hit us and send us to the room. She paced back and forth, waving exhibit A—the VHS tape—up and down. The sticker on it said “Dick-Tations.” Her eyes searched for someone who wasn’t in the room. “Ay Padre,” she prayed in quick, Salvadoran Spanish, smoothing over consonants like the French do. It’s a prayer in Spanish for patience with me, with Chris. She’s used it our entire lives. My eyes, in a head tilted mom-ward, didn’t lose hers so she wouldn’t think I tuned her out. Here came the grin she hated so much, but I couldn’t stop it. “It’s a twitch or something, I don’t know,” I would always explain to teachers.

“Stop smiling, Carlos. This is why you’re always getting kicked out of your classes. This is serious, guys. Cristian, how much did you see?” She uses his full name in Spanish when she’s in a state. She *would* ask him; he was only 18 months younger, not having yet learned how to lie well enough yet, still thinking parents are omniscient.

“Sperm,” he said, and the numbness in my head spread to the rest of my body, paralyzing me. Dammit E, I thought to my cousin faux-telepathically. You just had to tell him what sperm was. Cue the sex talk.

Then, a sigh from my mother, followed by, “Ok—oh my God—well now you know what sex is. Yes, me and your dad had sex. That’s what we did to have you and your brother. That’s how Fernando and I had your sister.” Her arm finally relaxed, and the VHS hand dropped down beside her hip. I wondered where she’d hide it next in our two-bedroom apartment while Chris asked to go back outside and play.

I couldn't avoid wondering, "Mom, you do those things, the things on the tape?"

I told myself, "I'll never get caught again."

Hands in Pockets

I was in first grade, suiting up in cleats and shin guards for my first soccer practice. My family's mentality: Your father was an excellent soccer player. You and your brother have miniature versions of his legs, so you've inherited that talent. I'm a spitting image of my father. I'm a completely different book, wrapped in his dust jacket.

During practices, I stood around on the field every week, the spotlights blinding me while the coach repeatedly reminded me to take my hands out of my pockets. I remember my teammate, Alex, taking pointers from his dad. They were working on toe bouncing and head-butts. I was entranced by it. If my dad was as good as my family claimed, he could probably do that, too.

At games, I couldn't even see the ball, only knowing it existed because players danced around it. When it was coming my way for the first time, I didn't see it either.

"Carlitos, the ball!" My mom yelled. It seemed to appear out of thin air, so I lunged at it. At the same time, a boy named Jesse did, too. He kicked me in the shin, sending me face first into a chalk line on the grass. Other kids laughed at the white chalk stripe on my face.

As life has it, my brother Chris, who resembles my mother, a Benitez not a Hernandez, has a knack for sports. Chris went on to dabble in several. I wasted the daylight locked in our bedroom, under a lamp that would get so hot it was dangerous to touch. Outside, my brother's voice contributed to a collective of them, while I handwrote transcriptions of *Cinderella* and other tales, while I drew Chuck Taylor sneakers and prize-winning rodeo pigs.

My mom walked into the room one night. “Mijo, you have a game tonight,” She said. “Do you want to go?” I hesitated before saying I didn’t think so.

“Are you sure?” I wasn’t sure.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” I continued my drawing or writing, and she closed the door behind me.

During journal time at school, I drafted a fictional journal entry about triumphant victories in which I took essential parts. “Joey kicked it to me. I passed it to Nick. He passed it back to me. We scored, and won.” Sentences like that.

When, at random, the teacher called on me to read an entry to the class, I got one sentence in and broke down crying. I thought, “They all saw me. They all saw right through me.” I was resentful, jealous of my teammates, whose fathers gave them pointers, whose fathers could afford pizza for the whole team, whose fathers bought them their very own playgrounds to keep in their very own backyards.

Emily...Michelle Cano!

Fernando borrowed a camcorder for my sister’s third birthday. It was a nice one that actually held a VHS. No transferring or dubbing was necessary. It said JVC on the side and had a little puffy microphone next to a bulb on the front. Top of the line among our family and friends in 1994.

In the video, the Da Vinci Jesus is still on the wall above the couch. Emily is following her dad the cameraman around, whining, “Daddy, I wanna see it. I wanna see the camera.” Occasionally, you can see my mom in the kitchen wearing an apron, not smiling. Periodically, he can excite her with his inquisitive tone and muster enthusiastic answers. She runs out of sight when he asks. She bounces back into the room and yells a response.

“¿Como te llamas?”

“Emily!” She goes back into hiding.

“¿Que mas?” He asks.

“Michelle Cano!” Back into hiding.

“¿Cuántos años tienes?”

She jumps out with a hand showing three fingers, missing three front teeth.

The camera makes its way slowly to the kitchen while the voice of the cameraman asks “Donde esta Paqui?” When the camera arrives, mom covers her face and frowns.

“Ya Fer!” She says, turning her back to it as if to work on something else. There was a barbecue at Hammerly Park later that day, so she was probably seasoning the pounds and pounds of fajita beef and chicken we would eat later that day.

I Once Was Blind

On the morning of a school day in 1995, I woke up on top of my glasses. In forgetting to remove them, I’d slept on them and broken a temple off. My mom made me go to school anyway. “As soon as you get to school, ask your teacher if you can sit in the front row, and tell her what happened with your glasses.”

I disobeyed her and instead told the teacher, “Oh, I don’t need them anymore, I can see just fine.”

“Oh really? That’s great, Carlos.”

I spent the first hours of the day listening very carefully to the teacher, squinting as hard as I could to read along. The teacher would scribble things on the chalkboard, but nothing appeared on the green emptiness. I asked my neighbor to share what was on the board with me. I can do this, I kept telling myself.

It wasn't yet lunchtime when a terrible headache crept in, when my face hurt from squinting, and my neighbors became frustrated with my constant questioning. I started to cry.

"Carlos, come over here. What's the matter?"

"I can't see. I don't know what we're doing right now, and I'm lost."

Brown-Headed Stepchild

Contrary to the first time, I actually remember the last time Fernando yelled at me for being so close to the TV. I was in fourth grade. He was on the couch wearing a pair of cutoff shorts, chewing a toothpick, a tall boy in his hand. My mom was in the kitchen. "Carlos!" He began. "I told you a million times about sitting there!"

"You're not my dad!" It was the first time I yelled the stepchild slogan at him. By the time my mom made it to the living room, I was already in mine and my brother's room. I knew she'd send me there anyway.

She called me from work the next day. "You know, Fernando felt bad when you told him that." I said nothing.

Ingrown Toenail

My mom used to love this anecdote: "When Fernando started coming home later and later, and more and more often, I was done. He came home one night and passed out on the bed. I started yelling, snapping, shaking him. He was out cold. That made me so angry. An ingrown toenail had been bothering him for months. He couldn't walk right because it was so sensitive. He wouldn't even let me treat it with peroxide anymore. I stared at him getting

madder and madder, looking him up and down, wondering who the hell he might be running around with behind my back.”

“Then it came to me. I went for my tweezers and yanked the dead toenail out of his foot. He grunted, and his face turned bright red. He still didn’t wake up. It felt so good.”

I hated Fernando for making all of us go to Catholic church. Everything about it bored me, the droning organ, the back and forth reading from the book, the lifeless choir voices. We weren’t in any confirmation class because we didn’t attend St. Cecilia consistently enough. For an hour, we’d guess at lyrics while they were being sung. During the sermons, a tiny version of myself would run around the inside of my brain, pounding on the walls of my mind, yelling, “Wake up! You’re going to end up in hell!” No matter how hard I tried, though, I couldn’t hold my eyelids up. An hour of rising, kneeling, nodding off, then a splash of holy water on the way out.

Afterward, we’d get to the Taqueria so Fernando could have menudo, the Mexican hangover remedy. It’s spicy beef tongue and tripe soup. Squeezing a lime’s worth of juice into it was supposed to make it perfect. That didn’t seem to work for me, but quesadillas did. The restaurant was packed. “Of course, it was packed,” I thought. We didn’t arrive early like usual because of church. A clown would show up. He made balloon animals and traipsed around the room giving them to children, laying his business card on their tables. When we paid the cashier at the front of the restaurant, we’d each get a pack of Canel’s gum. They were 3 for 25 cents in those days.

With a satisfied belly and having finally overcome grogginess, I’d think “Sorry, God,” to make sure He wasn’t mad so I wouldn’t go to hell.

We used to hang out at my aunt's house most Saturdays, eat barbecue, play with cousins. Most importantly, they had cable TV. We could watch *Ren and Stimpy* on Nickelodeon. My aunt Violet was the first to buy a house and bought it with Fernando's brother, with whom she'd had two daughters, in addition to her oldest who had a different dad. On a night when we slept there to leave Fernando at the apartment alone, he showed up to my aunt's. Naturally, his brother let him in. It was a barbecue, after all.

I woke up to his begging voice, asking my mom for a second chance. I pretended to be asleep while she kept pushing him away, rejecting him while he lay on the bed next to her. Her stirring finally sounded like she sat up. She finally said NO in a full voice. I glanced around the room to see if Emily and Chris had woken up. I couldn't see anyway, but I heard no stirring from them.

Fernando left the room. I fell back asleep.

By fifth grade, we moved right next to the Union Pacific line. It ran adjacent and parallel to the Katy Freeway, and we lived on the opposite side, the poorer side of the Memorial City Mall and hospital. Fernando would occasionally come around to pick Emily up for a few hours, but that was all.

From the public library, my mom checked out books called "Food, Nutrition & You," and "Holistic Running." She read them at night while we played video games on the living room TV. We started eating lots of chicken breast and broccoli. Lemon pepper chicken, she called it. I didn't mind it.

Her friend Angie came by one day to celebrate mom losing forty-five pounds. They went out for the night. My cousins who were a couple years older came over to stay the night. We played video games, they'd rummage the place for left behind porno vids and mags that Fernando left behind. The first thing the next morning, I went to my mom's bedroom, glad to see her sleeping under a bundle of sheets. Every few weekends we would do this.

Saxophone

Toward the end of fifth grade, the Spring Oaks Middle School band came to my school, Shadow Oaks Elementary, to play a concert for us. After their performance, the band teacher Mr. Navarro, explained to us, "Just fill out this piece of paper to let us know what instruments you're interested in playing. In the summer, we'll call your parents so they can bring you to Spring Oaks and we can get you started." They didn't say playing in the middle school band was a choice among many.

That summer we had to go to Spring Oaks during a late slot after my mom got off work. "Percussion," I told him after the pleasantries.

"Actually, percussion's full," he said, "why don't you take this?" It was, not yet known to me, a trumpet mouthpiece. "Why don't you buzz into this, and let's see how you sound." After I had buzzed, he suggested other instrument sections that weren't yet full. "Most of the slots are full this close to the school year," he told us, "we have saxophone, baritone, and tuba."

My mom turned to me. "What do you think, Carlitos? Saxophone like Lisa Simpson?" Another kid buzzed into a mouthpiece at a nearby table, where he sat with his mom and the other band director.

“Sure,” I said shrugging, “If those are my choices.”

On the first day of school, I reported to second period for band. It turned out I’d been mistakenly scheduled for the percussion period. I sat spectating for an hour while the band director who had “counseled” me introduced the students to percussion and listed the necessary equipment they were to bring next class. I thought, “I’m just one extra guy, and I’m already here. Couldn’t I just stay?” I never asked out loud.

When my schedule was fixed, the other three saxophone players and I were assigned to band class during sixth-grade lunch. We tried having lunch with the seventh graders. That didn’t work out. For the rest of the year, the four of us would huddle in a practice room and eat as a foursome while the clarinets and low brass had sixth-period band. Intermittently, students would come into the practice room, sent by Mr. Navarro, to tell us we were too loud and disturbing their class time.

In the next semester, I fell ill on the week of UIL solo and ensemble. Throwing up was always proof enough for my mom to keep me home from school. The proof was only present on Monday, and sufficient for my mom to trust my decision of when to return to school. I abused that privilege through Wednesday when I began sensing my mom’s skepticism. She put a plate of milanesa on the table with rice and beans. Contrary to the crackers and broth I’d been eating, it had an irresistible aroma.

My mom didn’t keep a calendar, so I knew she wouldn’t remember that Solo and Ensemble was that week. I was enthralled in a Bluebonnet book about a kid on a safari. I sat on the concrete stairs by our porch and followed him on the page while he tested sources of water with tabs, snuck around wild feline predators, and wandered through caves, looking for

signs of humanity or rescue. At twilight, it was do-or-die, nearing call time at the competition venue. I considered mentioning it to my mom for a minute, before ultimately deciding to continue along with the protagonist into the sunset and the rest of his fictional survival account.

I decided I wasn't the music type. Regardless, I stayed in the school bands for the next six years, because I was too afraid to quit. My mom had leased this ridiculously expensive instrument, and I didn't want to waste her money or let her down.

G Thinking She's My Mom

There were, at least, two concerts every school year for the seven years from middle through high school. Here's how most of them went: Each time the band would complete the last piece of the program, the band director would commission the audience, which my mother and grandmother would always be a part of. "If you have a son or daughter up here tonight, please stand so we may honor you." My grandmother was always sure to rise, sometimes before my mother. She is always the only grandparent to rise along with parents.

I am the only grandson who has accompanied her to Los Angeles to see her relatives, and who's tagged along with her to El Salvador, twice.

Sometimes, during my tween years, I would accompany my grandmother to work in the hospital cafeteria. It was a clandestine affair, only happening on Sundays when managers weren't around. "He better not fall, Francisca," warned one of her direct supervisors.

"Walk slow," my grandmother told me. You always walk slow in the back of the house, and quickly in the front of the house. There wasn't much walking in the back, anyway. Mostly, I rinsed dishes, loaded them into racks, and passed them through the

dishwasher. “Someday, I’ll have a powerful faucet like this in my kitchen,” I remember thinking. If there were no customers in the dining area, I was to go bus any used tables as quickly as possible before more customers appeared. My grandmother and a handful of her co-workers worked the cafeteria together from the eighties on. Some are still employed there to this day.

On one of those Sundays, my grandmother introduced me to a co-worker who knew my father. “You’re identical to him,” the woman said about my resemblance to Carlos Sr. On the way home, my grandmother told me that woman was one of Carlos’s “work wives.”

“It was innocent,” she told me. “He was just a flirty, friendly guy.”

With ten fresh bucks in my pocket, I asked my mom if she remembered the old woman.

“Yeah, I remember Gladys. All those women at the hospital loved your dad. They always had running jokes like that.”

“Wouldn’t you get mad about that?”

She shrugged, “I mean, I felt disrespected, but I was still just a dumb teenage girl. Everyone would say they were innocent jokes. They were my mom’s age; he wouldn’t do anything with them.”

I didn’t ask my mom how many “work wives” she knew of, particularly at Whataburger, where my grandmother didn’t work with him.

Fake Letter

During the spring semester of sixth grade, a classmate Melanie handed me a letter while we waited for class to end after finishing a math test. The letter was folded into the origami

square, method I could never repeat. On the letter was written, “To: Carlos <3 From: ???” Melanie held her finger up to her lips, smiling mischievously.

When I opened it up, it began: “I hope you don’t mind, I had all my friends write a sentence so you wouldn’t be able to figure out who I am.” The note went on to talk about how this person would stare at me from across certain classrooms. It also said I knew her screen name and things like that. Naturally, the first person I pictured was Sarah from Computer Lit class.

I’d met Sarah the first day of sixth grade in Computer Literacy, a class mostly consisting of learning good typing habits. I liked that she was white. In my dreams of those days, the pretty girls were always fair skinned with dirty-blond hair, the same color as Sarah’s. I felt like my similar skin complexion made us compatible. I liked her blue eyes. I liked how her freckles mingled with her not-so-great complexion. I’d find excuses to help her with some of the typing exercises. Or I’d just get really ahead in my own exercises so I could go chat. In those days, I was always quoting *The Simpsons* or Eddie Murphy’s *Delirious*, a stand-up special the guy my mom was dating showed us. I thought I was cool for knowing about Rated R stuff. I kept the dirty magazines and movies a secret, though.

By April of that semester, Melanie had grown weary of my inquisitive pestering. “You’ll have to wait and see,” she’d say, and other variations of that phrase. She wasn’t the culprit. She couldn’t stand me, and not in that middle school pretend-to-hate-your-crush kind of way. She reacted to me in ways that more than once led me to subtly sniff my body for any musk. God, I wanted it to be Sarah. My stomach was in knots by the last day of school. I couldn’t go an entire three months not knowing. What if she got over me by then?

On the last day of school that year, Melanie was visible from parent pick-up lane as I was waiting in line for my school bus. I left the line and ran over to her. Several weeks, certainly over a month had passed since I pestered her about it. I sprung it up on her one last time, “Come on! Just tell me, please.” Her face moved back a little, eyebrows raised.

“What?” I held up the letter. I’d never figured out how to fold it back into the square form it had come to me in. “Oh!” She burst into laughter. “We all got together to prank you! Wow, you saved it and everything!”

Specter at Tia’s

That summer, I spent some weeks at my aunt’s taking care of basic house projects: jobs like sweeping the dog hair from the back patio where the Retrievers slept or making dinner before she and her daughters got home from work and day camp respectively. In between chores, I would hop on the computer and connect the dial-up modem to the internet. It was summer; someone was always on AOL Instant Messenger. I would wait for the door opening sound effect when someone signed on so I could chat. I would wait for pictures of naked women to load, the pixels emerging in rows from left to right, gradually. Then a full resolution nude woman would show up.

A draft caressed the back of my neck, sending a shiver through me. In response, my mind conjured up a blurred black silhouette of a humanoid at the other end of the hallway from the room I was in. An image so vivid of it floating down the hall emerged in my mind, feeling more real than any dream I’d had. I was wide awake, somehow imagining the black specter jumping onto my back and crawling into my body through the same part of my neck that had felt the chill.

I immediately closed the illicit browser window and logged out of AOL, shutting the computer down. Looking out the window for my aunt's or uncle's car in the driveway, I hoped that perhaps I was twisting their unknown presence into this hallucination. When there were no visible cars, I lay on the bed, able to stare down the hall from where my head was rested.

A few hours passed before I got back up to blow the leaves in the yards.

Mall with Cale

In seventh grade, I rode my bike everywhere. On a Black Friday, I rode it to Memorial City Mall to meet a friend. It was the first time in junior high that a friend invited me to the mall.

He and I stopped into B. Dalton Bookstore to browse the books. Every book cost at least ten bucks. A small fortune. There was an illustrated encyclopedia of Greek Mythology that cost over a hundred bucks. I marveled at the glossy full-color pages. It smelled so good, like the books we used to get for free once a year in elementary school. I hated that we couldn't afford it.

At the food court, I grabbed a happy meal, spending three of my five bucks. My friend got a value meal for five bucks. He said, "Do you believe in God?"

"I believe in The Gods of Mount Olympus," I told him. I'd gotten my wires crossed, misunderstood the word mythology.

"That's mythology," he said. I didn't ask for an explanation. Instead, I made a mental note to look into it later.

"I believe whatever you believe is true, as long as you fully believe in it." The guy who my mom was dating had recently told me that. So I went with Mount Olympus.

My friend said, "But Jesus said, 'You're either for me or against me.'"

I didn't get much sleep that night.

Stuck

When the guy my mom was dating started sleeping on the couch, he brought a ton of digital music equipment into our living room with him. He had keyboards, drum machines, microphones, and other things spanning the wall opposite the couch. His clients would come to the apartment after nine at night. He worked on beats with one guy. Another woman would show up to record vocals.

He hid dirty magazines under the restroom sink. *Club*, *Hustler*, the harder stuff. He hid them under a pile of cleaning supplies like I wouldn't dig around. When he and mom went out on weekends and everyone else was asleep, I could get into that cabinet.

When a good friend of my mom's showed up to get away from her abusive boyfriend, my mom volunteered my bed. No amount of protesting, shouting, or whining helped my case. There was nowhere else for her to stay. I was stuck.

On the balcony, outside of the crowded apartment, looked over the railing and down to the concrete, considering things. The church pantry starches we'd recently had to eat. Chuck being all over our living room with his musician friends at night. I'd have to dive headfirst for this to work, I thought. Still, I'd have to fall at just the right angle. If it didn't work, I'd end up paralyzed. That'd be much worse. With nowhere else to go, I went back to my room to play as much Playstation as I could before her friend came home.

Just Ask Him

On my fourteenth birthday, a couple of my friends were in the backseat of my mother's Ford Explorer. I was in the way-back, where the cargo is loaded. I lay on my back, watching orange asterisks blur by, streetlight bulbs. Considering my notions about the eye in the sky, I remembered not being invited to take communion, to take in the body of Christ for not being confirmed or baptized at the Catholic church Fernando had forced us to attend. That is, forced us to attend until my mother ousted him for the last time because of his alcoholism. I thought, "Where is God's punishment?" wondering who I should fear. So I asked Him. I had no idea if He even existed.

"Are you mad at us? Am I going to hell? Do you have any real proof?"

In the front of the car, my mother and her friend who took my bed were flirting with the police officer who'd pulled her over. Mom had warrants out for nonpayment of citations. But he let her go. In the backseat, my friends were completely frozen at the sight of a cop.

I started waking up, with no alarm, at five in the morning and reading through the New Testament, even the genealogies. I didn't even know what begot meant, only recognizing Moses, Joseph, and Jesus. A week later, the *Book of Acts* fascinated me: Paul's conversion, Stephen the first martyr, the shipwreck of the apostles. This continued until I realized the next step was attending church services. At a church that would accept our family. I convinced my mother to start taking us on Sundays.

When I went to a youth worship service for the first time, I was amazed by the live rock music. People were praying to it. The excitement and energy of the different instruments—guitars, drums, vocals—felt harnessed, focused on a single thing. The focus

was God, whom I believed had been working things out with me. I felt ready to take all of this into high school. I would God on our terms, I thought. Mine and His. No one else's.

A Wednesday night in February 2000 was overcast. The cold had subsided for the year, but a cool breeze periodically coursed through the front lawn of our church. The two buildings that composed it were a large castle, where all youth activities were held, and a sanctuary in the shape of a dome, open 24/7 to any worshippers.

An usher was escorting me and said, "Okay, Carlos, this water's going to be cold, are you ready?" I said yes and held up my change of clothes. I was in a white t-shirt and old black pants. The pastor was inside the life-sized baptistry. There were two ornate flags waving on either side of the tub.

