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By

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Montgomery men often say that the Montgomerys make their own luck. When they say it, they mean to imply that they get by on stubbornness, on guile, and on no small amount of intestinal grit. When they say it, they are not referring to the abnormally frequent incidences of car accidents, head trauma, and disfigurement. They mean it in the good way. Fortune favors the bold.

Not all Montgomery men are bold by nature. The two cousins screwing around on the railroad tracks are not bold. They just want to have a little fun away from their uptight little brothers. Barney thinks it is fun to build little pyres from trackside litter and offer them

up to the grill of the engine, while his older cousin Shep likes to see the train send all of the bits flying. Fucking around on the tracks in the path of a slow-moving locomotive is a measured recklessness. It's almost subtle. But subtle they are not. They are loud with beer-soaked whoops of glee and half-baked clods of invective directed at whosoever might be in earshot. And they're definitely not bold. They'll step out of the way well before the train's plodding engine would suck them off their feet.

The cruelly named Montgomery Montgomery is not the typical Montgomery Man, either, as proven by his own ass being firmly locked on a log safely away from the tracks and just beyond brunt of the heat from a Sunday evening bonfire. His older brother and cousin are both too uncomplicated to interest Monty very much. He would rather watch his golden retriever Bill Cosby run through the field. The dog is sniffing at whatever plant life has managed to sprout from this hard-scrabble that passes for a yard, and the dog has more sense than to wander near the increasingly intense thrum of railroad steel. Darry, the younger cousin, is trying to make conversation while drinking a beer and poking aimlessly at the fire with a tree branch. Darry is earnest but a banal conversationalist. He is pretty much pursuing all of his personal interests right this minute so there isn't really much else to say. But Monty gets antsy if nobody is talking, especially if he hasn't concluded that the silence is a comfortable one. Darry is good at picking up on that kind of thing. Frankly, Darry is pretty surprised Monty isn't a little more antsy considering the trouble they witnessed – some might even say caused – outside of the funeral home earlier in the day. Instead, Monty looks bored, which is even worse than being antsy.

Monty is not bored, though, at least not entirely. His older brother is roughhousing on the tracks, laughing like a mean child. The antics do not amuse him, but he is admittedly

curious as to how a thirty-eight year old man could derive such joy from acting like a poorly behaved child. Barney is still in his twenties, barely, but he should be too old for this shit, too. Monty is bored by his Darry's conversation, but he is touched at the attempt to reconnect because they don't see each other very often. He doesn't understand how his cousin can still be so fond of him after years of Monty not making an effort to keep in touch. Monty is mostly not bored because Barney's girlfriend Jen sitting is right next to him. This girl is out of this world, always has been. She has been Monty's classmate since middle school and has been in his fantasies since the same. Now, almost ten years after graduation, she's as beautiful as she's ever been. Monty is not above reducing a woman to an idea even though he considers himself an ally for the female cause. In his defense, he tries to reduce everything he experiences to an idea that makes sense in the scheme of his worldview. Jen is not just an idea, though. The two of them have history. She was his first friend, which not the same thing as being a close friend. It just meant that they had been neighbors until Monty's mom left his dad. They had hardly talked at all throughout high school. Something is different now. He's been home since Thursday and they have seen each other every day. A connection is growing between the two of them. He has that feeling. He doesn't know why. He knows that it makes him uncomfortable not just because Jen is with Barney, but because the feeling alone already makes Monty feel as if he has transgressed against his wife.

Audrey is still up north, far away in the home they've created together. He convinced her that she did not need to make the drive with him because he did not want to drag her into what was just the latest episode in the Montgomery family drama. Now he thinks that may have been a mistake.

Darry breaks Monty's reverie with a question that is made indecipherable by the noise from the train that completely dominated the lower frequencies of the audio spectrum. Darry repeats himself, louder.

"You think he will go through with it willingly?"

"He" is Shep. "It" is more complicated. "It" starts with a government contract Shep signed twenty years ago tomorrow. For nearly twenty years, the federal government has cut Shep a monthly check. The only thing he had to do in return was expire with the contract. Tomorrow, when the contract expires, Shep is supposed to die. That is the "it." The problem is that nobody is really clear on how he is supposed to die. The television news had been grilling the feds about how they were going to handle this first batch of expiring contracts. No matter how many times or how many ways the government was asked, the answer was exactly the same:

"The appropriate parties have been or will be contacted directly."