"I felt stuck," I testified. "I didn't want to be here anymore and felt alone. I felt like no one was going to get me through what I was feeling. Then I started reading the New Testament." On I went. People shouted amen here and there. Pastor Kemp was a white guy with thick brown hair and a big mustache. He wore a robe instead of his usual charcoal suit.

Pastor Kemp prayed about my loneliness, banished it in the name of Jesus. Declared it no more. He praised our Lord, our father, declared me baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. "Pinch your nose," he whispered placidly to me. The muffled applause was audible for the split-second I was submerged, then clarified when I emerged. I moved over for my brother to go next. He opted not to give testimony. No one held it against him, applauding just as loudly when he went through the motions.

Gifted Fender

Cale was the friend who first referenced the “For me or against me” scripture from the New Testament. When he saw how I gushed about the rock music worship experience, he offered me pointers when I’d come to his house. I learned about frets on the guitar moving in half steps. He encouraged me to fight through the pain in my fingertips.

“See this?” He showed me what looked like lead-coated fingertips. “These are my calluses. You’ll get them if you do your best to ignore the pain and keep practicing.”

I thought if I endured the pain of my bottom lip that came from biting on a reed, surely I could endure less delicate, raw fingertips.

In the summer, he dropped by my apartment. “Dude, I just got an Ovation acoustic. Please, take my fender.” He handed me his hundred-dollar acoustic.

I spent my time building hardened fingertips. I made a mixtape from my favorite FM radio classic rock tunes and picked them out by ear the best I could. I wrenched my fingers into buzzing chords. Once I could contort my hand into a G-chord on the neck, steam picked up and I couldn’t be pulled away from that Fender beginner acoustic guitar.

Sarah: The First Attempt

I got to date Sarah in eighth grade. A Charlie horse had taken me out during a cafeteria dance. I was dragged to the windowed wall of the room, where the wallflowers hung out. That’s where she was, hanging out alone. She’d curled her hair, I could tell. She was wearing jeans and a red top. The clothes fit her figure, something I hadn’t seen before because of our uniforms. “I have to have a dance with her,” I was thinking. “I need my hands on those hips.”

I jokingly asked about how much better she could type since sixth grade. We chuckled about Coach Crain, our crazy algebra teacher whose class we got transferred out of so we could be Ms. Neeley's students. I guess I was the one chuckling. She was more about smiling and closing her eyes while shaking her head. "This is an innocent conversation," I thought. She was shy, and I knew she went to the Baptist Church. I didn't move my hands at all. I fought the mental image of what might be under her clothes that kept trying to emerge.

The moment felt right so I asked, "Will you go out with me?"

"Yes."

We hung out at Memorial City Mall with a group of friends. Parents were to pick us up at eight. Sarah's and mine showed up last. We sat on the curb and compared lives. We both grew up in apartments, with divorced parents and two siblings each. I was the oldest, she was the youngest. Her parents were from Tennessee, mine were from El Salvador. She played clarinet so we both played reed instruments. We compared the scars under our lower lips. I spoke some Spanish sentences to her while she tried to pick them out based on her middle school Spanish class explanation.

My hand was next to hers; they were in contact. I lacked the courage to try holding hers. This wasn't like mom and Chuck, mom and Fernando, or my older cousins and their monthly girlfriends. Did she consider kissing sexual? We were too young and Christian for sexual activity. There were rumors in our middle school about non-virgins. We weren't that type. I'd known so much about sex since I was seven. I figured she'd been raised better than me, protected from videos and magazines, blowjobs and cumshots. Her ride showed up

before mine. I didn't want to hug her in front of her older brother who was driving.

Schlitterbahn

I could never handle roller coasters or elaborate water slides. The resulting nausea after riding them would overcome me and ruin the rest of my day. I was with Sarah and her best middle school friend for the first few hours of our band trip. Schlitterbahn: the "Hottest, Coolest Time in Texas" in New Braunfels, outside of San Antonio.

Early in the day, the three of us were discussing where to go on the six-foot-tall map. I kept passively protesting the intense rides.

"What about here instead?"

"I can't do that ride, but I'll go with y'all."

Sarah finally said, "What about if we just go to one part of the park, and you go to a different part? We don't *have* to be together the whole day."

At the band's hub in a shaded picnic area, I hung out with other friends, goofed off as usual. Sarah's friend walked over from a table across the way, put a napkin on my table. On it was a note inked in blue. "I don't want to do this, but I still want to be friends. I'm sorry. Love, Sarah <3" When I looked up they were gone. Two years of crushing for us to last only six weeks. I hadn't even held the girl's hand, much less kissed her.

My mother had been chaperoning that trip. She said my face was paper white when she returned from taking some kids to a ride. That was not a good start for her and Sarah, who would be our neighbor in a few months, and who would reject me in similar manners twice more over the next eight years.

Two months later, my mother was moving us to The Mansion, where Sarah lived. Would she think I'd somehow lobbied for the move here in some creepy ways? What about when she started dating someone else? I understood that my mother was trying to encourage me, but instead she was coming off as apathetic when she said, "Don't worry about it, who the heck is she? You do your thing." Those are the pieces of advice that don't sink in when you're fourteen and about to start high school. Financially, though, it was an offer my mom couldn't refuse. The Mansions were within walking distance of the schools all three of us attended. My high school was half a mile away, my brother's middle school was caddy corner, and my sister's elementary school sat adjacent to that.

I would wait to see if Sarah's mom's Nissan Altima left the exit gate before I left my apartment for the walk to school.

Tio Robert's Last Christmas

Sometime in elementary school, my mom's older brother who was the oldest sibling divorced his wife. They'd come to Houston together before anyone else in the family, from El Salvador. Leaving her, the mother of four of their children, he remarried a white woman he ended up having a fifth child with. The result of that turmoil was seeing him infrequently for several years. He'd moved out to a neighborhood in Katy, a half-hour west of Houston. To my family, he might as well have moved to San Antonio. No one left Spring Branch; my mom and aunt worked at the same Spring Branch Schools, and my grandmother was still at the hospital.

He started coming around again once I'd gotten to high school. His older sons, my oldest two cousins, weren't doing too well in high school. One had dropped out. His youngest son with his first wife was trying to acclimate himself to Katy with them.

"I remember that Christmas Eve," my mom says about the last Christmas he spent with us. "He was so calm and smiled the whole night. If I snapped at you or Chris, he'd say, 'Paqui, no les grites.'" Or, don't yell at them. This was in stark contrast to his formerly boisterous attitude. He would slap women's butts in the past. I was wearing a fishermen's hat once, and he told me I looked like a penis, then slapped my back and filled the room with his laughter.

While the family opened presents at midnight, my uncle sat next to me on the couch. He was the only adult male in a room full of single mothers: my grandmother, my oldest aunt Violet, my own mom. He looked at me for a minute. I braced myself for some comment about my busy floral or my Doc Marten sandals. He said, "Look at all these women in here. Damn boy, no one ever taught you to be a man. Why don't you come spend the summer out in Katy with me? I'll teach you some things about being a man."

I said, "Sounds good." That was the last time I ever saw him alive.

In February of 2001, Robert Benitez-Cea was in his Mitsubishi Galant with his neighbor Jim Campbell. They'd walked to Robert's apartment after last call in the sports bar adjacent to their apartment complex. At around four in the morning and after several card games, Robert and Jim, now feeling sobered up, walked back to the Sports Bar to retrieve the car. At the median, Robert failed to yield for an oncoming tow truck with its sirens on, traveling well over the speed limit.

Although the wrecker hit the car on the passenger side, the impact broke the reclining mechanism in Robert's driver's seat, launching him backward out of his seatbelt, and forcing his head through the rear windshield, shattering his skull. He was revived once on life flight, then once more at Hermann Hospital before his declaration at around five in the morning. Jim Campbell was in critical condition but eventually survived.

Early on a Sunday morning after performing a *The Sound of Music* double feature with my high school theater troupe, my mom woke me up with a phone call in her deadpan voice. A few seconds in, she shattered into a shrill sob and said, "I lost my brother," holding out the word brother like it had a fermata over it. It faded into a shrill sob.

Emotions pulled from several directions: sadness, confusion, guilt, curiosity, but my core resisted, maintaining itself in a void. It was the first death in our family, even my great grandparents were still alive at this point. Then she composed her voice, inhaled, returned to deadpan, and said, "You have to be strong. You have to be our example. I'm coming to pick the three of you up. Get ready."

I looked at my brother and said, "Tio Robert died." His eyes widened, and a strange grin brewed, made strange by his futile attempts to suppress it. I said, "Why are you smirking?"

He said, "Why are you?" It turned out I'd been smirking all along. His face had no response to give, so it imitated mine. The weight of that response still pulls at me from time to time.

At the viewing, I made the mistake of touching his lifeless hand. That couldn't have been his hand, I was thinking. For some other unknown reason, I thought it best to lay my Bible over his crossed hands just before he was lowered to the ground.

For a week, we spent every night at my Aunt Violet's house. The weight of death was like a dark vapor, moistening our clothes, adding weight to our bodies. My grandma was always in one of the bedrooms, which emitted a palpable grief, that was thick and took one aback if they entered. I caught a quick glimpse of her in the shadows. She was rocking, sobbing, praying indistinctly. I heard, "Padre" and "Diosito" strewn about her mumblings. She clung to a tissue and some other piece of cloth I assumed belonged to my uncle. My aunt ushered me out of the hallway. "She doesn't know if her son went to heaven."

My two older cousins had nothing to say, which was in stark contrast to them always having something to say. They were usually jokes. My brother tried to play with my younger siblings and cousins, who kept forgetting we were in a somber mood. Something about this hadn't hit them. They were acting so normal. I spent my time next to my older cousins while the rest of our family reminisced about Robert. We didn't say much on our side of the room.

My mom spent the following Christmas in San Antonio with a guy she'd been seeing long distance. It was the first Christmas we weren't all together.

Dispersal

LSI was a small HVAC business where my mother worked as a receptionist and dispatcher during my sophomore year of high school. When it started to go under, she was one of the first layoffs. When she couldn't find a job after a month, a family meeting took place.

“We can’t afford to live here anymore. Even if I get hired tomorrow, I won’t get paid soon enough to stay here. We’ll lose electricity, the late fees will be too much. Carlos, G wants you to stay with her. Emily, Chris, and me will stay at your Tia Viole’s.”

The three of them stayed in my Tia Viole’s converted garage. My mom and sister took the full-sized bed. He stayed on a couch. It was something like a motel room. My aunt had HBO so I would take my grandma’s van to come watch *Curb Your Enthusiasm* on Sundays, and music videos on MTV2. We were only a couple of miles apart.

I don’t remember what this argument was about. I only remember the rug burn on my brother’s temple. He’d been shouting at the top of his lungs at my mother. His face started getting too close to hers. The moment he pointed his finger at her, and it touched her chest, I shoved him back. He told me to mind my own business and shoved me. I told him to back away from my mom and shoved him back harder. When he lunged at me again, I sidestepped and shoved him to the ground, pinning his head against the carpet with my knee. I was protecting my mom and myself. The more he flailed his limbs, the more I imagine how bad he’d beat me. I repeated “stop resisting, and I’ll let you up” over and over.

“Alright, I’m calm!” He yelled, and stopped flailing. His trembling moved through me like I was a conductor for it. I saw a patch on his temple, glistening, outlined in fleshy red. It made my chest uncomfortable. My mom was fighting tears. I wanted to apologize, but he left too quickly, slamming the door as he left the garage. Eventually, headlights lit the room from the driveway. His friend Ben’s Jeep. They took off.

Ben helped get Chris a job at Baseball USA, a baseball complex in the area that featured batting cages, pro shops, and several diamonds. Because many of his friends worked

with him, he would spend most of his afternoons there, whether he was scheduled to work or not. Afterward, they'd go party at people's houses or some business lots in the area.

Sarah in a Business Suit

We were in uniform. Black slacks, button down shirts, white gloves. People were emptying spit valves, fingering parts we'd rehearsed for months, polishing the bells of their horns. I didn't care about this horn. It was a Yamaha Baritone Saxophone. I'd busted my ass on alto sax to be in the varsity band. I had the second best audition, the band director told me. Of course I did. My best friend Michael was number one and landed first chair. His mom was a master organist. He'd taken lessons for years.

The only time I'd worked hard at saxophone was for this audition. Still, the terms were for me to play Bari if I was to be in varsity band. I haven't hated many people in my life. In a couple years, just before I was to graduate, that same band director would tell me I was the rudest student he ever had while a couple of white dudes in the trumpet section would be restraining their laughter over flatulent noises.

Sometimes, I'd rest for thirty-two measures at a time before hitting a whole note or contributing a bass tone held by a fermata. In a high school concert band, this is overkill because you already have bass clarinets with a similar timbre to take care of reedy bass tones. But the bass clarinetist was a girl, and the band director didn't trust her lungs to distinguish that tone, not at today's UIL tournament, anyway.

I was walking around on the sidewalk, repeatedly fingering the chromatic scale because my actual parts were too simple to finger. Sarah joined me, carrying her clarinet. We had similar friends, so things weren't as awkward as they were two years before, just after she'd dumped me. I made some jokes. It was chatting, with a friend of a friend. Eventually,

she sighed and said, “Carlos, I want to walk down a busy city street, in one of those power suits, to my big office in a skyscraper.”

“Me too. So let’s do it,” We high-fived. We hadn’t made eye contact for years before this high-five. She still had the eyes and freckles.

Shadowdale Oaks

Eight months after losing her job and our apartment, we all moved into a place down the street from The Mansions. Shadowdale Oaks was still conveniently across the street from our schools. My mom beckoned me to pack my things and move them in. When no one would answer the door of the new apartment, I thought they’d given me the wrong unit number. I gave up and returned to my grandmother’s, waiting until the next night.

“We *had* moved in, papa. I was out. Emily wanted to stay with your tia one more night. Your brother must’ve been working, or with Ben.” It turned out she’d been seeing a guy.

During a football practice, my brother twisted his leg the wrong way and tore his ACL. Technically, the surgery was optional. Chris wasn’t interested in college football, and our insurance deemed the surgery elective. He chose to be bedridden for a few months. He spent his days on the couch, watching TV or chatting with friends on AOL. Friends would stop through often. Sometimes they’d throw parties. Mom would often be with the guy, Tomas.

Band Banquet

Sarah and I went to that year's band banquet together. At the last formal, I'd borrowed my mom's car and drove it off a ditch on Highway 6. Before that, I backed into a friend's brand new Beetle door. So we rode in a station wagon with other guys in the rock band I played electric guitar in. They had plus ones, too. There was a plated dinner, there were joke awards handed to folks, none of which either of us won. There was a dance. Sarah danced with her friends most of the night. I hung out with the bandmates.

Afterward, Sarah and I lay in the way-back of the old Station Wagon. It had wood paneling on the outside and everything. "Where do you think stars are up there?" She said. "Eh...there. And there." The sky was smeared with purple, nothing besides the moon and blinking red lights on aircraft could be seen.

"Oh, there's one," She said, also pointing at nothing.

Held Up

After rehearsal one night, the bandmates and I drove across Spring Branch to the Marq-E, an outdoor mall with a movie theater, shops, and several restaurants. Having decided to prank the fountain with cheap laundry detergent, we gathered all the coins we could forage for the cheapest soap we could find at a convenience store a few blocks away.

A couple of guys in ski masks walked into the place while we counted our coins. They held what looked like .45s, silver and black handguns. We were all ordered to lie down. "Who has a cell phone?" One asked. I'd borrowed our vocalist's to call Sarah, so I offered it up. They tossed it across the room.

The convenience store clerk lowered his hand for a second, so one of the gunmen hollered at him to keep it up, pointing it at him.

The other guy chimed in from the beer fridge, “Hey man, be careful. That thing’s loaded.” Then he proceeded to load a sack full of tallboys while the first gunman emptied the register. Next to me lay the other electric guitarist. He reached for and clenched my hand. “Carlos, I’m scared, fool.” His face, against the tile floor, was consistent with his sentiment, red as a berry, tears streaming from his eyes. I told him it’d be alright, then had to turn my head the other direction to restrain my smile. I couldn’t understand it. I asked myself why, again, was I amused.

They told us to count to one hundred before getting back up. The clerk didn’t count at all, immediately following them out the door. We had left with our soap before the cops arrived. What evidence could we offer, a description of two Hispanics in ski masks? The clerk could offer that as evidence.

After surviving the fiasco, the prank was a bust, not worth what we’d been through. We figured the detergent was too cheap to even suds up properly. I got dropped off at the apartment, completely deflated, worried about an SAT test the following morning. I wouldn’t sleep much that night.

It was a Friday, so my brother was throwing a massive party. My mother was with Tomas. I guessed Emily was with her. Since the rug burn fiasco, I’d had absolutely no authority over Chris. I lay in my twin bed upstairs to replay the night’s events in my head.

There was virtually no noise insulation from the thin walls, so instead of sleeping I called Sarah. The call frustrated us both because she was a soft talker in the first place and the party made it that much harder to hear.

We lived in a neighborhood where most of the neighbors were making this kind of noise on a Friday night. The kind of apartment complex where the cops aren't showing up unless it's to tape off a crime scene and get report fodder. This was the apartment complex that, when my bandmates and I got caught trying to leave campus for Burger King, and I told the officer I lived at Shadowdale Oaks, they immediately strip searched us and the car for drugs.

Pinky Toe

On Memorial day weekend, I'd fallen asleep on our couch. The phone ringing upstairs woke me, and in my half-asleep daze, I dashed upstairs to catch the call and kicked my sister's percussion bag full force, my last toe absorbing all the impact. I missed the phone call when the pain of it laid me out, breathless. How could such a small toe hurt so much? I thought.

The next morning, my physics teacher saw me in a sock, saw the purple of my swollen toe through it, told me I should probably head to the nurse's office. There, she told me to take a load off since I'd probably been walking on it when I shouldn't have been. She lent me crutches, and when I asked her if I should go to the doctor, she said the most they'd do for a broken pinky toe was tape it to a popsicle stick and pump me full of painkillers, which I could do myself, so there wasn't much of a point. She said I'd limp for most of the summer, then at some point, I'd forget it was ever broken or that I was ever limping.

Before I was to leave town for a Thespian Festival in Nebraska, I stopped by Sarah's to say bye. I had my hands on her waist again. She wore jeans and a form-fitting t-shirt. Some mascara, maybe a little concealer. Her lips were glossed. I moved in for a kiss, and she

met me halfway. I let my hands sink a little, until they rested on the contours where her hips protruded. I was too nervous to lower my hands any further. I thought, “At least I kissed her, even if it was three years later.”

The Oustings

We performed *Les Miserables* with my high school theater troupe. I didn’t fit in with the rest of the troupe, so I spent most of my time in a dorm room, reading or sleeping. When I returned from Lincoln, Nebraska in the middle of the night, I found a mousetrap on the kitchen floor. My brother was stirring awake from my entrance and I said, “Don’t tell me we have a mouse now.”

Trudging up the stairs to our room, he said, “Yeah. We have a ghost, too.”

On a night after kicking out the earnest but terrible vocalist of our alt rock band, I went home deflated and demoralized, having been blamed by Josh’s sixty-something-year-old parents for instigating his ousting. It was a Sunday, and my brother was on the computer instant messaging a handful of teenage girls. I called my mother to ask her if she was coming home tonight, in light of the rough day. “I’ll be home around...eleven. Will you be up?” It was summer, so I said yes. I wanted to believe her.

At eleven, I’d been on the phone with Sarah, dumping all of my angst on her. So she dropped me for the second time in my adolescence, told me she couldn’t do this, but that she loved me so much. I was seventeen, feeling like a deer that had been run over, like she was shooting me to end the suffering, but not hitting the right spots for a quick death, instead lengthening and worsening the agony.

At eleven-thirty, I called my mother again. “Sarah dumped me.”

“I’m so sorry mijó,” she said. “I’ll be home in a little bit.” But she didn’t come home that night.

The morning after Labor Day, I’d decided to start eating breakfast before school. In the kitchen, something snapped onto my pinky toe, and a wave of pain, reminiscent of the past Memorial Day, laid me out again. I looked at my foot to see a mouse trap snapped on it, and pulled it off.

“Oh my God, screw all of this,” I yelled.

After winning second place in a battle of the bands sponsored by Second Baptist Church—a Christian band won first place—I realized I hadn’t written a word of an essay that was due the following day. For the essay, I was to choose one word to write about for five pages, or some such amount. Luckily, Michael was with me while the band basked in our predetermined runner-up victory. I asked him if I could type my paper at his place so I could use his printer.

I started coming up with other excuses like these to stay at his place, once a week, then two nights a week, until I took up residence in their guest room.

Only my brother was home, watching TV on the couch when I came to get clothes and a few other things to take to the Barrowses’. “You staying at Mike’s again?” He asked.

“Yeah.” He looked me up and down, at all the junk I was carrying in my arms. Mike was waiting outside in his parents’ Oldsmobile.

He said, “Alright,” and continued watching TV.

I don’t know why it took me twelve years to realize the sharpness and intensity of that image: my brother on the couch, alone. He’d sleep in that two-bedroom townhome alone for weeks before finally going to stay with Ben at his parents’ house.

I still saw and hung out with my brother in high school. The family would gather for things pretty often. My mom took me to visit the campus that was offering me a music and academic scholarship.

When I graduated from high school, folks were alarmed. I was staying with my Grandmother for the summer. She knew I’d been working in the kitchen with Michael at his family’s church sometimes, to help cater different holiday celebrations and gatherings. By this time, she’d developed a pinched nerve, and her hospital was coming down on her and threatening her pension because of the amount of work she was missing. Her forty-hour workweek average was starting to dwindle, which lowers your income bracket. She didn’t want that for me.

When I got my first tuition bill a week before moving to Belton, TX for college, I had my own panic attack. The scholarships were a mere shout of encouragement and high-five. Even federal loans I was approved for at the time weren’t enough to cover tuition, room, and board.

I inherited The Beast, a 1992 Oldsmobile Cutlass, from the Barrowses when they bought Michael his Pontiac Grand Prix. They hoped it would help me upon graduating from high school in 2004. When I decided not to take out loans for that small Christian university in central Texas and therefore put off college for an unforeseeable time, I offered to return the car to them, not wanting to accept their help on false pretenses.

“Carlos, we gave you that car only on the condition that it would help you out. We’re not going to take it from you just because you’re not going to college.” I thanked him, told him I just wanted to make sure.