Finding the appropriate parties proved a very difficult task for the intrepid news teams, as the government stayed mum and the other parties involved in the contract weren't exactly looking to draw attention to themselves. Shep maintains that nobody's contacted him. The family suspects that will change tomorrow.

"I don't think so," Monty says. "But I'll tell you what: if he'd lay down right about where he is right now for three minutes, he'd save us all a lot of trouble."

Jen recoiled, shaking her head twice, quickly, sharply, like one does when water seeps into the inner ear. This sets off in Monty a nauseating pang of regret immediately followed brow-beating guilt at giving one too many rips what Jen thinks of him.

“Harsh,” Darry says, also shaking his head but in the slow, sorrowful way of someone who has heard every manner of gutter talk and can no longer be shocked by mere words.

It had come off more cruelly than Monty had intended. Fortunately, soft-hearted Darry bails him out by fishing a cheap beer from the cooler parked next to his lawn chair and tossing it to Monty.

“You hear about Richie?” he asks.

“I don’t know any Richies.”

“Richie Watkins. Done threw himself in front of one of the trains two weeks ago. Came out of the Bent Wrench more sauced than bad spaghetti and just stood on the tracks till the train got right up on him.”

“On purpose?” Monty asks.

Jen nods her head, meaning that this is town-wide news.

“Started running toward it at the last minute.”

“Like a goddamn centurion,” Monty says mostly to himself.

This wasn’t entirely a shock. The folks of Sleeper had been getting themselves caught up in the front-ends of trains for as long as Monty could remember. The problem was one of planning mostly. From Darry’s place out in the sticks, this pop-up camper in a weed patch, the tracks undulated with the gently rolling terrain for a few miles until they hit Sleeper proper, and divided Sleeper cleanly in two. It had been little more than a minor inconvenience, trains only chugging through once or twice daily, until the feds had begun withholding highway funds and the interstate infrastructure fell into disrepair. Then companies had dialed back to the technology of previous generations: the locomotive. Now lines of boxcars seemed to cut through Sleeper nearly every hour at so slow a pace as to

nearly be an insult to the town itself. The real tragedy came from the tracks falling between the Bent Wrench and the Pour House, Sleeper's two most popular drinking establishments, both the sleazy scumfuck type of places that served fifty-cent pitchers of staling grog until their patrons were drunk enough to be whipped up into a frothing mob of fisticuffs and then too drunk to carry on even that line of degeneracy.

Darry points to his cousins, who are still building their smash pile on the tracks.

"Yep, only two weeks ago. Where do you think they got all that shit?" Darry asks.

They are laying all manner of things in the path of the train: a big wreath of flowers draped across the tracks like a distressed damsel from the Old West, a number of wooden crosses of varying size and composition, an old pair of bowling shoes.

"You're kidding." It isn't quite grave robbing. Not quite, but way too damn close for comfort.

"Naw. Barney loots those kinds of places on the regular. He never gets sick of seeing trains hit stuff."

"He's such an asshole," Jen says.

Darry raises his already half-empty can. "Agreed."

They toast over the sputtering flames to Barney's hardline macho bullshit. Darry kills his beer and tosses the can into the pit.

"Hey dumbfuck," Barney yells, apparently done desecrating tributes to the recently fallen, still jostling back and forth with Shep. Both of them are dusty and sweaty from their antics. "Those cans are worth a nickel apiece. With the amount of beer you drink, you could buy yourself a house with a backyard pool from the refunds alone."

Darry silently grabs a full can from the cooler and never breaks his stare with his brother as he tosses it into the pit. In the time it takes for the lukewarm bathwater from the cooler to evaporate with a hiss from the aluminum surface, Barney has torpedoed himself into his brother's chest, toppling them both backward onto the ground. Barney had the drop on his younger brother, but Darry has a good forty pounds on his big brother. He has the type of flab-covered musculature seen in young sumo wrestlers. He is a load, and if the lawn chair hadn't been a yard-sale piece of shit, the older brother may very well have simply bounced off like a gadfly from a water buffalo. It isn't long before Darry has the upper hand and Barney is nearly crying from frustration. As children, Darry had no concept of his massivity and he had simply taken his licks. No more, it seems.