That car had no air conditioning when I got it. It had one long bench seat, complete with a middle seatbelt. It was a relic, and even the buttons on the radio were push buttons. Push one station in, the other preset button pops out.

That was the car I started picking Sarah up with for our clandestine rendezvous. In the time after we were mugged and became more serious, Sarah and I took that car everywhere. We took it to Belton, the town I’d almost moved to, where a handful of our friends had gone.

We went to Austin to visit her brother, who lived with one of her exes and two other roommates. I was horribly jealous having to share a roof with them, only angered further when Sarah smoked pot. My siblings were also dabbling in it back in Houston, and I felt it was following me around the way the smell of it literally does if you spend even a second with it regardless of whether you smoke it. That I was also famished for our entire stay because they lived like hippies—often forgetting to eat—worsened the trip even further. I left the city with a sour taste in my mouth.

The car was a ship, where no matter what my speed was, I felt like I was in stasis, floating over the highway. For a few minutes, while Sarah slept on the way back to Houston, I stepped on the gas to see what speed was necessary for me to feel it. I was nineteen, so mischievous right side of my brain far outweighed the left side of my brain, which warned me that I was in a twelve-year-old car, the only car on Texas Highway 71, where I’d stick out like a sore thumb if a State Trooper were planted there with a speed gun. No matter, I

thought. At around 100 miles per hour, the car started shaking, but not as violently as, say, my grandmother's twenty-year-old Dodge Caravan would on the highway. It gave me pause, but I fed off the adrenaline. Still, at the speed, it was an uncanny thing to know how quickly we were careening eastward, in such a heavy car, and not feeling it at all. Then the beeping started.

A bell chimed in, coming from the instrument panel. No lights flashed, though, not the temperature warning, not the low fuel light, nor the tire pressure sensor. I let off the gas and planned for us to be stranded while conjuring up a confused reaction in case Sarah woke up. But she didn't, and when I reached a reasonable speed, I realized I'd left the turn signal on for over five minutes, causing the warning chime to kick on. I was good for another day, deciding against ever testing The Beast's limits for the next eight months I'd have it, a car so heavy it could hydroplane for dozens of yards before crashing into a Ford Expedition with Louisiana tags.

For the following eight months, that car transported me to both of the jobs I was working. When I lost both jobs, I'd use it to transport Sarah to her job, a split shift which meant I made four round trips each day. My sister was an eighth grader on the mend, with an ankle full of screws. She'd been on a crosswalk with her now lifelong friend Jackie when a Toyota Sienna minivan hit her and barely missed Jackie. Now, in addition to always needing rides like social middle schoolers tend to, she also had frequent doctor's appointments. It was on one of these drives that a Ford Expedition cut from an off-ramp lane on the Katy Freeway clear cross the service road in one swoop.

The moment I saw it and slammed on the brakes, the heavy Cutlass hydroplaned. I had enough time not only to reflexively cross my arm over Emily's chest but to also quickly

say, “Brace your ankle, we’re going to hit this car.” This accident is important to me for two reasons: The first is that Emily was there, and can vouch for me in the rare circumstance that this accident wasn’t a result of my questionable driving skills. The second is that it had to happen, so that later when I found out Sarah had been at a beach party kissing some guy during an ambiguous place of our relationship while I was calling her for help, I’d be forced to accept she was done with us.

I had a few sets of clothes and a bike at Sarah’s that I retrieved. Imagining these items now, I’m relieved at knowing nothing about Net Worth, how it’s measured, or its implications. Around then it would have been negative \$1200, factoring in the pawn shop bicycle, and how behind I was on my cell phone bill. The cell phone debt was for three months of nonpayment, but these things have a way of compounding. Back then, I didn’t know you could settle some debts with a single counter-offer in a couple of minutes without an attorney, or even the original creditor sharing the line. Back then if you’d asked me what my net worth was, I’d have probably just said zero.

It took a year of trying to clump my life together like a crappy sand castle during high tide before it was all washed out and I finally decided to try the college route.

But, as these things continued in this manner for the next seven years, of course, my mom chimed with a job opportunity. “An old co-worker of mine says you can just tell them you do drive forklifts because they’ll train you anyway.” So I went to officedepotdistributionjobs.com, lied on my application, and nabbed a first-shift gig, six in the morning until eleven. This all happened within two weeks of starting my first semester of college.

That semester, Katrina devastated New Orleans. I left the University of Houston, convinced I was throwing my money away without having a chosen a major. Sarah had been calling me from Belton, where she'd decided to start college. She spent a weekend on campus with me in Houston. Then there was the flu I came down with, during which she double dated when I finally took the hint.

The next five years kicked off with the trip to LA I took with my grandma, then five years of bouncing in and out of community college, learning the ropes of waiting tables, tending bar, and finally landing a job at a five-star hotel.

Here is the clearest memory I have from my first semester of community college: Dr. S, our creative writing professor, was lecturing about the clash of Western European culture with that of Native Americans. "The natives understand that when we die, we come back to the earth, to feed the soil, the organisms buried within it." He drew a large circle on the whiteboard to illustrate it.

"Western culture is about upward mobility through time, generation after generation." He started just to the left of the circle, near its base, then drew an upward diagonal line that cut straight through the circle.

I was 20, marveling at what he'd just illustrated for us. I was sitting in a community college classroom with 20 or so other classmates. Most of us didn't know what to imagine at the other end of that bubble-popping line. A family maybe? Successful entrepreneurship? Or, as appropriate to this class, a bestselling novel?

What I saw was half of the Ghostbusters logo. I was starting to suspect maybe I was the other imagined half, the ghost that looks all surprised that the circle, and it's line, was closing in on him.

I was somewhere inside the circle. I had a diploma, some work experience. There was still time. I'd been in one disastrous painful relationship. I'd enrolled in the creative writing class I was currently sitting in. I'd done a few of the things people do that get them moving along that line.

Now while I write this, I'm thinking about my mother in the logo, seeing her in some unknown place within the circle, too. By the time she was twenty I, her firstborn, was already a year old. The decision she made to be with my father was rushed, unintentional, which left her wide open to several others being made as a result. She didn't know that by deciding to date him, she was deciding to stop going to high school, she was deciding to move out of her mother's house. Above all, she had no idea she was deciding to have two sons.

What did I see on the diagram he'd drawn on the board? A big line across a circle that said NO.

Sometime during that semester, Sarah called me. I was shaving, so I put her on speaker. She said, "Hey. I'm wondering if you can come with me to the community college (not the one I was attending) to wait in line and take care of paperwork."

I looked into the mirror at the half-shaven face, the other half covered in shave cream.

"I actually have some stuff I need to do."

"That's cool," She said. "I'll talk to you later, then."

In the coming years, we wouldn't talk. She'd end up marrying and having kids.

Part II: The Five-Year Wash

About mine and Stephanie's impending relocation to Denver in 2016, my brother claimed "He stopped helping mom out financially so he could go finish his degree in Huntsville. Okay, cool...

Vision: A Further Decline

It wasn't until adulthood that I began to inquire critically about my vision. I'd been using corrective lenses for two decades by then. Was I a candidate for Lasik? Why did I always do poorly on the field of vision test?

"Well, if you were a potential candidate, what we would do is shave thin layers off of your cornea until the arc of its curve was corrected. But yours is so far bent that we'd shave too much off of it. You'd increase the chances of cataracts at a young age. More certainly, though, your corneas would be so thin, the slightest injury or infection could require we replace your corneas with implants. We always want to avoid implants."

"What about the field of vision thing?"

"A few things," She began. "First, you have dry eyes from the contacts. That's why you're fed up with them. Just take a break and try them again in a month or so."

"Second, your left eye will always carry your right eye. Finally, as for your field of vision test, I don't know why this hasn't happened yet, but you should go see a vitreoretinal specialist. It could be your optic nerve, or it could have something to do with the freckle in the back of your eyeball. I'll write you a referral."

Restaurant Life

A summer Monday, 2008: four-thirty am. Up, shower, bike, two miles to work, clock in. Set-up: creamers, sugar caddies, honey, jams, butter, every table. Turn ‘em, burn ‘em. Get the guests to work. In, out, one after the other. Two at a time, three at a time. “Good morning!” Coffee? Tea? Orange Juice? Omelette? Refills, small talk. Drop the Check: One breakfast, \$19.49. He was here yesterday, room 1021. Look him up. The secret shoppers come alone. They take notes. He has a tablet. “This is here for your convenience, Mr. Mazerole.” Credit card this time. Must’ve checked out. “Have a safe flight, sir. We’ll see you next month.” Ten percent? Cheap bastard. Now the couple’s check: paydirt. “Whenever you’re ready is fine, sir.” Smile at her too, another one-half his age. The Black Card’s out, and it’s time for a swipe. Eighteen percent? That’s more like it. They’re always brunettes. Where does he mark the notches if the bedpost belongs to the hotel? Ten-thirty am: tear-down, tablecloths off. Refold the clean ones. Lunch time, two coffee pots: one decaf, one regular. The conference breaks for lunch at eleven. Oil types: offshore technologies. Turn ‘em, burn ‘em. Engineers, they do the math: all fifteen percent no matter what. The credit card slip is scratch paper. They carry the one, it’s written in above the total. Two o’clock: dinner set-up. Tablecloths back on. Dim the lights. Clock out, bike, two miles home. Microwave and eat leftovers. Get to the desktop. They’re waiting: Sasha Grey, Jenna Haze, Bree Olson, Julia Bond. Four o’clock: naptime. Eight pm: Asics, shorts, wicking shirt, watch. Music: Rx Bandits, He Is Legend, Incubus, Norma Jean; anything hard, anything fast. Thirteen miles: Memorial Drive, Memorial City, Piney Point, Tanglewilde, Galleria. San Felipe: head straight home. Stretch,

shower. Petroleum jelly: heels, nipples, lips, nose. Dinner, eleven pm: Stir fry—canola oil, frozen veggies, chicken, rice. Put the rest in the fridge. Twelve am: Bedtime. Go for thirteen and a half miles tomorrow. Check your phone, three texts: Art at eight-forty-eight, Heather at nine-oh-two, Teresa at nine-seventeen. Sure, they want to go out. They don't pay rent. They don't have my freedom. Lights out; what's on Netflix? A summer Monday in 2009, four-thirty am: up, shower, bike, two miles to work, clock in. So on. So forth. A summer Monday in 2010, four-thirty am: so on, so forth.

It's well-known that restaurant life is tough on various levels: irregular and abundant hours are dangerously conducive to dipping your pen in company ink. One has to be pretty damned good with money not to blow most of their daily take-home pay on pittances like regular drinking binges because there aren't many other ways to socially decompress after midnight. I made these mistake several times in detrimental ways.

I got an apartment a mile away from home with a roommate who was twenty-seven and not expecting to make it to thirty. He was born here, moved to Monterrey by his parents as a toddler, and finally returned to the states just a year before we got the apartment together. We didn't particularly like each other but managed co-habitation by self-medicating the ills of our current job situations in not-so-healthy ways.

In my workaholic daze, he and I scheduled the same vacation days, and I agreed to a road trip south of the border to Monterrey. He called it the Los Angeles of Mexico. Any amount of time as far as possible from Houston sounded good. I was mistaken.

Foothills

Nine days in Monterrey began with an eight-hour-long series of checkmarks and bribes on the drive from Houston to Monterrey. The terrain goes from flat and humid subtropical to rocky and semi-arid. We arrive to get sixteen hours of sleep, followed by a welcome home dinner with Felix's parents.

Just before five in the morning we were in an alley, in the pearly white G6 Jorge financed back in Houston, where we worked and lived together. He turned off onto a back alley to get to his parents' house. We were two drunks in a shiny new car with Texas plates on it. It was best to avoid law enforcement's attention. There'd been enough bribing on the

way, and there was more to come when we'd cross back over in six days. He slowed down, but repeatedly refused to pull over at my requests. I opened my passenger side door as he turned a corner, forcing him to finally stop.

Then I was hunched over, my right foot planted on the ground outside.

"Let's just get some tacos, man. You need some tacos. That will make you feel better." He kept repeating that.

"I just need to vomit," I kept saying.

Frigid forested mountain air made its way from the peaks of the Sierra Madre and into these dank alleyways built among its foothills. The asphalt beneath me spun around my static right foot. My left foot and left side of my body remained in the seat, head hung over the threshold, facing the pavement. The heat in the car mingled with the frigid mountain air outside.

We repeat our mantras outwardly. His was tacos. Mine was, "I need to vomit." I could see him fidgeting, put his forehead into his hand, agitated. I was unable to keep up with him, therefore slowing him down. He had an agenda for the next nine days: to cram as much debauchery into them as possible. In the morning, he'd call our boss, attempting to call out an extra day on both our behalves. I'd be forced to call Jolanda myself, to tell her I couldn't leave yet because border patrol was more rigorous on the weekends. Bribes on the border are more expensive on the weekends, and anyway, our direct deposits hadn't been made yet. We were stranded until Monday.

I wanted it all out, the two liters of Johnny Walker Black and soda—that's how they served it at Rose Bar, where we'd begun the night by watching a Red Hot Chili Peppers tribute band. I wanted it all out—the Miller Lite from the men's club, where I saw the calves

and ankles of nude dancers, unable to lift my cloudy head to see more. The traces of ash had darkened my respiratory system to take the edge off of my alcohol-induced nausea.

I'd become my own poison, I realized while tasting the bile in the back of my throat, like a first grader had poured baking soda and vinegar down my throat, just to see what would happen. I wondered who I was as I heaved my toxic contents onto the asphalt.

"Tacos," he repeated. "That's what you need."

"I don't want your tacos," I slurred. In my inebriated state, I couldn't reject his strip clubs, his benders, or his flight of stairs in the back of the men's club. I hazily recalled staring up at it as I ascended. Moments later, I descended and heard him say, "This one's on me," about the bleach blond-haired woman whose curtained stall I just left. It was about this moment that nausea had begun. I was trying to shake these looping memories as I repeated "I don't want your tacos," and "I just need to throw up."

A little after five-fifteen, I closed the car door on the puddle I'd left in the alley. I had no passport or money, only a paralytic headache. Day three: the worst day.

Day Four: A trip to the mountains, a secret bottle of Johnny Walker Gold. Jorge said, "It's under this bowl over here, just don't tell anyone else."

We were in a living room, the clock struck midnight, and we sang Las Mañanitas. I thought that was a birthday song. A beer pong game lasted for hours. I spectated, nursing the Gold.

Then I was in a bunk bed when Jorge awakened me.

"We're all going for tacos, let's go, man."

"Did you ever sleep?"

"No." He was holding a can of beer.

We were eating tacos on couches. Everyone was still drinking. A select few were passed out in various nooks around the mountain house. The house is so full, everyone's laughter deafening. A guy sprawled out next to me on the sofa kept asking me the Salvadoran Spanish, and English translations to his Mexican Spanish.

Day Six: I couldn't shake myself off. I sat in Felix's parents' living room, playing video games until the return trip that had been delayed by a day. Who the hell was I? I wasn't going to find out in Mexico.

Unable to take anymore flushing myself down a toilet, I instead played video games on the Playstation 3 I'd brought along, living precariously through the adventures of digital characters. It was all I did until our return trip.

Nine days in Mexico ended with another eight-hour-long series of checkmarks and bribes on the drive from Monterrey to Houston. The terrain went from rocky and semi-arid to flat and humid subtropical. We arrived in Houston for four hours of sleep followed by splitting a twenty-four table restaurant between the two of us and one other server. Dozens of well-suited businesspeople, to whom we refer as covers in the business, alternated their stares between us. We servers held carafes of caffeinated black gold, fighting off their quickly emptying coffee cups.

When my roommate Jorge abandoned our lease, I took inventory of my debts. There was a private student loan for which I'd been receiving threatening certified mail. There were a couple of credit cards, each with credit limits of only a few hundred dollars. Finally, there was the car I had just gone to pick up with help from Mike's parents. What terrible timing.

I hadn't even listened to the terms of the loan, just the monthly payment, and how important it was to take out a warranty on this car that had over 50,000 miles under its belt.

Tisdale Motors

Mr. B and I drove for six hours to McAllen, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. Mr. Tisdale, the third-generation owner of Tisdale Motors, was towering at a minimum of six feet tall, and half that width. He had a hearty handshake and spoke something like a television preacher. His crow's feet and etched smile indicated a man somewhere in his sixties, the same age group as Mr. B. His office was beige and brown, with wood-paneled walls and beige moldings. On the wall behind his desk was mounted a mantle with Americana on it, a bald eagle statue, and Old Glory on a stand. Grayscale or Sepia photos were framed and on the rest of the walls. He and Mr. B shook hands and followed it up with a hug. This was Mrs. B's hometown, but they'd been married for decades by this point.

The two men caught up, discussed family affairs and other lore of life in McAllen. Mr. B described his son, Michael, "That's how we know Carlos here," and his daughter Katie, "She's a nutritionist for the school system in Houston." They proceeded to discuss Obama's reign of terror. Mr. Tisdale asked me to weigh in. "I'm young, ignorant and

undecided,” I told him with a chuckle. He laughed boisterously. “You know what you should read? A book by a man named Barry Goldwater called *The Conscience of a Conservative*.”

Eventually, we moved on to business. I was out of my element, and the two men negotiated in a laid back way. “This warranty,” Tisdale started explaining.

“Oh yes, indeed,” affirmed Mr. B.

Within a few minutes, I was signing a contract. I looked only at the monthly payment. Dang.

“Now, keep two things in mind. We’re making an exception and giving you twenty-four-month terms, which explains the payment amounts. Also, I’m not checking your credit because Jim here is vouching for you.” To be clear, vouching did not mean co-signing.

Someone pulled the car around out front, and Tisdale pointed at it through the window. “There she is,” he said.

Inside the car, things seemed fine enough aside from a faint mildew smell. I drove it around a few miles with one of the employees in the passenger seat. He didn’t say much besides pointing out directions on the route.

We took off soon after. I thanked Tisdale for the deal and the book recommendation. Everyone shook hands, and we took off. I followed Mr. B on our six-hour drive back to Houston.

Crash

I couldn’t return the Elantra. To return it would mean driving all the way back down to McAllen in the Rio Grande Valley. I’d be returning it to a family friend of the Barrowses. Not to mention, they’d lent me some cash for the down payment, so how could I return the

car on Dave Ramsey's principals, and force them to share the sunk costs of car financing with me? So I listed that debt, the biggest one, at the bottom. If I was going to get back into my own place, ever going to get back into school, I had to get my money under control.

A few weeks later, during rehearsal one night, I'd realized I now had the cash to pay off my smallest debt, a credit card with a credit limit of three hundred bucks, but that had gone well past that limit due to interest and (late) fees. I called the debtor after the rest of the band left, haggled with the rep for a couple minutes, and was able to pay the whole balance off at a lower amount than I expected. In my excitement, I even called my mentor to tell him about it. I was getting my life back together. Morale was up.

This practice space, called the Rhythm Room, was inside one of the several warehouse-style buildings full of carpeted rooms like ours was. The Rhythm Room was just a couple of miles from the Barrowes' house.

I remember my phone buzzing as I pulled onto Brittmoore Road, to which the Rhythm Room's parking lot exits. Instinctively, I started digging into my pocket before I stopped myself, thinking, "You're getting your life together. While you're at it, how about not using your phone on the road, too?" Cheerfully, I left the phone in my pocket, further increasing my morale, the sense of my own maturity. "I won't. I'll keep getting my life together." I slowed to a stop at a red light at the intersection of Hammerly and the southbound side of the Sam Houston Tollway. I turned up John Mayer's *Continuum* and sang along. I was a little raw from the last few hours of singing grunge and classic rock covers with Bad Channel, but John Mayer had a manageable enough range for me.

While I considered the fatigue of my vocal chords on Hammerly, a Toyota Tacoma was coming down the southbound Sam Houston Tollway service road. This is my memory of the following:

When he saw that the light was yellow, he accelerated to beat the red light.

At that moment when my light turned green, I lifted my foot off the brake to get the car idling a few inches into the intersection. Before I'd placed my foot on the gas to accelerate further, a sparkly red Toyota Tacoma hit the front end of my car, which twirled the car a few times, before it coasted to a halt in the Tollway underpass. I saw nothing but the blinking time in my dash. The *Continuum* CD was still playing, not skipping. Somehow, I was completely out of breath, and my heart was racing. It felt like I'd just sprinted toward and jumped into the car. My body was antsy, wondering why I'd stopped whatever intense action I'd been involved in.

I entered the Barrowses' house, someone else's house that I was living in, shaken, my mind disconnected from my body, and repeated the two images, separated by a second of darkness:

First, a red compact pickup truck smearing across my windshield, the sound of tires squealing—mine, or his, or both. Darkness for a second, then my sedan was spinning while I clench the wheel. Then I was standing over my sedan with a crunched front end watching a puddle expanding beneath it, a stew of glass, fiberglass, metal, all of its bodily fluids leaking out. The colorful puddle expands. Whatever held these vital fluids is gone, crushed.

My eyes were wide open, but I didn't see my present, the inside of a Houston Suburban home. I saw what my mind kept looping. I could hear, though. I heard their questions in that present: Are you OK? Thank God you're OK. What happened?

I said, "I swear that light was green. There were other cars at his light. They were all stopped. My light was green."

I repeated that to them and to myself all the way up the stairs. I sat just a few steps before the top of the staircase, grabbed the banister. The image kept repeating: the red truck smear, the squealing, the growing puddle. Car number five, gone. Something else I couldn't hold onto in this city. Another mess I'd made, another debt in the balance. Another decision made for me. I should have made my own decisions. I should've left this place long ago.

Rock Bottom

In 2006, Michael was standing in the center of his bedroom when I walked in, holding and staring at a framed picture he'd picked up off the shelf. He looked small like he did when I first met him during his first year of high school and my second year. That was five years ago, before he'd had his first drink-to-get-drunk.

At the door to his room, I said, "Hey Michael." That version of him from five years ago turned to look at me, his face smooth. A serene sadness was on his face. The crimson in his cheeks looked settled like it had been there, not a reaction to my walking into the room, which felt warm. The warmth was coursing through my bones, melting away the life I lived outside this room.

He said, "What's up, Carlos?" and walked over to me. What was he doing? I reached out for a handshake, but he instead wrapped his arms around me, going limp. I felt his weight

increase, felt him spasm, heard his sobs that sounded like laughter. He smelled clean, not shower fresh, like he'd taken a shower and then done nothing afterward, to remain clean for as long as possible.

"You were the only one," he said. "The only who tried to help. Thank you." He'd hit rock bottom. On the one hand, I pitied him. On the other, I admired where he was. I said, "Just being a friend," hoping it was enough. I added, "Do you want to talk about it?" And imagined cameras and crew around us, filming an after school special. We decided to talk while walking around the block.

He began once we were in his front yard, "Well, a few weeks ago someone gave me ex at a party, and it didn't really kick in. So I just kept drinking and shit. I mean I didn't pay for it or anything, so I was like whatever." He went on to tell me about waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. "I remember thinking, 'My brain is literally broken.' Even when I was a kid, I would never go to my parents' room for nightmares or whatever. But that night, I walked in there and told them straight up, 'something's wrong, I think I'm actually going crazy.' So they took me to the hospital, where they gave me some shit to calm me down. They said I was going to be pretty miserable for the next few days. And I was." His mom stayed with him for the several days, hunched over him while he hunched over the toilet. By his account, she'd pat his back gingerly, encourage him to take fluids and eat things. Then he had a vision.

"I was wrapped around that porcelain throne literally thinking, 'I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die.' I had nothing more to throw up, but I kept heaving and gagging. I couldn't even fucking breathe. And all of a sudden, while my mom was there patting my back I blacked

out. Then I saw the shape or outline of two hands, with holes in the wrists. They opened up to me for a second, before I came to and told my mom about it.”

There was something that seemed so pure about it all. There, he’d been suffering. There, he’d been purging himself of everything, feeling so close to death, terrified. He was like a child again. He had no loose ends to tie up. There weren’t even any ropes or cables to speak of. And it was that moment in which he had a divine vision. Really, he swears it was real. And I believe him.

Michael at rock bottom. Mike’s vision at rock bottom. Michael having nothing in the world to think or worry about besides the moments in front of him, all because he’d taken a wrong turn on his road to debauchery.

I was thinking about that four years later when I decided to go on a seven-day drinking binge.

7-Day Binge

Day one was a Saturday night in August. Insurance companies were assigning fault for the accident, denying responsibility, deciding how much of a loss it was, giving me no indication how much of that fresh debt would be settled by the claim. My policy only allowed for a few days with a rental, which I’d already exhausted.

I was still working at *World-Class Five-Star Hotel*. I have complicated feelings about the chain, and it feels wrong to air out their laundry, dirty or clean, knowing that I had, in my own way, exploited some of their resources, sometimes harmed more than helped.

For example, I had just come up with a secret shopper idea, for which we’d invite friends or family to check into a room for an hour or so, with the request that they give

honest feedback on their room service experience. During my turn, I invited a friend of a friend to be the guinea pig. After Room Service had delivered, I made my way up to her room.

We watched TV on top of the covers, shoeless. Downstairs, the place was dead. No weddings, no conferences. “I’m out of here at ten, what are your plans for later?” I said. She was fingering a frayed spot on the thigh of my pants. “This is unacceptable,” she teased. This is a five-star establishment. Where is your manager?”

“I’m your manager, B,” I said, referencing the *Chappelle’s Show* “Popcopy” sketch. We carried on like this for a half-hour, watching TV and quipping on luxurious *World-Class Hotel* three-million-thread-count bed dress. After about a half-hour, we planned for her to pick me up post-shift. I returned downstairs to build that up in my mind for the next few hours.

Later, while she pumped gas into her vehicle, I left her to go get a pack of gum and, secretly, some rubbers. She hadn’t tensed up when I kicked my shoes off in the hotel bed, or while our bodies were touching from shoulder to waist. Maybe it needs to feel unexpected for her, I thought. To plan it, to be explicit about grabbing protection, might make it less of an accident, take the excitement out of it. This is how I was trying to take control of the situation as a passenger in her car. Having no ride home for the night, I told myself it was a point of no return anyway.

At the steps to her apartment, I said, “After you,” and she said, “You just want to see my ass.” And I did; I admitted it thinking why shouldn’t I admit it? I reminded her we were both marathon runners, so that was part of the package. In my mind, the reality of walking through her door on a Saturday night pounded at my insides. She found a spare contact case I

could use and some sort of sweetened alcoholic drinks I can't remember. We sat on the couch with blurred vision. Then we were spooning. Then she started to breathe in a way that I couldn't discern. Was it sleep or pleasure? She worked her curves into the grooves of my contorted body. Now, I was at half-mast.

It turned out the breathing *was* sleep after all. What was this? What form of rejection? They were the tightest white pants she'd worn when we'd hung out, and I was able to spin this yarn in which she was upping the seduction, and so I should expect sex tonight. It was too many thoughts at once and being half-mast on this couch felt like being half-mast in middle school when it was time to stand for the pledge of allegiance. I'd opt to fail before exposing myself. I looked at her cheek, stained blue by TV light. I was chaos and needed to go, but she kept waking up when I wanted to grab my phone to beg someone for a ride home. She'd say "five more minutes," not grinding as I'd thought, but snuggling. I thought something serious would spring from something casual, and I wasn't sure what kind of rejection this was. I ended up more lonely than sexually frustrated, but spooning on the couch wasn't helping. How did she get what she wanted? How didn't I?

Axie, the friend who introduced us picked me up, asked me how the night went. She explained to me the situation, that Meghan wasn't looking for anything, but that she enjoyed my company.

"Well, why couldn't she just say that?"

"Why does she need to? Just take it slow."

"This is too complicated," I said, "And now I have an hour left before playing at Grace, and a ten-hour shift right after. Yes, I kind of thought we'd hook up. But I really just

wanted to make progress. I'm ready to get past the whole 'having Meghan ignore my texts for weeks until she just wants a warm body next to her' thing."

Looking back, I don't think complicated was the right word. Even so, things would eventually be simplified a few weeks later when, instead of sending a text about Meghan to Axie like I meant to, I sent it to Meghan herself, who promptly responded. "It's cool," she said. "Look, I'm not putting myself out there right now." We wouldn't talk again after that, but for now, I was up here at the front of the church, wading in three levels of surging shame and embarrassment, purple floaters and blackness occasionally threatening to close in, the blackness of slumber piling onto me against my will.

That night, during a slow Sunday shift, I reflected on yet another debacle, thinking signals would always feel mixed. Worse, I thought about how sloppy it always had to be. This wasn't even the most significant exhibit of my track record. The rapidity at which it creaked open just a crack, and then quickly shut, was like when a Jehovah's Witness knocks on the door of a hungover person on a Saturday morning. But it was a good synopsis of my usual rhythm. A lot of lingering around some woman I'm attracted to without making my intentions clear in some way. When it did come through, it was always in some questionable, even illicit way.

A couple years earlier, there was a married woman with an absent husband. We had a matching work ethic, which we demonstrated as co-workers at *Neighborhood Bar & Grill*, with similar upbringings to boot. We were both Hispanic, both the first people in our respective families' generations to seek out higher education, even if my pursuit was piecemeal and intermittent with no focused career ambitions at the time. And then I realized, with tears and several liters of alcohol, that the ambiguity caused by her inability to break up

her three-person family for me. I couldn't be in a room with her without becoming overwhelmingly aroused past the point of considering how painful this might be for her husband and family. I would ultimately continue strangling something inside me until it ultimately died. As a result, folks I worked with went from losing personal respect for me, to losing professional respect for me. So I left the job in a huff, telling myself I could do better, that two and a half years working at this place was too damn much for an ambitious twenty-three-year-old like me.

I landed a job at *Luxurious Cafe* where I met Heather, the woman I admired for braving a drive from North Carolina to Houston in a van whose transmission couldn't be put in reverse. She'd racked up as much cash as she could from working at a fondue joint and paid for two things: to terminate the lease she'd had with her chronically abusive and unfaithful boyfriend, and to get this van with its partial transmission. She wound up working at *Luxurious Cafe*.

We were only together for three months, but by the time we'd ended, "our" plans had been for her to get back to North Carolina with me in tow, for me to put writing aside as a pastime, and teach English. And it was all because I had a general "sounds good" response when she'd point out ideas, thinking it'd be nice to have the stability and vacation time of a teaching job, and the freshness of a town with less ambiguous weather and less traffic.

When we drove to the 2008 South by Southwest festival in Austin, she told a bartender I was her robot while I danced in the distance with a vagrant to Michael Jackson. I slammed my whiskey and lost it on her, rejecting all of the previous ideas I'd absently agreed to, desperately trying to shout my way into authority, into a Real Man's role. We spent that night in our hotel room, her beating the piss out of me, both of us trying to find out our sleep

number with no success or sleep, before a surprisingly pleasant day of tourism, followed by Arby's and our breakup. My brother's dog Jake watched Heather drive off while I took this last debacle as a sign that things would always be this way and ultimately wrote off any thoughts of pursuing someone until later. Later, when my life was "together."

There would be more unintentional but welcome situations, some more illicit than others, that resembled the Meghan situation. But it stood that the biggest takeaways came from the three messiest. Takeaways like a wanderlust, and learning that sexually, the white women I'd dated hadn't held a candle to the Latin girl I'd dated, in or out of the bedroom. (That, of course, is a matter of taste.) Also, knowing that decision-making was not my forte meant I'd probably continue to end up with a woman who would decide for me if I didn't grow the hell up and get my crap together. Instead, though, I put off that scattered crap, trying to escape and hide from it in a one-bedroom apartment with roaches for roommates.

Starting the June after the breakup with Heather, I spent a year working, watching, and running. I left working two jobs, one at *Luxurious Cafe* and one at *World-Class*, to focusing exclusively on *World-Class*. I watched Netflix and porn when not working or running. I signed up for the 2010 Houston Marathon and was training for that. At the end of that year, I began manager training.

Danny was Executive Food and Beverage Director, the boss of all bosses in the food and beverage department, and made a deal with me when he offered me the promotion to entry-level. "Give me about eighteen months," he said, tracing his bald head with his fingertips, looking for a spot he might have missed while shaving. "I'll promote you, send you out to another property. We'll build you plenty of connections. I brought Ivelisse here from Puerto Rico. I sent Chamo to Baltimore. I can send you to Miami, or New Orleans."

Away from here. I thought to myself, I'd proven to my family that five years of hard work could get you middle-class salary the same way a college degree could. I wanted to get out of here at some point. Sounds good, I thought, repeating to Danny the same response I'd given to Heather almost a year ago to the day.

I conjured up images from the movies and TV I'd watched that were set in Miami. What fantasy characters would my life most closely resemble? How could I romanticize this? Certainly not the surgeons of *Nip/Tuck*, or the life of badassery and irreverence that Mike and Marcus from the *Bad Boys* films lived. The characters from *Empty Nest* or *The Golden Girls* were too old for me to imagine myself in their shoes.

The closest I could get was *Dexter* without a law enforcement or psycho killer thread. But his little apartment, his relationship with a damaged person like Rita. I could get down with that. I wasn't doing anything around here. So I bought into Danny's claims, and composed a mantra for myself: Just got to get through the next sixteen months.

Two months into the entry level position, still shifting uncomfortably in the embarrassment from the Meghan situation, I mentally replayed Danny's promise. I was wandering around the property, a vast gilded space currently devoid of guests, adorned with enormous mahogany archways, grand pianos, and living plants that towered over my head. It was a beautiful property, I thought, remembering the wedding in which an elephant was paraded through the foyer of the grand ballroom, which had an enormous curving staircase, or the Jewish wedding where at least 100 people ushered the bride and groom around in their chairs. But even these experiences, likely because I was a lowly banquet server during them,

had lost their freshness, no longer fueled the romanticism I'd been using to get myself out of bed and into this fake suit.

I watched the bartenders from a distance, from which I could hold them between my thumb and forefinger. Young guy Art was standing around chuckling with our even younger cocktail server. I was older than he was but much younger than the other bartender Su, who was wiping things down, jotting things onto a clipboard. Art just held this gig while he tried to land a bartender spot at a high-volume nightclub, where he could athletically and rhythmically sling drinks and shots, without the constraints of the awkward jigger that had to be used to measure every ingredient of *World-Class* beverages. Eventually, one of those nightclub managers would trust him enough to let him work someplace downtown every weekend. For now, he was biding his time here, flirting with the younger staff members when he could. And Su had settled down from a wanderlust's life. She'd come from Thailand, traveled the States with friends for decades before settling down and marrying, only working at the hotel to pay for her Cadillac.

What was I doing here? I certainly hadn't traveled the country or gone on any other types of excursions. What was I biding my time for, a promotion in Miami? What did I care about Miami? Frankly, the place intimidated me. That was more Art's kind of place, with his V-shaped physique, Enrique Iglesias mole, and thick manicured curls. He'd ask me regularly about planning a trip out there to visit one of our former colleagues who'd relocated there. "You are biding your time for that," I said to myself. It made no sense, biding my time for a goal imposed on me, a decision I relinquished to my employer, instead of making it for myself. I wasn't paying off debts like I'd planned. I was just, here, just in attendance. Because it was the next logical step in this industry. That's what hospitality types do, they

follow the promotions. And even when they become executives, there's a chance of being uprooted. These were their terms, and I was operating on them. I didn't love this enough for that.

Back in my realm of the hotel, in the restaurant, the clock slogged along while I made myself a cappuccino, my mind conjuring and composing a list of decisions I'd outsourced to others by defaulting:

Mike's parents had taken me to the valley for the Elantra that I'd buy from their friend who owned a dealership. They even spotted me half the down payment.

Ivelisse had poached from a restaurant down the street at which I was a server. "I think you're very articulate, and that you have a potential to work at a place that pays much better than this."

Jolanda had groomed me for the management position. She'd often approach me during down times when I was a breakfast server, offering advice that began with, "When you're a manager..." And when I got the job she said, "Yeah, but now you've got a career track, so you can get your degree whenever you damn well please." And when I related my salary offer to Farah, who'd stepped down from her management position, she pep-talked me into going back to Danny and negotiating a higher rate. And it worked, but it was a grand shy of what I'd made as a server in my previous time there.

Here was *my* decision, I thought to myself: I was going to get sloshed again tonight and the next night, then for as many nights as it took to quell my embarrassment, the result of my inebriated advance that Meghan rejected. As many as it took to get the time to pass, get my debts paid, to feel free enough to do whatever I wanted on my terms.

By day three, I was following a seven-day track to alcoholism that I hoped would propel me into an alcoholic stint and speed me through my tenure at *World-Class*.

A post-shift rhythm formed: Loosen the tie, hang the jacket on the back of Art's passenger seat. Have a Johnny Walker Black with a beer chaser while waiting on a pile of nachos or fried finger foods. The appetizers would arrive with a second Johnny Walker Black and beer back. The empty appetizer plate was removed, replaced by another scotch and beer to wash the apps away. Then another round to take the edge off. Then one more to shorten my ride home. Then arriving home for Netflix, free streaming porn, and more food. Then waking up to find my jacket on one of the many coat racks around the house, a shower and shave, and a ride to work in Jim's minivan, to wait for the end of the shift. It was three days of living inside myself, under a pile of business attire, looking through my eyes like they were a filthy windshield. It was nice, I thought, getting paid to be numb. But on the seventh day, I was rejected.

On day seven, Art, the bartender at *World-Class Five-Star Hotel* dropped me off at around three am. I could barely walk, equally fatigued as I was intoxicated. His little black Civic sent a rumble through the suburban neighborhood, up and down the well-kept lawns and neutral-colored houses on the street. It sped off while I leaned into my stumble across the front yard. As usual, the door was unlocked.

The TV was just past the short entry hallway, illuminating the living room with a Turner Classic Movie. I detoured left through the unlit dining room that contained a large table in the center and a few china hutches adorned with antiques against its walls, to the Barrowses' kitchen, where only the dimly lit stovetop bulb was on. The pizza was in a box on the counter. I microwaved two slices then continued out of the other side of the kitchen, now through the TV room, where Mike's dad was in the recliner watching some film in black and white.

I concentrated on my legs. Could I feel them yet? I could. I could make it across the living room looking more tired than inebriated, I thought. We greeted each other: a "Hey" from me and a "Hey, fella" from him, and I trudged upstairs. The walls of the staircase were lined with generations of framed pictures, some of Mike and his sister as children and one of Mike with his sister at her wedding. There was also a photo of the Barrowses on their wedding day. He still had hair. She looked almost exactly the same as she did now. A few ancient photos of people vaguely resembled current family members. A synoptic visual history on their staircase wall. I made my way up hoping Jim assumed I was sluggish from fatigue, hoping his eyes weren't following me up the stairs and out of sight. My tie was loose but still strangling me. My suit jacket weighed a ton. I couldn't wait to get out of costume.

In my room, I sat at my computer, crumbs and traces of orange-colored grease on the paper plate near my keyboard. In my underwear, I ambitiously and hazily browsed unsavory recesses of the web, while the TV streamed Netflix, and the colors it emitted mingled with the colors emitted from my monitor, intersecting at my head, helicoptering around it with the walls of the room.

I turned around in my chair, lunged for my bed and sprawled out. On the TV, Netflix asked, “Continue watching?” I clicked yes with my controller, trying to remember what was even streaming. I was still hammered, still hungry, still horny. After I had got up to pee, I made my way to the stairwell, looked to see if the walls downstairs still danced to that TV’s light. I saw nothing but the slithering of the pool’s reflective waves on the walls so I returned downstairs for more pizza. I ate two more slices cold while I waited on the three I would take upstairs to eat while lying in bed. When in my room again, another episode started up, and the insatiable emptiness in my stomach became a sinking feeling.

A tingling feeling encased me, composed of embarrassment, shame, and conviction.

The embarrassment returned from a few hours ago when we were in the dimly lit tex-mex bar & grill. Giant murals of Tapatias and Mexican coastal towns lined the walls, under which sat the pre-gamers, crowds of dolled up young adults filling the room with an anticipant energy, the energy of being on the cusp of committing acts they’d regret if they remembered it during the following day’s hangover.

Art and I were spectating from the bar, taking in the social nightlife landscape from stools that rose above everyone else. Four women at a table across the room from Art and me all stared and smiled at him, waving him over. In less than a second, one of them glanced at me then quickly away, and not in a bashful way. No shy smile afterward, no shifting eyes while staring at the ground. More of an “I hope he doesn’t think we mean him, too” way. Art didn’t see that. “Come with me, man,” he kept saying. I declined, turning back to my scotch and nachos, and waited to be driven home while he took down numbers across the room.

Then I began to feel the weight on my body, the weight of my work costume, the weight of all the excess calories I'd been piling on for days.

Shame emerged, of arriving at the Barrowses' home drunk again, worrying what the father of a friend from my upbringing was thinking, myself being painfully aware that I did not need two slices of pizza, much less seven. I knew how much a large supreme from Domino's cost them and gave no thought to it, no matter how generous I knew they were with food. I should have been living here to get my life back together. Not committing gradual suicide via binge drinking, saturated fat, and refined flour.

Conviction forced me into hiding and thinking I had to retreat until I was right again. I was misappropriating the providence of others, like the Barrowses because I put myself in this mess, so I should've gotten myself out on my own. My eyes fell shut, my body shivered, my mind desperately scurried to retreat into it, a body succumbing to the alcohol and pizza and over-stimulation, a body forced back into feeling when it couldn't take anymore fat and alcohol.

I woke some unknown time later in a functional but neglected body—in particular, a bloated stomach that now felt far from empty. On the contrary, now it was brimming. I imagined the doughy lump in my throat, my gut packed with pizza up to my esophagus, which was also at capacity. The crackle of acid reflux sizzled in my throat. Then nausea set in, and I ran to the restroom just in time to purge it all. Michael might be up; he might be hearing me.

I woke again a few hours later, to sun rays slithering through swaying blinds, and conjured up the last image I remembered, one of unsettled water in the porcelain bowl. Only

a bowl, no near-death experience. No fancy, miraculous vision. No rock bottom or accompanying tabula rasa. I was turning the Barroweses' home into a halfway house. Hadn't I stooped low enough?

I felt like my brain was an ant under a magnifying glass, the rays singeing its delicate tissue. This persistent, dull headache would follow me for the week, during which every throb would pulse in a reminder of one of the many ways I'd failed. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

I was sober, and an alcohol-soaked week further behind schedule. Only one of my closest high school friends didn't have a degree yet. He and I were living at his parents' house, both still in respective recoveries. He'd recovered from alcohol and rehab, one bad trip on ecstasy dismantled him and was his turning point. I was recovering from a private student loan provider seeking litigation, a Hyundai Elantra with a torn-off front-end, and countless other ends that weren't just loose, but had been untied for so long that they had become frayed. The net I'd built for myself was unfit, and now I was using someone else's, namely the Barroweses'.

Michael was trying, too. He'd gotten a job detailing furniture and living with another childhood friend for a while until he suffered a nervous breakdown. His parents flew him home during a job in Corpus Christi. Since then, he was back living in their house, on the other side of the restroom that separated his room from mine. Michael was enrolled at St. Thomas, working on a philosophy degree. But, he struggled to keep up. He needed more time than a semester system could give him. He's always been a diligent, patient learner. He could spend several hours practicing his guitar, regularly. We'd started playing guitar at similar ages, but he blew me out of the water within a year. A diligent, patient instrumentalist, for

him, guitar's always been the means, with no end in sight. He enjoys the means, loves them even. That's not me, I want the ends. I grow weary of the means. I've always tended to.

Mike's father took me to the hotel. In his Toyota Sienna minivan, AM radio voices dulled by white noises chattered while he and I made idle chit-chat. No updates on the car yet, I told him. I was waiting for a declaration of total loss before I could figure out what my next transportation move would be. He said he could be my ride as long as needed. He'd gone from disability to retirement years ago, so he likely had nothing but doctors' appointments or other errands to run. I was uncomfortable, though, still unsure whether or not he'd given a second thought to my drunken hobble. The easy thing about him, though, was that I could always launch him into any sort of anecdote or diatribe. I searched my mind for good conversational kindling.

"Did you hear about this book *Zealot*? It's supposed to be a comprehensive biography of Jesus through a more political than religious lens." I was genuinely intrigued by the book, but I also knew where he'd take the conversation.

"Oh yeah," he said. "I heard all about it the other day. Now it's a big thing to reduce our sacred histories for political influence. We have to watch out for these people trying to reduce Jesus's life to that of some politician. There was another book like that in the seventies..." he continued while I watched the cars on the freeways compete for first place on the way to *World-Class Hotel* for another shift as Food and Beverage outlets manager.