Sensing a primitive struggle with potential consequences for the hierarchy of the moment, Bill Cosby breaks off his rhinal investigation of the lot and circles up to a distance that affords him a sightline of the dust-up while ensuring a safe remove from any fallout. Once it is clear that Darry has asserted himself as the alpha, Bill Cosby loses interest and resumes his life's work of pissing on every goddamn thing in the world. Monty wonders where he winds up in the dog's hierarchical calculus. Safe to say, he isn't a natural alpha. "Conflict-averse" would be the academic way to put it. He had allowed himself to get ripped off on his pick-up truck mainly to avoid negotiation. All in all, he had walked off the car-sale lot feeling he could have acquitted himself worse, though. At least he had walked in, had seen the teeth in that jalopy-shark's smile – too many teeth – and had the good sense to know that he was overmatched. An honest assessment of defeat is worlds better a false victory. As a young boy, before his father died and left him drifting away from the family, he had occasionally ridden along with his Uncle Jules on some day-to-day business. Jules, a

self-proclaimed bastard and a unanimously-agreed poseur, “worked for himself.” Meaning he didn’t work much. Odd jobs, mostly: re-tiling a bathroom here, hanging some drywall there, and a whole lot of glomming onto work-crews for projects his brothers had similarly come by. That whole generation of Montgomery men – Bobby, Jules, Titus, and Lanny – were oddjobsmen of varying levels of success. Bobby, the eldest, was either a “sell-out” or a “legitimate business-man” depending on whether you asked his youngest brothers or the public at-large. He didn’t fix garage doors or patch roofs, he contracted with the county to re-grade the roads or renovate the elementary school, and then he stuffed his work crews with semi-skilled laborers who were otherwise unemployable, mostly undocumented immigrants and his younger brothers, all people whom he could pay absolutely bottom dollar, keeping the largest slice for himself. Even at dogs’ wages, the work he threw his brothers had to be considered charity. On this day, Jules hadn’t had any work from his older brother, nor any other real work to attend to, so “business” consisted mostly of drinking coffee from the local McDonald’s and driving around maintaining the appearance of purposefulness. The pinnacle of achievement that day was getting an oil change for his uncle’s truck.

“Boy,” his uncle had addressed him, “like your Uncle Bobby always says, getting ahead in life is about figuring out what you need to do and what you can get other people to do for you.”

Monty didn’t understand that this was an *ex ante facto* excuse against the charges of laziness and prodigality. For three hours, uncle and nephew sat in that stinking waiting room with grease-stained windows and dilapidated plastic chairs, while the mechanic kept coming back in with further reports of issues with the vehicle.

“Rear differential fluid is low.”

“Cracked a ball bearing.”

“Leaky valve.”

“Serpentine belt is slack.”

Each time, Jules greeted the mechanic congenially and meekly agreed to the repair. But his uncle’s mood soured each time the bell rattled and the door to the garage slammed shut. He slapped his knees with tense hands. His lips muttered under his mustache. No longer content to gripe to himself after the third or fourth such update, and having no other captive audience, Jules unloaded on his guileless nephew.

“Goddamn, Piggots,” he said, referring to the family from which the mechanic had apparently descended. “They’ll fuck a Montgomery over whenever they get the chance. Here’s a life lesson for you: never trust some other asshole to do what you can get done yourself.”

Finally, the mechanic, Piggott, had come back in wiping the grease from his hands with a filthy rag and began punching keys on the old mechanical register, murmuring his way through the tally of charges.

“Oh yeah,” he said looking up near the end, “I took the liberty of switching out your wiper blades. Figured you wouldn’t mind after everything else.”

Jules sprung to his feet, livid to the point of shaking. For a beat, words didn’t come, and Monty anticipated something filthy to spew from his uncle’s mouth. It had been anti-climactic when all his uncle managed was a terse, “I won’t pay for it.” It came out punctuated, an ejaculation in five parts.

Piggott looked up, innocent confusion written across his face. “But I already put them on.”

“Then take them off.”

“It’s only ten dollars. I didn’t even charge for labor.”

“I won’t pay it.”