Danny wanted me at work by two-thirty in the afternoon, a half-hour early. I showed up at two-twenty-five and waited for him to chicken peck emails out on his keyboard and delegate countless tasks to folks on his speakerphone. He was a quirky Food and Beverage Executive Director. He had a yip that would intermittently click in his jaw. He would trace

his shaven head for any peach-fuzzy spots he might have missed. He would do this while carrying out any number of executive tasks. He did this while finally addressing me after twenty minutes of demonstrating his executive power to an audience of me.

He said, “This is your first meeting with you as the only outlets manager in attendance. You feeling good about it?”

“I’m good, Daniel,” I assured him. I had a headache, and dermatitis scales scurried all over my scalp, but these meetings were a cinch. I’d watched my mentor, Ivelisse, give a few talking points on very general ideas for improving the outlets. I could list those off in my sleep, since for entry level management like me, it mainly entailed using stilted language to remind our General Manager we cared about the quality of our goods and services, in addition to being cost-effective.

In the darkened room, I was lucky we covered food and beverage almost initially and got my talking points out of the way. For the rest of the meeting, different reviews on TripAdvisor were discussed, and the executives of the departments would explain action plans for review items relevant to them. My mind drifted from that place. Instead of scrutinizing our hotel’s performance for the last quarter with everyone else in the room, I took myself through a mental play-by-play of the last seven days. Back to the drawing board.

Total Loss

On my next day off, likely a Tuesday or Wednesday, I went to a body shop in West Houston. It was a big one with lots of lights and gaudy lettering. In fact, it looked like a used car superstore, one that looked like a wrecking ball came loose from one of the nearby cranes—because there’s always a nearby crane in Houston—and bounced all over their inventory, leaving rows of partially crushed vehicles in its wake.

I looked at my Hyundai Elantra with the crushed front end being hauled to this particular body shop's version of a morgue, where cars waited to be harvested for parts, then ultimately compacted, their little auto souls squeezed out of them to wander around aimlessly. I imagined the rest of its sad afterlife as I stared at it, the fourth car destroyed under my keep. There was the Cutlass, then the Sunfire, followed by the Mitsubishi, then finally, this Elantra. My sister was with me now, to whom I wondered aloud, "Do you think all these little car cubes I've created are all in the same junkyard someplace in North Houston?" She laughed. She'd been with me at my first total loss, the Oldsmobile. Now she was with me for this one.

Jim's Suggestion

I walked up to Jim Barrows, Mike's dad, to break the news of the total loss to him. He'd sunk some of his own money into the vehicle, too. That was what made it twice as hard to break it to him. I'd just used what small sum of cash I'd had to pay that card off, and the rainy day fund wasn't enough. I felt it would be a slap in the face to ask him to settle for what I had.

"Well, the important things are that you're OK and that the insurance is paying the car off," which they did. I'd heard horror stories before, and so agreed that this was the upside of things.

"What do you advise? I don't have anything saved up for another down payment. But I can't just have you chauffeur me around indefinitely."

"Look," he began, shuffling in his Leather recliner. He was retired, and before that, on disability for years. He spent more time in this chair than anywhere else in the house.

"Carla and I are happy to keep driving you to and from work anytime you need. Whenever

you're ready to get another vehicle, we can go see Tisdale again. But I think there's another option you should consider." I knew what he was going to say, as we regularly had this conversation.

"I'm going back to school next semester," I offered. "I can cash flow it now. I just have to see what credits from HCC transfer to UH." It had been five years since I'd dropped out from the University of Houston, and I didn't owe them any money by then. They had to have forgiven me, I thought.

"I understand, and that's great. But I have this image of you as a full-time student, and Carlos, you've never really given that a shot, but I can picture that being a great environment for you."

Weighing it Out

Up in my room in the Barrowes' house, I weighed things out while googling the cheapest universities in Texas. The TV streamed Netflix.

Though I love to think of myself as an autodidact, I couldn't deny the appeal of the structure and institutionalism of a university. I needed a controlled environment, and not only was the University of Houston too large to manage at 35,000 enrolled students (today it's closer to 45,000), but I needed an entire community that was more controlled.

There were just too many distractions in a metropolis like Houston. I couldn't just work; I had to overwork, whether it meant slinging extra hours over my back, or piling a second job on top of whatever the full-time might be. I'd stumble into relationships at those jobs, which, in conjunction with said job, would compound my neglect of said studies.

It sounds like such a good problem to have when I think back at the job situation. First, how lucky was I to have the opportunity to overwork, when for years I'd watch my mother scour classifieds and take on pizza delivery jobs when there was nothing else? I could tell you I mean quantity, not quality. When you work the hourly jobs I worked, though, quantity (another ten bucks per each extra hour of stocking boxes, or another hour of three tables that were each worth a \$5 tip during a lunch rush) cost quality of life. Quantity meant I could have my cake and eat it too. And because my GPAs were always the casualty of my clingy boyfriend nature or my inability to manage my daily income stream, my strong points were the jobs.

Once I found the cheapest schools, I googled the locations of the schools in search of the closest one.

Looking back twelve years, it's hard to imagine any other qualities about me besides the blind work ethic that might have scored me extra points with the women I dated in early adulthood. When Sarah and I gave us another shot just out of high school, I'd refused to buy into the Mortgaging Your Social Status process of the private university offering menial scholarships.

I remember sitting on Sarah's back patio after a get-together she'd thrown before we tried rekindling and relating my opinions on that game. "It only makes sense to me that four years devoted to anything will get you the same success that a degree would," I related, so proud of my eighteen-year-old's wisdom. Not three months after that conversation, I'd get fired from Wal-Mart for not keeping a "good zone" in the stationary aisle. (Seriously,

though, the next time you're in a Wal-Mart, make sure you look up and down the office and school supplies aisles, and you'll realize what a Sisyphean task is before any poor sap on whom the job's been pawned off). Nevertheless, I remember her agreeing. "Good for everyone going to college," I remember her saying about her group of friends.

We'd both had working-class upbringings, so watching our friends go off to college because "it was the thing to do" just made us resentful. The fall just after high school, when all of our classmates left us for their paths to middle-class adulthood, we the stragglers became close. Add to that a traumatic mugging with a pistol-whipping, and you had the perfect recipe for attachment and co-dependence. She was a carhop (no skates) at a fast food joint, and I went from Wal-Mart to Little Caesars.

Sam Houston State University was in Huntsville, the cheapest and closest option. It was a prison town with seven units in the area. Someone told me once that contrary to what I might expect, prison towns are actually safer because security's beefed up.

It was a year later that I'd worked myself into illness. I was logging seventy hours a week managing a pizza joint, mostly eating said pizza, unless it was a rare exception that I'd stop by Whataburger or something on either side of a twelve-hour shift. Pizza flour and cornmeal had entered every crevice of my life. Today, I can trace a chronic but mild knee pain back to a shift at that job, where I fell on the exact same spot that agitates me after a good run or long shift inspecting vehicles with my father-in-law.

With a university chosen, I logged on to Craigslist.org and searched for rent prices. It would have to be a bedroom in someone's house. Campus housing was priced for rich people and loans. It'd be hard without a car, but I'd bike commuted before.

I tallied a budget using an average of the rent prices I'd found, listed tuition with estimated book costs. I'd have to be generous with that line item if I was going to study literature.

I had a figure based on the possibility that I couldn't find a job. There were only four handful restaurants in town. None seemed like viable options.

Three months to raise the money. I could do it.

Let's Do It

For the first time in my life, the financial aspects of the decision were easiest. Professional conversations were to be had. The hardest would be with my bosses at *World-Class Hotel*. I was on a career track there. The guitar gigs would be easier to resign from.

I began with what I thought would be hardest: family. Surprisingly enough, those conversations were easy. My grandmother was relieved that, even if it took me eight years to do it, that I was walking away from restaurant work. Ditto my mom and siblings.

Danny's Office

I waited for a few minutes as I usually do for Danny to demonstrate his executive abilities, his chicken pecking and delegating.

"Daniel, I wanted to tell you first. I'm moving to Huntsville to finish my degree." He stared for a few seconds.

“That’s great, congratulations,” He said, extending his hand for a shake. I took it. His shoulders sank a little and he went into a chat.

“How long will it take?”

“About five semesters.”

“Good. So you’ll be gone for a couple years, taking care of business, getting a degree. In two years, you’ll come back to the biz, pick up where you left off. You’ll be fast-tracked into something more senior than where you are now.”

“That’d be nice,” I said, knowing damn well that folks are quickly forgotten once they drop out of the ranks. Two years is an eternity in that world. Within a year, all of my superiors and seniors would be gone. Within two, the property would be bought out by another brand, most of the staff turned over.

Today, it’s a Royal Sonesta, and the color scheme has gone from beiges and maroons to metallic blues and grays.

The Repo Incident

Regarding my brother’s accusations about ceasing to “help mom financially,” I was a fool in only making a conversation about the move with my mother a checklist item. The act of cutting her off was an entirely different task, and the hurdle came to me in form of a text message:

“Can you pls help my car is going to be repo.”

For years, I’d wanted back into my mom’s finances, but I refused to do it on her terms, and therefore didn’t contribute as much as I possibly could. On her terms, text messages like the one above would arrive in my phone’s inbox sporadically, and I’d honor

those terms. That means I'd agree to a paycheck-to-paycheck life with her, a lifestyle in which everything feels like Temple Run, where some coded randomizer produces obstacles and challenges you never anticipate and are therefore always on the edge of a game over. So you're either running as fast as possible on the edge of your seat, or it's game over.

I'd woken up to this text message, and tossed the phone aside as soon as I read it, thinking this might be the first time I ever rejected my mom's request for money despite having liquid funds. In these days, though, I had no idea what liquidity meant. Normally, these exchanges had been discussed like an interest-free loan. She was to get paid on this day or that day. Her tax return would be coming in. There was some unforeseen expense somewhere that took priority over securing her transportation. If I had something to scrape up, I'd scrape it up and hand it over.

Pre-emptive guilt settled in the back of my throat, like the yeasty white material that accumulates on an infected uvula. I also thought about the unfortunate coincidence of the situation. I had myself just lost my own car to a Toyota Tacoma whose driver was trying to speed through a stale yellow traffic light. The misfortune of these circumstances and my pre-emptive guilt was amplified by the fact that, since I could drive, she and I regularly took places chauffeuring each other. It was typical for only one out of the two of us to have a working vehicle.

For myself, I'd been making real efforts to get things back together. When I'd lost my roommate a few months prior, despite being able to afford my own place I opted to move in with my friend and his parents. I was throwing chunks of my income at my own debacles: defaulted student loans, maxed out credit cards, the recently-totaled car I'd just financed. I'd even taken Dave Ramsey's nine-week Financial Peace University course, to which one paid

eighty bucks to be indoctrinated by his fiscally conservative personal finance ideas interwoven with rantings about the US government's mismanagement of money. So I thought about the rich white man's approach, inwardly repeating to myself what I'd heard in one of his rants:

“You can't afford to keep bailing these folks out! If you love them, you'll be honest about that. Listen, people who have no goals for their money think they can afford things based on how far from Friday they are. But if you have real goals, you don't have to lie.”

I don't have to lie, I remember thinking. I couldn't afford it, and not because it wasn't payday, or because I was living in some financially ambiguous place where I lived paycheck to paycheck by habit, not a constraint. I was somewhere between poverty-minded logic and responsible personal finance logic, but logic nonetheless. Emotions, on the other hand, function like impressionist painters.

Pulling back from the precision of formal life and ethics, impressionists blur those edges and appeal to you with a hazy scene of evocative moments. I wish to heaven I could commission one of the greats, probably Manet, to paint the hazy picture of my mom. In the painting, she'd be walking down Gessner Road, or waiting at a Metro stop in front of a gas station or grocery store, under the relentless Houston sun. Her space would be shared with even less fortunate immigrants, who didn't command English the way my mother did, who didn't migrate to this country as teenagers to get an adequate education as my mom did. She'd be sitting and waiting for a bus with the community we'd left behind when I was a toddler.

I was at a crossroads, debating the importance of my mother's urgent, immediate problem over my own desperation for self-actualization. To boot, my mother's knowledge of my job and current rent-free circumstances skewed things on the side of emotions. In particular, fear or anxiety resulted from her urgent but familiar problem. She'd know I was voluntarily withholding this time. But I knew things, too. For one, I know how alarmist the paycheck-to-paycheck mind can make a person.

You have to be pretty behind, several months behind in fact, on payments for the threat of repossession to loom. I knew this from her past repos and my own credit issues. As long as you keep in touch with your lenders, you can actually get away with a lot. Sure, your credit score will spiral into the garbage disposal, but you'll still have a tank to pump five bucks of gas into for another drive to your job which, if you're in a bind like this, doesn't pay enough for rent, food, utilities, *and* transportation. This is the cycle my mother was living in, and despite her best but desperate intentions, it was bringing not only my finances but my morale down with it too.

Again, I returned to a pragmatic mindset. To heck with Dave Ramsey. To heck with my tendency to be so hard on myself. I had to get to the nitty gritty of this situation, and even if it didn't anesthetize the dull sting of the guilt on my uvula, making an intentional decision for once in a long while would get me through it. I had to stop thinking about why I should give her the money and how that would make me a good son and decent human being. I instead thought about what the hell was making me reconsider the bailout habit at all. I let that "darker" side of myself emerge, a competitive side of me that rarely rears its head.

I still lay in bed, and it had only been a couple of minutes since she sent the text. I would intermittently pick up the phone and re-read it.

“...pls help...”

“...car...repo...”

At some point, my mood shifted. I became increasingly resentful with each reading. Why was she putting me in this position? She knew what I wanted to do, what my goals were. How did she survive for so long when she had three kids, and we couldn't work? Why now, was that impossible? She didn't realize the profundity of her request. She was asking me to risk postponing my future further yet, because, for whatever reason, she financed a car she couldn't afford. I began to remember all the other cars she'd had, and lost, in the past. Two different 4runners, both repossessed. The lemon she'd once bought, an old Chevy Lumina, that she ended up dropping off at the small dealership she'd financed it from after hours because she was fed up with its issues.

If I were already in Huntsville, there really *wouldn't* be anything I could do. My hands would be tied behind my back. The decision would be made for me. This thought only aggravated me further, made me wish I was months into the future. And even if her car was to get repossessed, guess who'd be on the hook for her rides. It was then that I remembered an exceptional moment I'd had with my mother in which I was the one with a transportation issue.

I'd been driving an old Pontiac Sunfire, and blew out its gaskets by neglecting to give an oil leak the proper attention. While the engine was being rebuilt, I'd been in a bind. My roommate's schedule didn't align with mine, and bus rides take forever if you're in the wrong neighborhood. My mom didn't respond well to my request for a ride to work, or class perhaps. I told her I couldn't believe she was giving me such a hard time about this. That

having to cart her around when she was without a vehicle was partly what killed my car. Her response was, “Well, then you shouldn’t have given me rides.”

I’d spend the remainder of that hour-long summer’s walk repeating that to myself, and it came back to me at this moment. I shouldn’t have carted her around because it might have prolonged the life of my car. Frankly, I was feeling pretty vengeful in remembering that, but I didn’t bring it up. I struggled to keep reminding myself I wasn’t getting back at her, but I was using the logic she suggested at that moment from two years prior. I admit, though, that it felt damn good not to feel so damn guilty.

“I’m sorry, I can’t afford to help you anymore.”

She said, “OK mijo that’s OK.” That was the last time she ever asked for help in that way.

For the next several weeks, I wondered whether my mom still had a car. But I couldn’t follow up, because, “What did I care? If I’d cared, I would’ve helped her.” I was fighting that off, trying to paint my vision over it. A vision of life in the Piney Woods. A vision of myself no longer doing homework in the back of a restaurant during the slow part of a shift. A vision of life in a town not full of distractions, expenses, and traffic. A vision of myself as a student who works part-time, instead of an employee who studies part-time. As painful as it was, as remorseful as I was feeling at the moment, I told myself it was worth it. Still, I was cutting ties to the very dock that helped make me who I am.

Getting The Saturn

If you don’t name a thing, it’ll do it for you. Today, I drive The Jetta. When we reminisce about the car that got me out of Houston, we call it The Saturn.

The Saturn had been a college graduation gift to my friend Kristen from her father. She'd never owned a brand new car, an expensive thing for a college student at thirteen grand, so she didn't know how to care for it. It lived in Houston under her care for thirteen years before I talked Kristen's husband Tim, a longtime friend of mine, down from eight to six hundred bucks when I discovered the catalytic converter was shot. I had no idea how to make a repair of that sort. But after thirteen years, the Saturn was with me for a new phase. I would fix that catalytic converter so it could return to making toxins less toxic; I would replace the clutch a year later. For now, it was enough to get me to Huntsville and back every weekend. Now I could travel back and forth from one H-Ville to H-Town on weekends. The extra cash from playing at church would be helpful.

The day I bought the car from her, we drove around her neighborhood so I could get my bearings.

"The RPM shouldn't be higher than 3 for too long. You should shift every time it gets to that point."

"Try to let up on the clutch at the same rate that you press down on the gas."

"When in doubt, hit the clutch," was the most valuable piece of advice she gave me. I used it when we got to some train tracks, and the incline was momentarily steep. You know you can drive stick when you climb over a hill. That's like an initiation. Years prior, I would sometimes steal my mom's boyfriend's Toyota pickup, grind the hell out of the clutch, and avoid any intersections that were on a slight incline. Houston's pretty flat. Still, as any manual driver knows, it didn't take much for the slightest incline to grind your clutch down and stall you out. I was therefore terrified at the prospect of these tracks, which were particularly steep.

“Hit the clutch if you think it’s going to stall out,” she calmly reminded me. The car was intermittently going silent then revving intensely while I tried to equalize the amount of pressure I was applying and releasing on both pedals. It kept vacillating between those extremes. “That’s OK,” she’d say. “There’s no traffic, no train coming, and you haven’t stalled out, so you’re actually doing pretty good.” But I couldn’t stand being in that middle-ground. I think that’s why she kept her cool and didn’t laugh. I zoomed over that hump in that jerky way new drivers do. I was initiated. We circled around the block another time or two, just enough to confirm I had the tentative hang of it.

I jerked my way through several intersections, anxious at the prospect of taking I-59, 610 Loop, and finally I-10 to get home from the Bird apartment. I’d yet to learn that being in fifth gear was smooth sailing. Since it was after nine pm, the lack of traffic allowed for that sailing.

In the trunk that night, I found a binder full of negatives and two tomes. One of them was a handbook on hobbyist photography, and the other was *The Norton Anthology of English Masterworks—Early, Middle, and Modern*. Oh right, she has a master’s in Literature and Writing, I thought when I saw it. That dictionary-sized anthology would save me hundreds of dollars in textbooks as I trudged through my undergraduate English literature requirements. Thanks for that, Kristen.

At such a low price, I considered the Saturn another inheritance from friends. When Tim and Kristen lived in Galveston to plant a church five years before they handed it down, Kristen was commuting from Galveston to Clear Lake, about 50 miles each way, to teach at a high school. They lived there for three years before returning to Houston. I’d be doing the same with it. This three-door, 1.8-liter engine thirteen-year-old coupe was going to get me

out of Houston. I'd drive it out of this comfort zone in which I'd become cocooned by the long hours of hotel work, my lonely experience with casual dating, and the artifice of living a Christian life only to the extent of playing five songs at a church (with Tim) every Sunday.

I left a few days after buying the Saturn on a Monday in January of 2011. If I didn't leave the Barrowses' house before seven o'clock, I'd interrupt their weekly Lutheran Bible study. I'd been staying with them since June when Jorge's girlfriend became pregnant halfway through the lease of our two-bedroom a mile west of *World-Class Five-Star Hotel*.

Now waiting on a child, Jorge and Tanja could not live in the apartment with me as a roommate, nor in a place of its conditions. Now that I think about it, the conditions were unbearable for me as well. There was a nook in the corner of the white kitchen counter—beneath matching cabinets—that produced a steady trickle of roaches all sizes. I'd dug around, investigated, made work requests from the leasing office, before finally succumbing to the issue, instituting a daily habit of taking surface cleaner and disinfectant to the area at each first sight of the tiny roach and roach egg particles. As a result, we'd given up cooking in that kitchen, picking up frozen foods or takeout most nights. Breakfast we'd pilfer from the World-Class buffet just before opening for business. All employees were entitled to lunch in the basement cafeteria, where Five-Star leftovers from prior banquets were served.

I was glad to have Jorge out of my life, having always resented his constant subtle reminders that he'd lowered himself from a cushy life in Monterrey to work at *Five-Star*. I'd ascended to the job after four years of restaurant ladder climbing, the first of which was at that pizza joint. Jorge looked down at what I'd been looked up to. From this point on, I'd be looking back at it.

“You got everything?” my friend’s mother asked me, as we hastily tossed the last wave of trivial possessions that had somehow avoided the packing phase, as is usually the case when moving on. Things find their way into nooks and crannies and stow away, waiting until the moment they’re on the brink of abandonment, when they jump out from behind your bed or the corner of your closet as if to yell, “Wait!” Indicating you’ve called their bluff. Other items I’d purposely left behind included my full-size bed which sunk low into a minimalist Ikea frame, the suit pieces I mashed together into a costume when I began managing food and beverage outlets at *World-Class Hotel*. There, I learned not to button all the jacket buttons. I also learned not to order a cheeseburger when having dinner with your executive food & beverage director. I also learned many other things, most importantly that I wasn't cut out for that life. Not then, at least.

“I’ll be back next weekend for forgotten things,” I told her. My destination, Huntsville, TX, was only seventy-five miles north of my hometown Houston. I’d take the Sam Houston Tollway up to I-45 North, then coast at seventy-five miles per hour until exit 108, where I’d then come upon the thirty-foot-tall, porcelain-colored statue of General Sam Houston, the alleged first Texan to convert his slaves into paid servants. The night’s drive was a mixture of purples and blacks, as opposed to how green the days had been during the last several trips I’d made up by day. In a few months, the days would be grays and browns, the result of a drought, and then forest fire, that would devastate this area. This is the beginning of the Piney Woods region. It stretches from the vicinity of Huntsville, then further Northeast to Lufkin and Nacogdoches.

The long arc that fed us onto I-45 from the Tollway was populous, but we drivers were cruising along at a cool thirty miles per hour on a tilt, leaning towards the Greenspoint

industrial complex, and the mall next door of the same name whose parking lot regularly hosts a carnival for weeks at a time. The stretch immediately after this junction is one of the most dangerous in town. As I write this, I can recall one accident and several near-misses I've had driving on it.