The Piggott just looked at him for a second, then casually ambled back toward the garage. For the half hour it took before the mechanic reappeared, Jules stomped around the shop, every inch of his wiry frame in action: punching his fist into his other hand, tapping on the window, lightly kicking his chair, slapping the cinder-block walls with his palms, and a whole lot of swearing and shaking his head. Then, he paid off the transaction wordlessly and stomped to his truck, now idling out front, without even looking to see if his nephew was following. When Monty caught up and strapped himself into the passenger seat, his uncle was mumbling “sumbitch” over and over while futilely flicking a stick jutting from the steering column. There were no wiper blades on the windshield at all. Jules gave up and sat there for a few moments, busy not making eye contact with Monty. Then he shifted the car into first and jammed on the gas while releasing the clutch. A loud squeal erupted from the tires and persisted for what, in a little boy’s worldview, seemed an eternity. They didn’t move, save for the truck bucking like an untraned bronc, and then they burst forward and were jetting down Main Street away from town. When they were a few miles away, Jules pointed into the rearview mirror. Two plumes of black smoke had risen a good hundred feet into the air before beginning to disperse in the jet streams.

“You think he learned his lesson?” Jules asked.

These days, Monty considers these kinds of “moral victories” disingenuous, last minute pride-grabs that fool nobody, not truly. Better just to own up to defeat, to one’s shortcomings. Monty thinks that being right is more important than winning.

The train is finally upon them, and in the din Barney extricates himself from under his brother. Both Barney and Shep sprint toward the tracks, ready to break into applause at what they expect to be an epic explosion of wood chips and flower petals. After dusting himself off, Darry surreptitiously fishes the full can of beer from the fire and shoots Monty a wink. The cheer from the tracks never comes, and it seems that the train has merely flattened chattels in its path. Now, the older brothers are jostling each other, each daring the other to jump onto one of the boxcars for a short ride, which is not exactly a daredevil-caliber feat given how slow the train is moving. It's Barney who sidles up closer to the tracks and gets into the slight crouch athletes sink into to prepare for action.

"Don't you fucking dare, Barnabus Lee Montgomery," Jen shouts at just the right frequency to be heard over the commotion. And just like that Barney stiffens straight up and walks back toward the bonfire while being roundly mocked by Shep – fair enough, given that Barney has just fallen two spots down the food chain in under a minute.

"I'll still beat your ass," he says, drilling Shep in the arm. Shep winces for just a second before forcing his facial muscles to go slack. "Yours too," Barney says to Monty.

"I'm drunk," Monty says. A half-truth. That he is half-drunk is the full truth. They had only been drinking for an hour or two. After the funeral, they had to wait for the police to quell the violence outside of the funeral home before they could even step outside. And getting out of the downtown took ages because neither the streets nor the train schedule were built to accommodate hundreds and hundreds of out-of-towners, each family with their own automobile.

"Barney's been drunk for the last three years," Jen says. The assertion of dominance continues.

“I been drunk since I was sixteen,” Shep says. “You got a long ways to go.” This is true, but an unfair challenge. Shep is older than even Barney by almost a decade. Even though Barney and Shep have gone closer over the last few years. When the three boys had been younger, Shep had no use for them. It was only recently, when he and Barney were able to commiserate as under-appreciated big brothers, that the two have bonded. The gap between Shep’s birth and Monty’s would be cause for question, if their dad, Titus, hadn’t provided an answer that still rings clearly in Monty’s consciousness over twenty years later.

“It was an accident,” he had said.

Monty’s mother had come in as quickly as she had fiercely. “An unexpected blessing from God,” she corrected.

Sensing his wife’s impending wrath, Titus felt compelled to defend himself. “I didn’t say mistake. I said accident.”

“Accident implies mistake, you big jerk. Even a four year-old knows that.”

They went on like that for a while, focused on each other now rather than Monty, who went back to watching the action film that his dad had been playing on the television. He didn’t understand why his mother was so angry. Monty had wanted to know why his brother was so much older. The age gap was pretty big so Monty thought it made sense that it would have been an accident. Maybe she was mad because of whatever mistake Titus had made to make Shep so much older. Titus tended to make a lot of mistakes, and nearly getting his head knocked off by a tree hadn’t helped him make any fewer. As an adult himself now, Monty can understand how frustrated his mother must have been to be married to a guy with a damaged brain for fifteen years. Especially when the mistake responsible had been so easily avoidable.