By seven o'clock, wave three of rush hour was right on time, in effect on I-45, where the auto crowd was accelerating into a red-speckled fluidity. Fender benders and flat tires all over the highway had been mostly resolved. Long lines of vehicles were shrinking at the toll pay lines behind me. Gear shifting went from frequently to seldom, to where I was rarely downshifting but could mostly stay in fifth. Red tail lights still speckled my line of sight, dimming and brightening with the cutoffs and the sporadic lane changes of reckless Houston drivers. It all felt like stock footage of ultra-magnified platelets, unable to clot a wound because of its size.

I continued along I-45, passing through Spring, then the Woodlands, where traffic went from clots to contours. This point forward was, and would usually be, smooth dark sailing until the tiny blip that is Willis, a town boasting brightly lit roadside fast food joints—Sonic, Chick-fil-A, McDonald's—and an under-construction Kroger so large, it would contain its own furniture gallery. On this night, though, as I passed the Woodlands and entered the piney abyss with little to no gear shifting, I could lower my shoulders a little. While traversing the forested gap between the edge of Houston suburbs and Huntsville's giant sentry statue, I thought my only concern would be a risk of highway trance. I didn't realize I was testing the Saturn's limits.

Now the speed limit was seventy-five, requiring more weight on the pedal. I got up to eighty, and the car started to vibrate. I was only newly acquainted with the Saturn, and now

feeling unsettled. I guessed the texture of the road probably had something to do with it, out here in the middle of nowhere. The vibration became shaking. Nevertheless, I maintained weight on the pedal. I would get to Huntsville, shaking be damned.

Really, it was just the motor mounts, I told myself. Motor mounts, as I'd learned in the third car I totaled, a Mitsubishi Galant, were a gradual problem that could escalate gradually, too subtle to notice until it's too late, like the myth of the frog in the increasingly hot water. One day, you're vibrating. The next day, other parts of the engine would be shaken loose, one at a time. Then things could get expensive. It couldn't happen on one seventy-five-mile drive, though. Could it?

Memories of that car came with memories of Mary, the woman I wanted for myself who was married with a daughter. I'd never know whether it ended because she was diving off the ledge into divorce, or because of her love for Eric, in addition to the obvious love she had for her daughter. I still don't know. Probably a little of all of those reasons.

In the Saturn, I decided it was just another of the many messes I'd made, another one I was leaving behind. This was why I was still single. I had things to learn.

My attention returned to the Saturn, which was a half-hour into its shakes, and I wondered if I'd make it to the white sentry in Huntsville. I took exit 108 onto Montgomery Road and pulled into The Ranch at Sam Houston, my new subdivision full of identical duplex homes. I killed the engine, grabbed two armfuls of things and for the first time, noticed an indigo visibility all around. I'd worn glasses since I was four years old. I'm all but blind in dim light. But this wasn't dim light, it was indigo light. The sky was full of stars, a Hallmark cliché, or a computer wallpaper in the flesh. The moon resembled an overly used

cue ball, reflecting light strongly enough for me to see my surroundings. It was something I hadn't seen since I'd last visited El Salvador, fifteen years prior.

I stood next to my newly-acquired Saturn, panting as if to catch its breath, like a greyhound ready to retire. In my arms were a Rock Band 2 drum set, and an expanding file. Jounced by a sports car that raced by and alerted me to other nighttime sounds, I came out of my moonlit trance. The rhythmic chirping of insects, reptiles and rodents were louder than any wildlife I'd heard in Houston. Laughter and pop music leaked out of several cookie-cutter houses mixed into the aural surroundings—houses that matched mine exactly—split into duplexes, blueprints of units that were reflections of each other.

After emptying the cargo onto the patio, I produced my key. My new roommate Frankie was on the couch covered with a blanket up to his chin. He held a kitten that poked its head out. Multicolored light from the TV flashed onto both their faces, the only thing not pitch black downstairs. It was like a scene from a UFO movie, in which the TV played the part of UFO, entrancing Frankie and his kitten before slowly levitating them into itself for probing.

With the stairs to my room directly past the front door, I greeted him from the threshold and made the first of several trips up. "It's OK that he doesn't offer to help," I thought, "he's eighteen, his living still subsidized by his parents whom I'd met when signing the lease for my room. No one expects anything but good grades of him."

A couple of hauls up and down the stairs and my bedroom setup was composed of a few chock-full black garbage bags, a twin bed in the corner against the wall, a small Ikea computer cart, and a TV on the carpeted ground.

It took three hours (or eight episodes of *King of the Hill*) to get unpacked and situated. The room was a clean slate. After seven years of hospitality industry madness, the only hard assets I owned were a Mexican Fender Telecaster electric guitar, an accompanying Fender Deluxe amp, and the panting Saturn out front that I paid \$600 for.

I was too exhausted to feel ashamed for squandering so much money for the last seven years. After realizing I hadn't fallen asleep before eleven o'clock in over two years, a new mantra emerged in my mind in the moments while I slipped into slumber: Just got to get my degree and get out of this place. Five semesters.

I'd be back in Houston again next weekend, and now I knew the Saturn could get me there.

Vicky the Microcosm

On the day after I moved and before the start of the semester, I went for a run to gather intel around my new neighborhood. Ten minutes in, the streets wind around much more than in Houston. Noting landmarks at the tops and feet of hills, I followed the asphalt roads, most of them flanked by deep ditches. I found a backroad to I-45, a rusty semi-trailer truck graveyard, Sam Houston Road. Returning to my neighborhood, just behind it were two rows of duplexes, aligned on either side of Vicki Drive.

Vicki Drive runs right behind my duplex. All the homes on either side looked to be built off of the same skeleton, looked to be the same make and model. The duplex I lived in had a foundation beneath it. The grass was too unkempt in the vast ditch between the homes on Vicky and the back door to my place. The ditch was thorny, contained all kinds of wildlife.

The homes on Vicky's left—directly behind my duplex—were manufactured but looked more substantial and were more vividly colored than those on the right. Each duplex on the left had its own palate and personality.

The homes on the right side of Vicky Drive looked to be manufactured by the same stencil as those on the left but were all the same shade of gray. No effort had been made to hide the lack of foundations, aside from unpainted sheet metal, the wavy galvanized kind. The nicer-looking homes on the left almost fooled me. They had skirts that matched the materials of the actual “home” part of the trailers. They looked more expensive despite being the same make and model.

I was comforted as I watched, on the right side of Vicki Drive, a Hispanic man in clothes comfortable enough to make him look like a resident, not a professional landscape. I glanced at a black man coming out of his unit on the same side.

The cars parked in front of homes on the left side looked to be less than a decade old, well-maintained, but not less than a few years new. Mostly Hondas, several SUVs, small hatchbacks. The cars on the right were on opposite ends of a broad spectrum. Most were decades-old Japanese coupes with mismatching assembly—unpainted doors, hoods, or fenders. It's a microcosm of Spring Branch, I thought. If I'd grown up on Vicky Drive, I'd have lived on the right side, with the drab homes and older cars.

I didn't know yet that in nineteen months, I was going to marry a twenty-one-year-old woman living in one of the colorful units on the left.

Angry French Class

The spring semester started on a Wednesday. The closest parking spot I could find was on the outskirts of campus, adjacent to Elliot Bowers Stadium, built on one of the highest points in Huntsville.

Huntsville is surrounded by forested hills on all sides. I looked down from the top of the stadium hill to see the steps that spanned across a few intramural soccer fields, leading to the edge of campus proper. The spot I could get with the parking permit I bought meant a meandering route to the campus proper, where actual classrooms were located. Bowers Stadium was on the distant southernmost edge of campus, and the Margaret Lee Houston building was on the distant, westernmost edge. The walk would be between fifteen and twenty minutes.

When I arrived and entered the classroom, I scanned it to see my twenty-year-old (twenty-two-years old, tops) classmates. The classmates confirmed their ages during a French conversation exercise later. There were seven of us.

We introduced ourselves. It was their second time doing this for my sake, the latecomer. I'd been forced to transfer into this section of French so the class would meet its minimum student requirement. "Je Suis Professeur E. Je suis indienne et anglais."

"Je suis Charles. Je suis congolais."

My turn came. "Je suis Carlos. Je suis salvadorien."

Then there was Leslie, Gabby, Rachel, Clay, all American. Mario was Mexican American.

A smooth voice with the tonal balance and energy of a TV show host announced, “Je suis Stephanie. Je suis portoricain.” It was in one of those accents that people call “having no accent.” She was really hamming it up, though. Not like some B-movie over-actress. More like one who really believed the part she was playing and internalizing it. It mattered to her, the only person besides me who can get the guttural R. (The Mexican guy will roll his Rs when called on.) Her energy reminded me of my old colleagues at *World-Class Hotel*.

Back in Houston, I’d worked closely with four managers transferred in from the *World-Class Hotel* in San Juan. One by one, they left Houston, each leaving their mark on me. The Freakin’ Ricans, I used to call them. They loved it. No one else had their energy level. Other colleagues might share their work ethic, but not their vibrancy. One was nicknamed Diva, and every shift re-entitled him to this affectation.

We once worked a wedding that was being televised for a reality show. I stood at banquet-style attention in my uniform, indeed a costume, while he inspected our posture and the champagne bottles we held. Though I felt like Sergeant Pyle in *Full Metal Jacket*, he whispered in my ear, “That’s right, Papi. Looking good.” Not in some sexual way, more in an incredibly reaffirming way. He stood in front of the double doors to the banquet hall in his starched pinstripe suit with a jet black glistening pompadour, and he put a hand on each of the two handles. He put his hips into throwing the doors open as the hundreds of guests ushered into the room. We trickled through in a choreographed champagne pour for guests who at their massive round tables.

Televised or not, Diva, Ivelisse, Farah, and Fatima always brought that kind of devotion to work, the devotion and intensity of pro athletes.

This energy they showed, as much as it inspired, could also exhaust. It was as if every room, indeed every experience I shared with them, had its own extroverted energy reserve, and they would gulp all of it up before I had a chance to tap it. The more vibrant they became, the more I would shrink into myself. Getting the job done, sure, but with enthusiasm and energy that paled in comparison.

The French classroom seemed to feel this way. I tried not to let her energy contribute to a stereotype, a collective reputation my memory was trying to assign to my former colleagues. I was also trying to scrape up whatever energy I could after she'd gulped most of it to portray the role of Good French Student. Leslie and Charles in the back corner whispered and giggled in a tone that was more friendly than flirtatious. Otherwise, most folks willingly let Stephanie have all the energy and enthusiasm. They were either struggling to stay awake or concentrating on this introductory lesson.

I kept trying to sneak glances at Stephanie, but each time I did, she reflexively met my glance in those tiny instances. That is if her irises weren't already staring at me.

"Latin girls aren't my thing," I thought. I should be so picky. She had a full figure, and I don't mean that as a euphemism for obesity. Still, I doubted she'd ever hold me accountable for my health and weight. The Latin woman I'd grown up with would promptly point out my weight gain, then move on. This girl had caught my eye, and I gathered from her face what I could in that sliver of a moment before it could become a stare: her smile took a different shape, one that seemed customized for me like something toothpaste models might train themselves to do. Her teeth were white and straight, framed in shiny, soft-looking

flesh-colored lips. The smile rounded her cheeks, a smile that nudged her half-rim eyeglasses up a tad.

I followed her smooth, angled nose up to black almond-shaped eyes—“chestnut,” she’d interrupt if this were being read out loud—parallel to the ends of her smile. It was all on a tan canvas. The only makeup she wore appeared to be eyeliner, mascara, and that egg-shaped lip balm I caught her using in my periphery throughout class. An oversized fuchsia beret rested on her head. She continued responding to every question, every French conversation prompt from our professor, with her alpha energy, always first to answer, or first to have her hand up. Her purposeful irises followed the scribbling marker before being interrupted by my glances.

I couldn’t remember a woman engaging with me with this level of intrigue. Or perhaps just friendliness. I had no idea. In the back pocket of my mind I formed the explanation that I was a stranger from another town, that I was good at French class, so she might finally be in good company with another classmate in a classroom of zombies and Greek life poster children.

I quickly left class when it ended in case Stephanie would want to strike up a conversation. Trying not to seem rude by quickly looking away during class, I wanted to pretend I didn’t notice her smiling.

“Hey,” she called, and I turned my head to return the greeting without slowing my walk. She kept up anyway, appearing to have no problem holding a conversation as I skipped every other step. I gave one-word responses, partly because I was walking so quickly that my

breaths were scarce. I was still acclimating to the elevation or the dry winter. Mostly, I wasn't in a friendly mood. She was apparently disregarding my body language, though. She started interviewing me.

"So are you from Houston?"

"Yeah."

"Me too! Well, Spring. What part of Houston?"

"Spring Branch."

"So you transferred here, right? Where'd you go before?"

"I was working before."

All of her gestures, smiles, and conversation, seemed platonic. I was relieved, yet irked that she wanted the same friendliness from me.

I used my litmus test as what I thought would be a sure repellant. "Do you go back to Houston often?" I asked, "because my cover band's playing a gig this weekend." It would be at a pretty sleazy bar in Katy.

In my extensive rejection experience, there is a direct relationship between how many specifics you provide in an invitation, and the boldness of the line between platonic and romantic intrigue. In other words, "Let's go out sometime" is much easier to glibly agree to than, "Let's go out for dinner at Red Lobster this Saturday night at seven."

"Oh, I'm sorry I can't. I have a retreat. Let me know when you're next one is, though." I was further relieved.

"Sounds good. I'm going to my car across campus."

"Okay well, I'm going this way, but it was nice talking to you."

"Likewise. See you Thursday."

We parted ways, and I thought, “Okay, cool, she’s just super friendly because I’m the only person in French class she doesn’t yet know.” A sharp, dry breeze made its way up my sleeve, the likes of which I’d never experienced seventy-five miles closer to the coast in Houston. This flavor of frigidity has a way of quickly drying out your skin and cooling your clothing so that its cold stiffness jolts you every time it grazes the surface of your skin. At this point, everyone living north of the Piney Woods is permitted to scoff at my sensitivity to cold weather. I trotted for the warmth and shelter of my car, to the warmth of the room I’d rented on the edge of town for a nap and hours of Netflix streaming. I was content with my new routine.

Thursday, when French class came around again, her friend Clay, whom she sat next to at their table, approached me in the moments before Dr. E arrived.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Good, you?”

“Good, I’m Clay. Have you ever heard of Chi Alpha?”

“No. I’m too old for Greek life,” I say.

“It’s not a frat. It’s actually a service organization. We meet on Thursdays at seven at the AG (Assemblies of God) church on Montgomery Road.” I was living off Montgomery Road. I knew the church, across and down the street from me, closer to I-45.

“That’s okay, I’m not really an AG person.”

Stephanie chimed in, “Neither are we, but our organization is sponsored by them.”

That sounded suspicious, like when Fernando would explain to us why we were forced to attend Catholic church, even though we weren't ever invited to do communion for lack of baptism and confirmation.

After all the moral messes I'd willingly made in Houston, I felt dangerously close to the "Sorry God" MO we'd had as kids, after we'd ingratiate ourselves to some nudy playing cards, after we'd steal packs of gum from the corner store. We'd hoped our apologies would, at least, turn the heat down a little. Maybe in hell, we'd be sous vide instead of braised or broiled. Maybe we'd be chewed on like rawhide bones instead of all the gnashing of teeth, being swallowed then digested.

"I'm good. I already lead worship at a church in Houston."

Clay shrugged and said, "OK. Well, let me know if you ever want to go. You can sit with me."

After this class, Stephanie walked off with Clay. I could walk to my car in peace, to pack a bag and head straight to Houston. The end of week two had beaten the hell out of week one. Still, I was ready to pack up and return to Houston that evening instead of after Physics class the following morning. Only presently, as I write this, am I doing the math. I was spending four days in each town, living in two places at the same time.

Mike's Lawn

Around two-thirty in the morning, we were on Mike's front lawn. Sprinklers in the distance spit raspberries at the manicured suburban lawns. Periodically, a neighbor's enormous chocolate lab could be seen making his night-time rounds. Each time he passed us, his ears

would perk up as he looked over at us, before returning to identify whose glands had excreted whatever was on the grass in front of him.

As it turned out, Mike's semester hadn't been too great in the first week, either. About his time at St. Thomas, he said, "I don't know, man. I already had to drop one of my classes. I went in to talk to the professor about the work. He said, 'Well, I don't know what to tell you.'" The first text he'd been assigned, to be read and written about in the first exam, was a twelve-hundred-page tome on Western philosophy, from the Sophists to Kierkegaard.

One of us said, "We're too old for this shit," and the other nodded in agreement. "Yeah."

We were twenty-five and twenty-four, we'd both had a taste of the real world. Academia for us, we were finding, was like taking a vacation at a distant relative's house: a nice change of pace, but the roof's got its own rules within. And we weren't vibing. We were tourists in the traditional, undergraduate, full-time student life.

Today as I write this, I scoff at the thought of feeling "too old" for anything at that age. Still, some of the peers from our upbringing had had adult lives for years by the time Mike and I got around to studying full-time. They were high school band teachers, IT consultants with toddlers and mortgages. Many of my younger cousins had families. When you're in your mid-twenties, a sophomore in college, and still having beers with a friend from your teen years, the lives of your childhood friends become benchmarks. We were ignoring those aspects of which we've met or exceeded, for relishing the ones we haven't kept up with. It was like the feeling you get when looking at your Facebook news feed, a reverse schadenfreude perhaps.

That Sunday, I played at Community Church a few miles away from Mike's parents' house in Spring Branch. I hadn't been there for a few weeks, having taken the weekends to pack and transport. Noticing I was less bloated, the families joked that I was losing weight because my new student salary stripped me of a food budget. In fact, Frank's mother had gifted me half an igloo worth of groceries as a welcome gift, and as my hotel shifts decreased, I'd been replacing the long hours with exercise.

My girth has always been shift. I blame my preference for the savory over sweet, the sodium bloating me up. Not to mention, Chinese buffets and my grandmother's endless flautas smothered my sense of satiety years ago, shorting out whatever circuitry regulated secretion of leptin and ghrelin, the hunger and satiety hormones. The groceries Frank's mom had welcomed me with were whole, and I was cooking them without additives.

I returned to Huntsville that night, driving past the death trap that is the Beltway 8 / I-45 junction, past the Woodlands and Conroe, past the dark leafy textured blacks and purples adorned with orange construction barrels, and Willis, where the Chick-fil-a, McDonald's and under-construction Kroger sign outshined the moon.

I came back home again to Frankie and his cat were both entranced by the TV, made my way up the stairs and clicked the TV on.

Being well-rested like I was, after so many years of working until I was sick, felt unnatural, something like coffee jitters. My eyelids fidgeted when I shut them. I watched TV for a while before becoming too antsy, then scribbled through my single page of French homework. In short, I was no longer falling asleep the moment I hit the pillow. I hadn't felt this in years, and I didn't know what to do with it. I plucked my guitar for a while, then shut the lights to try for sleep again.

Still, my mind meandered all over, looking for things to do the way I had been for the last couple of hours. “It’s OK,” I thought, “you just need a routine, that’s all. You don’t know what to do with this extra time.”

Then when a fast food commercial played, because they always do in the middle of the night, I realized just how famished I was, how my stomach felt inverted. On one night a few months ago, which was only a little worse than what was usual then, I had eaten at the bar from my *World-Class* days. It was where I wouldn’t keep count of beverages I’d order (or the money I’d spent on them), afterward returning to the Barrowses’ to gorge myself further. I wondered what was in our fridge tonight.

A faceless celebrity, all voluptuousness, appeared on the TV. I was immediately overwhelmed by a mélange that emerged in my viscera. My laptop, with its access to countless recesses of the web, radiated an energy throughout the room. It surged through me in some primal way, at the same time mingling with the warmth of residual shame.

Compulsive behavior in search of relief—drinking, pornography, binge eating—had shot my feelings to shit, and I was confused. How was I hungry, aroused, and overwhelmingly sad at the same time? I didn’t know, but all three are wreaking havoc on my insides.

Just got to get my degree, five semesters. I repeated this to myself with shut eyelids that were still fidgeting.

That was the last thing I remembered before waking up to run down Vicky the Microcosm and through the windy asphalt-paved hills of my neighborhood. I hoped I could sweat this out of my pores, like a traditional hangover, before health class.

Study Buddy

The first time I studied with Stephanie, we met at a Starbucks that was built into the campus library. She was wearing another beret, gray this time. It was still freezing outside. We laid our materials out on the table. I wanted to get started. Clay could join us whenever he showed up. She said, “Actually, he texted me. He won’t be coming.”

“Oh. Well, he’s the one who needs help. Let’s just go over these for a little while then.” It was true. We went over the simple conversations for ten minutes. We hadn’t even finished our drinks before going through all the exercises.

Stephanie said, “So, we still have a lot of our drinks left. Would you like me to take you on a tour of Huntsville?” I wanted to say no but started to feel like a jerk by this point.

“Sure, let’s do it.” I’d only be watching Netflix anyway.

We walked through some courtyards and campus buildings, and she explained them to me.

“I also wanted to show you our coffee house, where they have open mic night.” That perked up my ears.

The place was part of a strip mall near our neighborhood.

Inside, most of the walls were particle board or plywood. A wall behind the stage was painted in chalk. Some kid, probably a college freshman, was playing Blink-182 covers. On the chalk wall, the names of performers who’d gone before him were crossed out. A handful of others were left. Most folks were enthralled in their conversations, phones, or books.

“This is actually where I go to church,” she explained.

“I thought you went to an AG church?”

“No that’s just the group I’m a part of. This is where I’m a church member.”

Artwork was mounted all over the plywood walls. I guessed the pieces were done by art students. They were modern-looking, some of them three-dimensional, mostly abstract.

After that, I accompanied her to get gas. She paid for ten dollars' worth, enabling me to pump a little over a quarter-tank into it. I pictured the pebbles, the dirt and leaf fragments, swimming around in her shallow gas tank and shuddered. I wondered if perhaps my mom and Fernando could have prevented the handful of cars from dying on us had they been able to fill the tank regularly.

She finally dropped me off and asked me what I liked to do throughout the week. "Hang out and play video games. Do homework and watch movies."

"What system do you have?"

"PS3."

"Do you have *Ratchet & Clank*??"