It had been one of those odd jobs, this time knocking down some scrub so that a foundation could be laid somewhere in the county's outskirts. Family legend went that Titus had either gotten bored or impatient and decided to just use a bulldozer to flatten everything on the lot. The old dozer, borrowed from a friend rather than leased, had none of the protective caging one might expect, so it only took one errant branch, torqued the wrong way for just a moment before whip-sawing back at the cockpit splintering the operator's skull. The moment the tree hit his skull he had been a vigorous twenty-one year-old. After the last of his surgeries to deal with the brain swelling, he was twenty-five, but he acted like a man well into his convalescent years. A convalescing man with a serious pill addiction and chronic pain.

All this must have done a number on Shep, Monty realizes. By all accounts, Titus had been one of the town's great assholes before the accident and simply an intolerable prick after. Better, perhaps, to have had an absent father than one who was irreparably damaged. Given that Shep had signed his contract only a couple of months after Lanny died and less than two years after their father had finally and wholly given up and served himself willingly up to death, or at least played recklessly enough with his prescriptions to amount to the same, there wasn't much doubt in Monty's mind that the latter was proximate cause to the former.

"Better keep the streak alive," Darry says, tossing another beer to Shep. Shep cracks it and takes a hearty slug.

"You should toss little Monty another one, too," Shep says nastily. "Unless he's already too drunk."

Monty fumbles the tossed beverage then sheepishly opens it and makes a show of taking a sip. Shep has always checked Monty like this. Always insinuated that Monty was a

disappointment, as far as being a man was concerned. When he was six and just starting pee-wee baseball, Shep took it upon himself to make sure his little brother didn't embarrass the family name, as though the typical Montgomery stock were typical of feeling shame. Monty liked to imagine that most fathers, or would-be father figures at least, did this by drilling fundamentals into their sons' unconscious memory so that these things would be programmed into the fibers of their fast-twitch muscles. Not Shep, of course, because being good was kind of beside the point. The point was being tough, a competitor, a warrior. So they squared up fifteen yards apart on the unkempt lawn, Monty standing awkwardly, unsure of what to do with his stiff, new mitt, Shep smiling an aggressive smile, the smile of a schoolyard bully who has caught a sniff of lunch money. And Shep just slings the ball at Monty, the kind of throw that moves with a zip and a whirr as it cuts through the air. Monty, a boy whose sense of self-preservation had already matured by this age, smartly stepped out of the way and let the ball fly by, careen to the ground, and roll to the far corner of the yard. He looked back at his brother. No smile to be found, not even the nasty kind. Neither brother moved, locked in place like predator and prey squaring off, calculating attack or escape routes. Then Shep started walking to retrieve the ball, something that caused a cold coil of fear to thrum in Monty's stomach. This was wrong. Monty should have to fetch the ball. Shouldn't he? He stood frozen in place as his brother stooped to snatch up the ball with his mitt. Shep walked back somewhat too casually for the iciness in his expression, akin to a serial killer who can turn off the empathetic part of the brain in a practiced way. As Shep strode closer, it occurred to Monty what was about to happen, at least in vague terms: punishment. Monty bolted like a squirrel-bound mutt. He heard the ominous whirr once

again, just a moment before a jolt of pain spider-webbed from just below his left shoulder blade. His balance pitched and he tumbled to the ground, fighting tears the whole way down.

“Get up,” his brother shouted. Monty obeyed, terrified. “Throw the ball back.”

Monty did as he was told, producing a weak, errant toss that was sure to hit the ground well to the front and side of his brother. He didn't wait to see it. He was on the run again. He heard a muttered curse from behind him, then pounding feet giving chase, then that horrible whirr. This one flicked past his ear. The ball rolled up to the front door of the house. Shep was gaining ground. Monty's little-kid calculus told him to break left, away from the ball, forcing his brother to decide which to pursue, the target or the instrument of the pain to be delivered. He had his answer when he got beaned again, right in the lower back, just off to the side of his spine. Monty didn't fall, but he stopped running. He wasn't going to participate in the brutal sport of the chase anymore. He picked up the ball and flung it in the general direction of his brother as hard as he could. His undeveloped arm couldn't live up to his murderous intentions, and the ball simply floated to his brother who snatched it with his mitt.