I said in a funny voice, "What you know 'bout *Ratchet & Clank*?"

"What?" She elongated the word in a falsetto. "I kick butt at *Ratchet & Clank*."

Actually, I used to have a Wii. Can I please come play sometime?"

"Sounds fine."

"Sweet! See you in French!"

"Yup."

One night, feeling lazy, I decided to leave for Huntsville on Saturday instead. It felt easier to do that. I didn't have to haul laundry back to Houston. One less thing. I kept up that habit.

Every Saturday, I would procrastinate a little more, often waiting until the afternoon, arriving in Houston in the evening.

Synoptic Stephanie

On a Saturday morning, Stephanie called to see if I was in town and if I could help her with Coco. “I won’t be of any help. I’m not a pet person.”

When I walked up, her little white dog Coco *arfed* at me for a few minutes before letting her guard down. Stephanie’s neighbor was examining a tick on Coco’s ear. Stephanie held the dog still while the neighbor girl dabbed petroleum jelly on it. When the tick came out, I went back home. I said I had to get ready for Huntsville. There’d been no reason for my presence. “Hey, do you think I could play *Ratchet & Clank* when you come back to town?”

“If I get home early enough, sure.”

On my way back into Huntsville, she texted me, “Hey! Are you in town?” It annoyed me, but I said yes and invited her over anyway.

“There’s a good chance I’ll fall asleep on the couch,” I told her. I kept my word, dozing on the couch while she played. She woke me up to help her with a boss fight.

“See, you don’t know ‘bout *Ratchet & Clank*.”

“Whatever. Go back to sleep.” She took the controller back.

The next time I woke up, it was morning, and she was gone.

On a Friday night in February, we went out for her birthday. I paid the tab. That was the end of my splurge money. I’d have to start applying for jobs the following week. They did a weird birthday thing. We shared each other’s music in the car.

She showed me Michael Buble and Imogen Heap's "Hide and Seek." She loved how Imogen could do immense vocal intervals without any autotune. She showed me Train's "Meet Virginia" and I remembered the time I printed Sarah's picture out and wrote the lyrics to that song on it. I didn't tell her about that, but still felt embarrassed.

On a Sunday sometime later, she invited me to a Chi Alpha party.

"Hey, since you're back in town, do you want to come to my friend's house? You could meet some new Huntsville people if you came by."

"That's Okay. I'm wiped from playing and driving."

On another Sunday afternoon before returning to Huntsville, I stopped by Aloft hotel near the Galleria to see how Heather was doing. Since we'd split a couple years prior, she'd changed jobs and become a bar manager. I was yet again impressed by her gumption.

She said, "So. Pulling the vanishing act, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Exes will pull the vanishing act to create mystery when they come around again out of nowhere. It can supposedly lure the exes back in to do that. Here, I'll send you the blog post."

"Yeah, send it."

She went on to tell me she and her boyfriend Rich were engaged. They had been on the outs for a while, and then he gave her a ring. She told me about open mics and invited Bad Channel to play.

"Sounds good, I'll talk to the band and follow up with you in the next few weeks."

“Sure you will,” she said. She had a skeptical expression on her face while she wiped down the bar top. I lingered for a second, then left.

In Huntsville, I interviewed for and was offered a job as a medical records clerk. There was an alphabetization test. They handed me a stack of labeled manila folders, explained their alphabetization method, and timed me.

After they offered me the job, I invited Stephanie to join me on a drive to Conroe for scrubs, the work uniform. She said sure but asked if I could pitch in gas money. On the way to the bank, she told me about some bill she needed seventy bucks for. I spotted her the money.

“I can’t take your money, don’t. You’re trying to make it on your own up here.”

“Sure, but I got a job before I ran out of money in case of situations like these.”

“I’ll pay you back,” she said.

I was annoyed, wondering where all the gas money she was pocketing had gone.

When Stephanie got bored of *Ratchet & Clank*, she didn’t want to play my other ultra-violent video games. But she wouldn’t go home, opting instead to channel surf, even after I fell asleep.

On a trip to Wal-Mart one night, I told Stephanie how neutral I was feeling inside. How everything was steady, no good moods, no bad moods. Told her she’s cool, but I’m in a place where even if we stopped talking today, I’d be alright because of how I’ve been feeling. Then she started crying.

“Whoa, whoa.” I apologized for making her cry, put my arm around her. “I’m just in a withdrawn place. You’re good people. No need to take it so hard.”

On a weeknight, some of Stephanie’s friends and I went to the Woodlands for pizza. I hadn’t yet spent time with her in a group setting. She was feeding off of the energy, though. I had a thing for her friend Shannon. She was light-eyed and freckled, but really young. The same age Sarah was when she and I got together for the third time.

I’d be in the middle of a conversation with one of Stephanie’s friends, and she’d jut whatever she wanted into the conversations.

Before we left campus, she slammed on the brakes because she recognized someone she hadn’t seen in a couple years. Then, she rolled down her window and yelled to grab their attention.

On a night when Stephanie was over watching TV, I found myself spooning with her. No grinding, no kissing. Just snuggling. She would fall asleep, lightly snoring. On another night, we went from snuggling to grinding.

In March, I pulled back. I told her I didn’t want a relationship, that I just wanted to get my degree and get back to Houston. I wanted to be invisible, not be on anyone’s radar.

All she said was, “Okay, but I never said I wanted that.”

“Sure, but when things start like this, one person inevitably falls for the other.” Usually, I was the one who would fall.

“I guess.”

She kept texting me on Sunday nights to see if I was back in town. She would come over on some weeknights.

Things were getting increasingly physical. No sex yet, but more kissing, more groping. Some grinding. One night she said, “Uh-oh.”

“I knew it,” I said, knowing that my response only made me look more like an idiot because if I knew, I wouldn’t have strung her along. She was growing feelings.

“Let’s not do this, trust me. I’ve made nothing but messes of things, really. I also don’t want to be taking advantage of you if you’ve got deeper feelings for me. That’s not fair to a person.”

Me, stringing someone along. Fancy that, I thought. But I had already invited her to the aloft gig I’d confirmed with Heather.

I thought, “Stephanie’s definitely showing up to this gig.”

She did show up, in a floral salsa skirt, a pink top, and an enormous white smile. Heather was tending bar, and Stephanie was ordering when I first saw her. Later Heather said, “Does your friend always drink like this?”

“I know what you’re doing,” I said.

“Worrying about a human being because it’s my job as a bartender?”

“Isn’t it your job to cut her off if you’re concerned?”

“Whatever, just watch out. She may have issues.”

Stephanie had been spending too much time at my place to have a drinking problem. She couldn’t sneak it around me in my place. I know the warning signs.

“Watch out for what? We’re not a thing if that’s what you mean.”

“Just watch out!” She said, exasperated. She went to behind the bar to a pantry, presumably to do bar manager things.

Mom and G gushed about Stephanie. My mom said, “That little waist and those hips. Wow! And she’s so pretty.”

We went to a Tex-Mex grill to wait for her blood alcohol level to ebb. It turned out Stephanie *had* ordered several drinks, but later, after Heather’s speculation. When they showed up unexpectedly, I thought, “Of course Heather and Rich would come here and sit at the bar, two seats away from us.” He didn’t look happy. I told the bartender to cut Stephanie off, and if she pressured him, to serve her virgin drinks. I’d known him for a few years now. The place had been one of my haunts through several of my restaurant jobs since it was located in the Galleria area.

I have little patience for drunken behavior, especially when the drunk person is in denial. She had come to see our band, so I, therefore, felt she was my responsibility. I hated her for putting me in that position. When she went to the ladies’ room, I deleted my number from her phone.

Eventually, I dropped her back off at her car. When I got to Mike’s she called me.

“Did you think I just wouldn’t notice you deleted me from your phone?” She was crying.

“I keep telling you I don’t want anything serious, and you showing up and drinking this much isn’t fair. If something happened to you, I’d be partly responsible. That’s serious.”

“Whatever, you know, I get it. You don’t want to talk to me? That’s fine. Let’s not talk then.”

When I was in bed, Heather texted me to apologize for the awkwardness. She said Rich got jealous and suspicious of all four of us being there.

“Did Stephanie really drive home after all those drinks?”

“She’s fine. The bartender made her virgin drinks at the restaurant.”

Three weeks passed. Sometimes, I would see Stephanie in the gym. She’d been single for two years before meeting me, only devoted to her small group girls. She’d gained weight because the other girls were naturally skinny and kept diets of sugary, fatty foods. So she was in the gym a lot now, getting skinny again. Stephanie looked really good in her yoga pants. When seeing her across the gym on one particular night, I wondered if she was courting guy who was with her, kind of hoping she was, and kind of hoping she wasn’t.

Heather invited me to Zoe’s Kitchen while I was in Houston. I told her I didn’t think Rich would like it. She said not to worry. They were through. The insanity at the Tex-Mex restaurant had been the tip of the iceberg.

In April, I texted Steph and asked if I could go see her. She said sure and made me wait forever. When I finally saw her, I apologized, said she made me feel weird. I said she had really nice teeth. She made a weird face and said thanks.

I saw her in the gym again a couple of nights afterward. I texted her, “IHOP after your workout?”

“Sure.”

At IHOP, people kept congratulating her on her engagement. She thanked them and cleared things up, explaining that it was an April Fools joke.

Over our post-workout meal, she said, “I’m going on a mission trip to Bolivia in May.”

“Cool, for how long?”

“Three weeks.”

“Do you think you can take care of my plants? I have friends taking care of my dogs.”

“Sure, but you should know I have no green thumb.”

On a day closer to her trip, I was helping her move stuff out of her duplex and into storage, where it would sit during her Bolivia mission trip. She’d be moving into a townhome when she got back. I realized after a long day of moving that I had missed the last online quiz. I ended up with a C in my health class. It would be the lowest grade on my Sam Houston transcript.

At the pediatrician’s office where I worked, I was flirting and hanging out with Mallory, who had a couple of kids and still lived with their father, whom she claimed she was not into anymore. “We’re just roommates now,” she said while we had lunch in the lounge one day.

One night, she and I were spooning upstairs, watching *Uncle Buck*.

Another night, we went out to the only night club in Huntsville, Shenanigan's, and I got wasted. Mallory and her friends dropped me off at home. She texted me, said she wished she could've stayed. She asked me why I was such a nice, caring guy.

I told her, "I believe in someone who died for a bunch of strangers, so why shouldn't I be as giving as I can to the people around me?"

In May, Stephanie and I drove to Dallas for her flight. We dropped her friend Star off on the way there. On I-45, the car started shaking. She said no big deal, the car did that every once in a while. She called her dad. We sat around waiting for about an hour. Then we started the car back up, and the shaking went away.

When we got near the airport, Stephanie said, "When I come back we won't really be hanging out. I understand you don't have feelings, and I do. But I can't be in this place, and I need to move on with my life." I said OK, and she left.

While she was gone, I spent most of my time in Houston. The semester was over, and I only came back to Huntsville to work the few days a week they scheduled me. I'd joined the Julys on Dale's invitation, to replace the former lead guitarist. They'd just recorded an EP, so I could learn the old guitarists parts in Huntsville in between rehearsals and gigs in Houston.

On a Friday, a week before Stephanie was to return, Heather asked me about her again. I told her what happened over cocktails at another Tex-Mex joint.

“She sounds like she’s really into you, and she’s really pretty...but you have no feelings?” She looked at me, deadpan.

“No, but she’s a really good friend. I have no other friends out there, really.” Heather’s expression didn’t change.

We left in Heather’s brand new white Civic and headed to Heather’s new luxury mid-rise apartment. She had all this on a bar manager’s salary. Has to be debt, I thought.

She’d lost a lot of weight. Said she was going to show Rich what he lost by getting in really good shape. We had a moment near her front door. Our faces moved in close. She scoffed, rolled her eyes, and turned from me. We returned to her Civic.

She texted me that night, said she’d be willing to help me finish school, said she wanted something serious, something better than what she’d had with Rich.

On that Sunday after playing at Grace, the alarm went off on Stephanie’s Mitsubishi for some reason. The horn repeatedly honked until I finally opened the hood and clipped the wires from it.

While I was gone for two days, I saw that Stephanie’s plants had withered and dried.

That night, I opened my laptop to a Facebook email from her. It began with her claiming that God had been putting me on her heart. Then, she’d written about how she knew

even if I had the right decision in front of me, that I would opt for the worse alternative in my current state. She talked about how she wanted the best for me, even if we weren't going to be close anymore after her return.

The day I had to pick Stephanie up, Dale had just burned me the Beatles' White album, so I decided to play it on the three-hour drive to Dallas. I loved "Rocky Raccoon," I loved this song and that. I was pulled over and received a citation just outside of Dallas from a small-town police department. The album played through a few times. I would show Stephanie all the tracks on it.

I got to the airport and saw Steph in the terminal. The inside of my gut fluttered. I didn't know what to feel. Then she tackled me when she hugged me, knocking the breath out of me. On the drive back, she told me about getting to preach to Bolivians in Spanish, about guerillas holding her hostage, with hundreds of other people on a bridge, almost missing her flight as a result. She'd made friends with a resident toucan in her team's dormitory. They'd eaten fried eggs and a fried chicken leg on a bed of rice every single day. Dengue fever overtook her for days. The missions leader told Stephanie it was borderline harmful that people only came for short tours like her team had. The visits would grow the mission past sustainability, and then the permanent staff couldn't manage it well enough. I showed her "Rocky Raccoon" and other songs. Told her I'd joined the Julys. I apologized for killing her plants. We slept at my place. We hooked up. We told each other it would be the last night.

We were heading back to Houston, and Stephanie decided to come with me. Shannon accompanied us. Steph bought me a hat at Gap. We picked Coco up from the kennel. She barfed on my leg.

We dropped Shannon off, ran other errands, then made our way back to Houston to meet with the Julys at a bar.

On the way there, I brought up Mallory and Heather. I told her about the conversations I'd had with them, about Heather's skepticism. She said, "Why should I be jealous at all? I already know you want nothing to do with me, so who would I be competing with? Doesn't matter. In fact, I'm going to drink tonight and see what happens with the guys that might be there. Maybe I can strike up a few of my own friendships."

Stephanie has little patience with hipster types, and Big Star was a big-time hipster spot. I told her that sounded like a dumb idea, she said, "What do you care?"

"I care because we're friends."

"Do you care when your guy friends get drunk and socialize with a bunch of women? Didn't think so."

I clenched the door handle, tightened my grip on it. My knee was shaking.

Big Star Ask

We were at Big Star Bar in the Houston Heights. I was going mad watching her down shot after shot of tequila, becoming increasingly social with complete strangers. The image I remember is one of her wearing tight white pants and voluminous teased dark hair, her bright white smile only disappearing when the time to down another tequila shot came. Her body

was still rounded in my favorite places, her hips, her bottom, her chest. She was a searing ball, bouncing around the room, brushing people's shoulders, tossing her hair back, raising her eyebrows appreciatively each time someone would buy her another shot. I'm bumming countless American Spirits off our drummer, Dale, and trying to convey a generally nonchalant demeanor about the scene.

On a Sunday a few months prior, Dale had asked me if I was going to get with Stephanie. "Nah," I said.

"She's beautiful!"

"Why don't *you* date her then?" I wasn't feeling defensive about it, so I did my best to convey that in my tone. It didn't bother me that he'd asked, or even that there was slight persuasion.

He quickly said, "Nah." I thought "So she's beautiful, but you're not into her. Then why should I be? So naturally, tonight at Big Star Bar the hipster joint, where we came for post-rehearsal drinks most weekends, Dale was leaning over and nudging me while I choked on his cigarettes. "Dude, do something. Look at her, she's all over the place."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not her boyfriend, though. She wants to be the twenty-year-old party girl, then she can do that. It was up to her to come along."

The truth was, I kept my eye on her the entire time. I counted each shot I could see her taking, adding a few to my count, assuming she'd likely had one at the bar before the one she was carrying to the patio to toss back with our crew. When she got to three or four shots, she started taking the cigarettes I'd bum off of Dale and trying to smoke them herself, coughing profoundly each time she took a drag.

I kept saying, “You’re going to damage your voice, and you’ve got rehearsals all month before the production opens.” She was to play Michaela, the lyric soprano role in *Carmen*, later that summer. I was thinking her behavior was annoying me. I was thinking she was doing all this to make me jealous. I was thinking she was bluffing, sizing me up. I thought I’d call that bluff. She wasn’t going anywhere with Mark, the last stranger she’d been chatting with. So I resisted the urge to cut in.

It irked me, the way she was acting in public. Public Steph had just gotten back from this mission trip, where she’d preached in Spanish and was gushing about it to me on the drive home from the airport. She was a small group leader in our college’s largest Christian organization. She wore shorts that went further down than mid-thigh, for crying out loud. She had it all wrong, bringing Private Steph out into the open. That version of Steph was only to show itself after hours of watching TV in the dark in Huntsville. It was only to come out when it was just the two of us. Private Steph was Erotic Steph. Before she went to Bolivia, the two were separate things, Public and Private Steph. It was all backwards, confusing me. Never mind the cigarettes or the hipster white guys with better physiques and more money than me.

When we’d had the talk in the car on the way up, about her questioning why she should be jealous of Mallory, I tried to protest her choice to see who she might “really hit it off with.”

I argued, “Really hit it off with? Do you really want to be this reckless, having just gotten back from a life-changing mission trip?” There were scoffs between my responses.

“I don’t think it’s reckless. I mean, I’m just going to have a good time. Maybe someone would *actually* be into me. That’d be nice.” There was a smirk in her smile that I imagined was tailored just for me.

Stephanie had the wheel and we were now on the curve that merges I-45 to Beltway 8, southbound. What else could I have said? The only valid argument would have been to admit to some sort of feelings. It was true that I felt things about her, but my heart was a mess, more so than my mind had been my whole life. We couldn’t be alone without being too intimate, and in our Christian world, that meant being illicit, sinful. How could we, as Christians, develop a loving, God-revering relationship that operated biblically, when we’d started in so sinful a manner? In fact, the very day the line was drawn in the sand was early in the semester, just after my move, when she’d unsuccessfully invited me to hang with her Christian friends on that Sunday night.

Having a serious relationship with Stephanie, in my mind, would require opening my life up to these comfortable Christians. There were so many in Huntsville that you never really had to worry about verbal, and certain not physical, persecution.

While Stephanie’s giggling resonated from whatever part of Big Star Bar she was socializing in, I weighed things out. I wondered if private, erotic Stephanie was worth a comfortable, sometimes corny Christian life in Huntsville with middle-class up-brought peers. I couldn’t have one without the likeliness of the other.

I finally admitted to myself that I had let her into my life in several ways, denying the profundity of that involvement. At Big Star, my own bluff was being called. I couldn’t have one half of her without the other anymore, and her behavior was communicating that.

I approached her as she flirted with the dude who, several years later, she would describe to me as sexy and light-eyed. “Can I speak to you for a second,” I asked, reaching for her hand.

Rolling her eyes, she sighed in response to my request, and turned to the other guy to ask, “Can you excuse me for a sec?” Then she took my hand. I escorted her to a chair, where she looked at me with glazed, half-shut eyes. One of her eyebrows was exaggeratedly raised.

“I’m actually just wondering, Stephanie,” I started, “Will you give me a chance to actually be a grown man and treat this like a real relationship? Will you be with me exclusively?”

After a few seconds, her expression softened. The glaze over her eyes became an inundation of tears, spilling over onto her rounded cheeks. What looked like every single one of her white teeth emerged between her plump, smiling lips.

She said, “Yes,” and covered her face with her hands for several seconds, before using her fingers to wipe the tears away and smear her mascara away from under her eyes.

Spring, 2012. A Saturday. In an ocean of people, the teens carry bags: Hot Topic, Abercrombie, Pac Sun, Apple. The soccer moms: Dillard’s, Macy’s, Apple. The people my age, in their mid-twenties: Gap, Fossil, Apple. A reverberating hiss fills the sky between their voices and the thirty-foot-high glass ceiling. An amalgamation of sun rays and fluorescent lighting fills the wings of Memorial City Mall. Plastic women walk by; my mind splices them into flashbacks of the streams I used to watch. Eighteen months since my last vid but the memories are still so vivid. How the is that possible? I pray, “Please, Lord: Tunnel vision,” then take shelter in the fluorescently lit jewelry store; the voices and their reverb hiss

dampen. Past my reflection in the glass of the sterile display case sit sparkling rings, nestled safely in foam slivers. The expensive glass is just as fragile. Stephanie wants intricate, but not elaborate; she wants white gold. She wants the ceremonial rings to intertwine. She'd better be worth my income tax tuition return. I'm twenty-six and feel way too old to be an undergrad, but do I feel old enough to be married? The sales rep walks up to greet me: a bright, white smile etched on her face. She's dressed the part: black blazer, diamond earrings, pendant bracelet, diamond necklace. We banter about prices, and the four C's I read about on a pamphlet—Carat, Colour (I guess the European spelling makes it seem more elegant), Cut, Clarity. She chimes in with phrases like, "Oh, these are intertwined, and white gold," and "over here are the selections in your price range." I'm reassuring myself. I won't be like my unfaithful father. I could never put my wife through that. There's no way. We've confronted this. She knows the laws of attraction exist. They're just actresses, on a screen...or, their bodies are. Sasha Grey was terrible in *The Girlfriend Experience*. Would she even marry me if she knew about all this? Will she leave me if I end up back there again?

"That's the one, I can feel it," I tap the glass above the intertwining white gold rings while I reach into my back pocket. No haggling at the big jewelers.

"Oh, I love that one," the associate says, "are you nervous about proposing?" I hand over, least of all, my debit card.

"Nah," I lie, not wanting to explain: I'm not nervous about her response. I'm nervous about what happens once Stephanie accepts, and for that matter, after the wedding, and for *that* matter, what relapse consequences will be. It's too hard in the real world, worrying about all this. My computer won't leave me. I never paid a dime for any magazine, VHS, DVD, or tube streams, never had to worry about them rejecting me, about jealousy or being faithful.

Everything was on my time. They knew all the positions, they did it all. They still know them; they still await my return, frozen in time, willing to do anything.

“I do apologize Mr. Hernandez, but we only have temporary ring boxes in stock. They’re not as secure, but they’re better than nothing. Can you come back tomorrow, when more will be shipped in?”

“No, I’m in Huntsville, and that’s another hundred and fifty miles round trip. I guess I’ll come back when I can. For now, I’ll take my chances. You can bag it.” I turn toward the sea of voices, the paper bag status symbols, the plastic, unaware cast members of my memory movies. The bag I carry is small, plastic, mine, not some credit card purchase. I worked for this, I’ll work for her. I’ll fight it. Wrapping it tightly around the package, I nestle the temporary box in my coat pocket and make my way back into the bombardment, back towards her at the other side of the mall. The device screens on display at the Apple store, a text vibrating my Windows Phone: that’s how instant it is. That’s how close they are. Anytime I’m home alone, it’s right on the tip of my fingernails, waiting to come back into my home, into my smartphone, my laptop, my tablet. No hiding, just running. I won’t let you back in; you can’t be here while she is.

Nine months after the Big Star ask, I proposed to Stephanie in March. Over the summer, when she’d had enough of her extended family’s traditional demands regarding engagement and wedding standards, we chose a date only five months after she accepted my proposal.

A dot-matrix, black: hundreds of bits, tightly packed to appear solid. Imagine the streaming vids (muted, their moans only matter in medias res) and color photographs as two-dimensional squares folding and floating around haphazardly. I fold them in half repeatedly, until the particles are too small to see. Caffeine has a half-life. The liver's enzymes can break it in half repeatedly, but never eradicate it. I fold on Sundays during post-sermon prayer, after a clash against slumber, hopeful there was at least a subconscious osmosis at work during the sermon. I pray the Lord instill these words in me with his spirit. Behind that voice, another one interprets, praying that the open-class verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs in the sermon will stick. Those are the ones that matter, the ones toddlers learn first. Never mind the function-class articles, conjunctions, etc. They don't even get capitalized in titles. We've prayed about this voice before. We've prayed that it be quieted. Quiet that voice, Lord. Quiet that voice.

You've heard about the voice, but you don't know its constancy. You don't know that when you burrow your head under my arm and wrap your left leg over both of mine, it's narrating, telling me this is a love moment.

When you and I go to bed pissed off, it tells me I'm sweating the most where your leg skin touches mine, reminds me your nappy hair tickles my nose, like those woolen blankets Chris and I slept in growing up. They cost Mom less than Wal-Mart comforters would have. It wonders, "Could you remove your ring if you wanted to?" I can. "Put it back on, quick." Your leg is pressing on my bladder. It asks me why my heart won't skip beats for you, even when we're not pissed. I fold then, too. Voices don't fold, people do—at about four hours before the first of four alarm clocks will sound.

Voices unfold—at the worst times. E-ink is better. That way I won’t be tempted to check my Facebook news feed while reading. Who cares about the news feed? You’re at work. None of the sites you visit start with ‘X’(tube), ‘S’(tileProject), or ‘4’(tube). I make sure and type each one in any way, once I’ve cleared the browser history. *She needs to get her laptop fixed.* Jesus told me to cut off my right hand. Wouldn’t it just hurt less to stop wearing my glasses? Besides: neither eye nor hand can *un*-fold.

“Baby, please get that computer out of here. This bed is for us, and nothing or nobody else.” You don’t know what the big deal is, lying next to me, wrapped up in that cintura, those hips, that dripping sexuality. Why can’t that be enough? Is it because you’re not as limber? Is it because you don’t do as much for my genitals as they do on screen? Would that ever be enough in our real world?

In the third year of our marriage, I joined Stephanie’s family on a trip to Denver. I fell in love with the town, and further in love with it when we visited again in the Summer. I frequently lobbied for the rest of my graduate career, making a case that would outweigh the convenience and affordability of Houston.

We often haggled, arguing against each other’s preferred cities. I was elated when she finally agreed to three-year terms.

“Three years,” She said, across our dinner table one night. “If we’re not situated by then, we’re coming back.”

“Deal,” I extended my hand. She rolled her eyes and took it, smiling.

“Why are you moving to Denver?” My brother asked a few weeks later, while my mom cooked and cleaned in their kitchen, slamming things violently, periodically wiping tears from her face. I had just told her.

To answer my brother, I went into a diatribe about the culture, the weather, fundamental questions I’d had. Stephanie corroborated my reasoning, describing the town in a positive light, by her preference for a couple to maintain a united front.

What Stephanie called a united front, however, my brother construed as Stephanie gloating about Denver while hiding behind a pretense that it was my idea. This went on for months, my brother placating us. It wasn’t until I traveled across the country for work that Stephanie was finally able to convince him that the trip was my idea and that Stephanie had made a case against it before agreeing to the terms she and I had negotiated for two years.

Part III: Soft Relocation

It is true that I stopped giving my mom money so I could survive the pay cut, from that of an entry-level hospitality management job, to that of a student in a college town that paid beyond bare living wages. Simply getting myself to Huntsville was where our mutual understanding ended, though. Because to him, we were still the hunter-gatherer pack we’d been in our upbringing, the one that had its roots on a block in West Houston, along with a Central American influx that had taken place in the early eighties.

This is the verdict: I’m abandoning the family our father abandoned, who as a result had to endure things like living on our front porch when mom couldn’t afford the light bill. I’m abandoning the family who survived the alcoholism and abandonment of our sister’s

father during our elementary school years. The family who in our tweens occasionally had to eat off-brand starches taken from the church pantry in our tweens.

I have a new family, a wife, and two dogs now. Occasionally, I contribute for meals and pitch in for things when we're all together, families old and new. It's nowhere near the hefty rent subsidies and guarantor assumptions my brother provides for them. Hence, I'm the traitorous alpha wolf who went out on a hunt and, instead of bringing the bounty home, has decided to start a new pack and bring it to them.

Vision: Answers

"I see two things on your retina," the vitreoretinal ophthalmologist told me. The retina is the innermost membrane of the eyeball. "I see a freckle with capillaries branching off of it, and a tiny hole elsewhere in your retina. You'll need to come back at least once a year to track the changes in either of these. Believe it or not," she tells me, "veiny freckles in the retina have been associated with colon polyps."

"That hole seems benign for now. As you approach middle age, though, your retina will start to gradually shrivel. This could cause that hole to expand, so let's start keeping an eye on it now."

As a twenty-seven-year-old senior in college, I went in for photos again. "You have a CHRPE. We pronounce it 'Chirpy.' It stands for Congenital Hypertrophy Retinal Pigment Epithelium. In short, it's a dark, benign freckle with veins that no one's diagnosed until very recently. Our practice just put out a pamphlet on it," she told me. "It's the first one anyone's published for the general public, and we're leading the research on it."

Just after college, while working a shift at my father-in-law's vehicle inspection shop, I asked him about his own vision, which was pretty terrible also, though not as bad as mine. He wears those invisible bifocals, but the two prescriptions correct his vision fully, or at least closer to 20/20 than mine. I asked him, "Papa, you think you might be completely blind for a while before you die?"

"Oh shit, I hope not."

"Well, I hope not too, but we both have really bad vision. I'm okay with it."

"What? No, I hope I die before I have to be blind."

When you have bad vision, particularly myopia, everything not right in front of you is blurry, distorted. For me, the blur is easy to forget, disregard. For me, the blurry becomes what white noise is to radio. It's static, and your mind deems it insignificant, ignoring it in favor of what's immediately clear.

They Want You to Fail

I'm almost thirty and looking at a classroom of twenty-three eighth graders. Five months into this teaching gig, I attach each of their faces to the work they've done, the work I've dug into for anything real, anything besides half-assed attempts to complete what they see as an assignment. Collectively, I don't even have twenty-three completed assignments. One is an amazing artist who illustrates beautiful humanoids. Another has written several emotional poems about her different boyfriends. Maybe another handful of completed pieces here or there. Something's not clicking for them. Worse, something's not clicking for me.

I'm thinking, these are my people. They live in apartments like those I grew up in. Some of their parents don't speak English, some of their parents don't care. They all laugh at my jokes and ask me how my week was, how my wife and dogs are when I walk into the classroom. They make eye contact. They engage with the conversation, responding enthusiastically once I dispatch them to compose. Still, the papers remain mostly blank or doodled on week after week.

A handful of times, their teacher of record encourages me. "It's okay," she says, "see Roxanne over there? Julio and Kevin? It's the same story every year. They don't do a thing for me either because they're waiting for summer school when all the work is easier and shorter."

That explanation only somewhat consoled me, mostly sharpening the spade that was digging at me. At my wits' end, I try unsuccessfully to slow my breathing before discoursing.

"You know, there are a lot of people out there who want to make sure you work like this," and I present to them a piece of paper with a single line of poetry, holding my thumb over the name.

"Why, Mr. Carlos?" Julio asks. He's the poster boy for verbal enthusiasm lacking academic substance.

"Because that's less competition for their kids when they get older and go out into the real world looking for the best jobs." I continue for a few minutes in more detail, tell them this is right where they're wanted, and when things don't seem fair in the future, the same people can blame it on them for not doing their homework as kids. Things like that.

“And they won’t admit it for years, when you’re older and struggling to find a job because others keep getting hired over you.” I let the blood flow back into my face, loosened my jaw, mustered my friendly grin back up. “Thanks, Ms. Narvaez. Thanks, everyone, see you next week.”

“Bye Mr. Carlos,” They all responded.

I was trying to be a Hispanic Robin Williams, addressing inner-city public school kids wearing polo shirts instead of privileged white adolescents wearing red coats. For this, I felt somewhat embarrassed, despite the honesty of my sentiment. This was what I got for outgrowing my roots and leaving them behind.

I spent the drive home repeating the same grievance to myself. These are my people, and I can’t do a thing for them. I’d spent the rest of my will on that speech and had nothing left for these kids.

I felt a burst of ashamed relief the following week at a meeting with my coordinators next week.

“We’re so sorry this contract was terminated early. What could we have done to support you and make the environment better for you?” The conversation went on as such.

We talked about the mental latency that came from switching between being a graduate student and magazine editor, and middle school creative writing instructor. We talked about the school’s history of difficulty with this creative writing program, how this wasn’t the first contract to be terminated early.

We didn’t talk about what was wracking me with a sense of defeat: I grew up in the same environment, but could never learn how to live in it.

“They want you to know they delighted in seeing your face in their building every Thursday, though. There was never a moment they didn’t enjoy having you there. You handled yourself professionally through and through, and they really appreciated that.”

The Girls

On a Monday night a year later, we returned to our apartment in Houston. I opened the door to be overcome by the canine odor that had completely replaced that of us humans. Not the smell of urine or feces, but of dog body. A cloud of it sucked us into itself, into the apartment. From the deepest corner of our two-bedroom, in the master bedroom where they slept, Sirena’s and Coco’s barks erupted. Coco’s shrill *arfs* came at a rate of two to Sirena’s one *roof*, which is louder than her bite and her size. Sirena has the kind of brusque *roof* you’d expect from a former stray whose life is now much better but pathologically can’t forget about her earliest struggles. When people hear her before seeing her, they’re surprised at how much smaller she is when they meet her. Coco’s *arf* is one that sounds like she’s grasping English phonetics--there really is an R sound in there--but will never get a word out, no matter how high she jumps or how intense her beady eyes can focus on you. She was born to Stephanie, hand-chosen by her, protected from the cruelty of stray life.

The Girls, we call them. Their uproar came from deep in the apartment, their eight collective paws scampering almost instantly to the front door to greet us. The air they gave off was one of “Look, guardians, look what we’ve done with the place. Do you like it?” as compared to the more usual, “Where have you been? We’ve waited for some amount of time we have no idea how to measure or even get a sense of. We just know it’s been much too long.”

Coco, our solid white miniature American Eskimo, was jumping and twirling in mid-air, trying to climb my right hip like a tree. When I looked down at her, she sprinted to her niche in the bedroom. But I was too slow to follow, so she came back again, hastily. She repeated this as I dumped a week's worth of mostly junk mail, ours and that of three different former residents, onto the dinner table. Sirena was dragging her wet nose all over Stephanie's leg, sniffing as profoundly as she possibly could, with little huffs tossed into every dozen sniffs. She was like a furious typist without a word processor, every sniff a keystroke, every huff a new line. And she was traveling up Stephanie's leg in this manner.

Sometimes, Stephanie will realize she's being sniffed and can pre-emptively avoid her hand being licked. Other times, she lets her guard down and says, "Stop Sirena!" As soon as she feels the moist, leathery tongue of our elder female canine, who looks like a Spitz mutt, and has a thick coat of fur that fades from brown to black in a velvety way, who's shedding can fill a vacuum canister after just one particularly itchy day. We'd been gone seven of these days, and Greg hadn't vacuumed.

Our roommate and an old friend of mine, Greg, agreed to help with the Girls. Lately, all he did was work—sometimes fifteen-hour shifts—then play video games. In good times, he gamed and drank juice. In adequate times, he'd have a couple beers. During the roughest times, he'd have a bottle of whiskey next to him. He was always the most benign of recovering alcoholics I've known. He's not an angry or belligerent drunk, just sloppy. Among the most malignant aspects of his drunken behavior resemble the following: a can of tuna in the sink in the morning, his jacket balled up on the ground near the front door, his room fully lit while he slumbers. These are much better than what Stephanie and I have both experienced with the other alcoholics in our own respective lives.

“Greg let the Girls stake their claim here,” I thought. “It’s OK. Uncles can never exercise the authority of parents.” Our queen-sized bed had a Sirena-shaped groove in the sheets, with plenty of her dander and velvety fur to complement. Every room smelled like dog-hair broth had constantly been simmering while we were gone. And because of the sunlight Stephanie loves to have fill our dwellings, I assumed that was pretty close to what’d been happening.

I looked down at the Girls and said, “I bet you didn’t even notice we were gone, seeing how at-home you made yourselves.” Coco was still panting, in a way that made her look like she was smiling enormously, with those beady little eyes. One of them is cloudy, which is exactly how things look to her through that eye. Sirena slinked her head, the way dogs do when they hear your tone, to appease to your sense that they should be contrite. I didn’t buy it. Still, she was soft and cute as usual.

I did my usual cupping of Sirena’s snout, scratching the bottom of either side of her jaw. Her body loosened up. She started muzzling my wrist, and as usual, I pulled my hands away just before her tongue could stroke my flesh. She decided to repeatedly lick her own lips instead. So it was Coco’s turn. I pet her differently. She’s so small, I can scratch her entire head with all eight of my non-thumb digits, and the strokes I used end up spiking the white fur around her head. Her favorite trick is to shake, which is what she did the moment I started to pet her. I told her, “Looks like mama found a job and an apartment. You’re gonna love the weather in Denver.” She ran and hopped onto the bed, where Stephanie now lay. I said to Coco, “Ah, you don’t care. But you’ll see.”

I joined Stephanie on the bed, having left my suitcase and carry-on near the front door. We’ve just driven to Houston from Dallas, where our return flight from Denver landed.

Years ago, her dad figured out that if more than one person takes a car to Dallas and pays for the parking, it's almost always more cost-effective than flying out of and back into Houston. Just make sure you have five extra hours for each way. That was what we did that time. We were wiped because of it. I remember falling asleep without letting go of my cell phone.

Stephanie woke me up an unknown time later to say, "Will you come with me to overnight my fingerprints?" The sun had set during Daylight Savings Time, after eight pm. She was overnighing fingerprints to Denver Public Schools, where she applied, interviewed and was offered a job at an elementary school within two days. While she canvassed countless schools, I sometimes chauffeured her, did a Q & A session at The University of Denver, but mostly drank coffee, revised my tech resume, and agonized about the countless loose ends that needed tying up before I graduated and left my hometown, Houston.

"What time do they close?"

"Eleven."

"What time is it now?"

"I don't know. Nine? It's not eleven yet."

"Sure. Let's go get some dirt-cheap bedsheets at Walmart, too." The bed was stripped of its dress to reverse the effects of its dog colonization.

"Oh, can we get a mattress pad, too?" The dogs always do things on her side. Sirena's dog-shaped groove in the sheets was on her side. They always tear up *her* underwear if left on the ground. Never my side of the bed, never my underwear. For this I am grateful. But then, they all "grew up" together, were a family for several years before I came in to contend for the Alpha slot.

Steph's Pets

"When did you get Mandy?"

"Before I can remember. My dad says I chose her at the shelter."

As far back as she can remember means the blurry recollections Stephanie has of living in Miami, in a beachy smelling apartment with flowery furniture. Mandy was her first cat. In Puerto Rico, where her mother was from, and where Stephanie would spend her summers, she had a farm's worth of pets, "A pet pig, a pet horse, a pet chicken, pet duck, pet iguana," and she stops there. She mentions the pet pig because its slaughter was the most traumatic for her, when her family featured the pig as her lechon, roasting it on a stick over a fire during her fifth birthday celebration.

When Stephanie's father Randall moved them to Katy, the suburb west of Houston, he built Stephanie a playhouse on stilts in the backyard. Around the stilts, he built a chicken coop to house her two pet hens and a rooster. Once the rooster was old enough to crow, however, the Homeowner's Association forced them to get rid of the fowls.

"Did you cry?"

"Oh yeah, I pitched a fit."

Later when Stephanie was nine, when Randall lost his business to a partner who had extorted him, they took Mandy the cat with them to his parents' house. The new job Randall had gotten required that he travel frequently. The resulting tension between Stephanie's mother Lydia and her grandmother Yolanda, including Lydia's erratic behavior, eventually resulted in Randall and Lydia divorcing. Lydia, who became suicidal and was revealed to be an alcoholic, returned to Florida without Stephanie and Mandy. Randall continued to travel constantly for work.

When Stephanie went off to college in Huntsville, Mandy had to stay behind with Yolanda.

Stephanie went one academic year, nine months, without a pet, because Sam Houston State required she live in the dorms her freshmen year. As soon as she was able to move into an apartment that April, she picked Sirena up from the animal shelter.

“She was this tiny brown ball of fuzz, and she was really calm. So adorable. She used to be well-behaved. Nothing like she is today.”

“So when did she start misbehaving?”

“The minute I came home with Coco.”

Randall and I were at the only Olive Garden in Huntsville when he told me how Stephanie got Coco. This is the myth he believes:

“Well, Stephanie had this Chinese friend who had to leave town for a while because her parents had an emergency. She had to leave Coco with someone, so Stephanie said, ‘Okay I can take care of her.’ When I saw that dog, I asked her why *she* had to be the one to take care of her. Stephanie said it was her friend, that it was no trouble.”

He did see it as trouble, though. Stephanie was not only a music major at the time, a particularly grueling field of study, but also working at a Best Buy thirty miles south of town in Conroe. “She couldn’t take care of two dogs, she was busy. But she didn’t listen. She said, ‘It’s okay, Daddy, it’s okay,’ Como siempre.” When Stephanie’s friend didn’t return from her emergency, she didn’t have the heart to admit Coco to the pound. After all, Stephanie had always wanted an American Eskimo. She’d actually wanted a full-size, which could be up to thirty pounds and twenty inches tall, but this happy miniature accident would do.

Here's the simpler, truer version in Stephanie's words:

"I always wanted one, so I went to the pet store to get one."

"Why did it have to be right then?"

"I had the money. Who was going to stop me? I was living in Huntsville by myself, and I knew she could keep Sirena company."

By this time, Sirena was just over a year old and had reached her full weight of thirty pounds and twenty-two inches. Coco was a fraction of her size, who looked like a balled up pair of white fuzzy mittens, fuzzy mittens Coco Chanel might wear, which is how Stephanie came up with her name. Small enough that she was able to be held by cupped human hands, Stephanie's roommates and friends took to calling her Snow Beast instead.

Naturally, Stephanie coddled the more fragile mini Eskimo, which Sirena didn't appreciate, having only over a few months outgrown the comfort of Stephanie's lap. Situating herself near the couch and waiting long enough for Stephanie to let her guard down, Sirena would try to nip at Coco. She never succeeded, though, and after having enough of Stephanie's snout taps, Sirena eventually relented. Once Coco elongated out of fuzz ball status, the two got along famously, regularly grooming each other, weaving together at bed times to resemble a yin-yang in a kennel they'd share.

A couple of years into their family arrangement, I moved into a duplex on the other side of the ditch from Stephanie's. Eighteen months later, we were married.

A year after that, we moved to Houston so Stephanie could teach and I could go to grad school. Now, we live near the Galleria, where Greg lives with us in the other bedroom. Ten years ago, Greg was paying me a monthly pittance for permission to pass out drunk on

my couch late every night. Ten years ago was when my brother and his wife got their first pet, a cat they never named.

Chris's Pets

When my roommate moved out, unable to afford most of the rent because I wasn't working enough server shifts, Greg crashed on my couch until my brother wanted to move in with his girlfriend.

In those days, I had gone from working six hours a week to at least forty, getting written up regularly for unauthorized overtime. Those overtime write-ups were a formality and never amounted to any further discipline.

I came home from a long shift to see a balled up kitten on the living room carpet while Chris and Malory watched TV. It was November and getting colder out.

"We opened the door, and this cat ran into the apartment."

"Well, we can't keep her."

"Yes we can, there's three of us here, and we all have different work schedules."

"All I do is work. So really, there's just two of us who can take care of the cat."

"Whatever, it'll be fine."

Malory lay on the carpet, toying with the cat while Chris and I haggled.

"Fine. You're paying me for the deposit if this cat screws it up."

Six months later, we moved from this apartment near the Galleria to a house in the Heights, which is in the northwest quadrant of Houston's Inner Loop. That was when he and Malory went to the SPCA and found Jake.

Jake was a brown fuzzball, too. A German Shepherd and Husky mix, he had the short coarse coat resembling that of a German Shepherd, and the different colored eyes—one brown and one blue—found in Huskies. He grew to be thirty inches tall.

Nowadays when I see Jake, no matter how many people show up to my brother's house, I'm the first one Jake brushes up against. In the Heights house, I was the uncle, more merciful than Chris. Then I moved out of the Heights house to be closer to my Galleria area restaurant jobs.

By the time I moved to Huntsville and Stephanie and I were married, Chris had spliced his new family—Malory, Jake, and the cat without a name—to the pre-existing family—my mom, my sister Emily, and their dogs. Three dogs, a cat, and four people in a four-bedroom house in Bear Creek, on Houston's west side, just outside of the Tollway. They all lived under one roof, to keep the pack intact. We visited them regularly.

A year later, Malory and Chris divorced. A year after the divorce, everyone moved out of the Bear Creek house and went their separate ways. My mother and her dog Blackie are back with her retired mother, who still has a mortgage. My sister is with her boyfriend and their dog, Simon. My brother is close to his workplace in North Houston.