“Don't flinch this time,” his brother said. “You either catch it or it hits you, one way or another.”

His brother whipped the ball sidearm, engineering the throw so it skittered off the ground a few feet before reaching Monty. He flailed at the ball with his glove, more intending to block it than catch it. He slapped the ball with the back of his glove, neutralizing it by knocking it into the dirt. A captive to the game, he heaved it at his brother, once again with all the strength his six year-old frame could muster, which is to say, not much. A few minutes passed and Monty had acquired a few welts on his chest from balls

that he missed, but he had also snagged a few of the balls that had been rifled at him.

Apparently satisfied, his brother switched out of predator mode.

“Not bad,” he said. “Now, batting practice.”

The worst part about the whole perverted exercise was that it had worked to some extent. By virtue of not fearing the ball, Monty was automatically a more assured player than seventy-five percent of his peers. His nomination to the all-star team was no doubt interpreted by his brother as affirmation of a job well done. Never mind that Monty would only play for a few more years before realizing that all he had to do was ask his mother to not sign him up in the spring for the next season. Sure, Shep could see it as a nice Little League career that he could be proud of. Monty saw it as the hijacking of a beautiful game so that all joy had been drained from it before he had even stepped on his first diamond.

First baseball, now drinking. Shep would see to it that Monty could derive no enjoyment from America’s favorite pastimes. So even though Monty could spare more empathy for his brother than he would be spared, he would not like his brother. And he could only try to love him.

All towns have their idiosyncrasies, small towns especially. But Sleeper is strange even for a small town. Stepping into Sleeper feels more like stepping out of the rest of the world. People who are not in Sleeper do not linger long in the memories of its people. The town has always aspired to exist without reference to the world beyond its limits. Monty should leave Sleeper. If he were to leave now, he might just get back in time to have a job on Monday. But it seems that if he's going to go anywhere, it will be to the bar with these hooligans. The Montgomerys have grown restless around the dwindling fire. And with Montgomerys, restlessness begets frustration, which inevitably gives way to aggression.

“Bent Wrench or Pour House?” Shep asks.

“I’d just as soon stay here,” Darry says.

This is Barney’s opportunity to save some face. “We’re going to the bar,” he says.

“We’ll go wherever the hell Shep wants to go. It’s his night.”

“I’d rather stay here,” Jen says, which earns her a poisonous glare from her man.

Truth be told, Monty would rather stay as well. For about a million reasons, really. There is nobody who is going to be in either bar that Monty wants to see. But mostly he’s thinking about Bill Cosby. He scans the field, unable to find his dog.

“Don’t worry,” Darry says, tuned in to Monty’s distress. “No trains for about two hours. Best time of day.”

Darry’s thoughtful reassurance has the unfortunate side effect of drawing attention to Monty. Shep wheels on him. “How about you, little brother? You able to buck up?”

Now everybody is looking at him. “So long as we can drop the dog off at Mom’s.”

“He’ll be fine right here,” Shep says. “What’s he going to get into out in the middle of nowhere?”

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that Darry lived in the middle of nowhere. Might even be more accurate to say he lived on the outskirts of nowhere. This saddened Monty quite a bit. He had always felt like an outsider himself. Had always carried a sense that he fundamentally just didn’t fit, like a mis-cut puzzle piece. That inner voice – the fundamental *him*-ness that existed inside of his mind, the part that wasn’t a survival mechanism adopted to preserve himself in an inescapable world full of people – that voice had always seemed so alone, so isolated. Yet, at this point in his life Monty has a wife, a workplace filled with interpersonal relationships, a small apartment in Chicago’s far north, even some

acquaintances who might respond when called “friend.” What did Darry have? A bully of a big brother. That and this parcel of land. When they had initially arrived, the first thing that struck Monty was how lonely it all seemed. A pop-up camper and a pile of scrub and scrap lumber that, with a log and a few lawn chairs, arced around the fire pit. Aside from where the weeds had been tamped down from the trucks going back and forth, no other trappings of civilization made themselves known. It was a rare and terrifying thing to see no trace of larger society at work. No roads in sight. No telephone poles or street lights. No electrical wires – though it turned out that Darry had illegally tapped into the grid and laid down a two-mile long wire to power his tiny television and dirty hotplate. No mention of plumbing.

“Why’d you choose to set up shop way out here?” Monty had asked.

“The price was right,” Darry said, making a zero with his thumb and index finger.

“Had a supervisor who gave me the go ahead to park my trailer here.”

Monty wondered if the price wasn’t too steep yet.

Darry sensed the tacit criticism. “I like it here. Nobody to give me shit – except when Dickhead comes out. Can play my music as loud as I want.”

The benefit of screaming into the void was being able to scream and speak in the terse indoor voices civilization favored. There was that, Monty supposed.

“Ex didn’t care for it so much,” Darry said. “But fuck her, right?”

His expression belied his words. And his tone was too naked to carry the supposed good-natured gruffness that would have made the question hypothetical. Rather, it had the air of affirmation-seeking. Darry wanted the love of a woman, maybe any woman who would have him, any woman who would have this life. Monty didn’t have the heart to point out that the woman willing to squat behind the brush pile every day probably wouldn’t have

the delicateness of spirit necessary to tend to Darry's sweet but sensitive disposition. Then again, Monty sure as shit didn't know what made women fall in love with men. He couldn't explain how someone like Jen would ever be with someone like Barney. But there she was sitting on a lawn chair not three feet away, sipping shitty beer-lite, her ankle crossed over her knee, her dusty silver flats dangling from her toes. Sitting there, at least, until Barney got in her face and pulled her behind the camper to have it out with her.

"They're no good for each other," Darry says when they've gone. "Always fighting like two rattlesnakes in a cage."

"Agreed," Shep says. "So let's go to the bar – they hardly ever fight in public."

The echoes of the two voice burble over each other from the other side of the trailer.

"I can't leave Bill Cosby here. There's a live wire out here somewhere."

"Fine, you big pussy. Then we'll take him to Mom's. Promise you'll stop bitching then?"

"I haven't said shit."

"You're bitching right now."

"Fuck off."

"Still bitching."

Monty glares at his brother.

"Still bitching. With your eyes."

Jen and Barney come back around the trailer looking like it would be just fine with both of them if they never spoke another word to each other.

"It's settled," Shep calls cheerfully. "We're going to the bar."

Jen sits back in her chair, and resumes swishing her ankle back and forth so that her shoe waggles provocatively from her foot. “They got you, too,” she says with a mocking tone. “And here I thought you of all people would have my back.” And with that, Monty’s heart has fractured irreparably. This was her first ever reference to their practically antediluvian friendship.

Jen has moved on far more quickly than Monty ever will. “So which smokebox are you two jackasses dragging us to?” she asks.

“The House?” Barney suggests.

“The Wrench,” Shep says.

“The Wrench,” Barney agrees.

As far as Monty is concerned, the two are indistinguishable. Though he had only been back to his hometown less than a handful of times since he turned twenty-one, he had been in both shit-holes many, many times. Sleeper-based establishments did not strictly enforce the drinking age. In fact, it would seem that some hooch-purveyors saw themselves as a Charon-type character in one of manhood’s many rites of passage, a young man’s nerve being the coin that would grant him access. In other words: if you didn’t look or act too much like a goofball, you could score a sixer pretty easily. Loyalties to one of the two slop-houses divided Sleeper just as sharply as its railroad tracks, though never too sharply to keep a louse who had been kicked out of one from stumbling to the other. Titus had been a Bent Wrench man, as had Lanny, the cousins’ father. The two of them were known to crow that the Wrench offered an experience a mite classier than that offered by the Pour House. A total lack of supporting evidence to back this up was beside the point.

Both bars operated out of cinder-block shelled buildings with naught for windows but apertures where blocks had been taken out and replaced with wire-laced plexi. The Pour House was bigger, but the Bent Wrench had more parking. Drinks were cheaper at the Pour House, but they wouldn't let a man run a tab. The Bent Wrench only had one pool table, as opposed to the competition's two, but it had two exits to the Pour House's one – a crucial distinction to a people whose compromising habits made the backdoor the method of choice for coming and going. Also exceedingly important to those with the rat's keen instinct for self-preservation, the drive to avoid being cornered at all costs, the urge to bolt whenever a situation felt too heavy.

Bill Cosby comes out of nowhere, galloping across the field full-tilt, gait smooth enough to balance a beer on his back. He gets catty-wompus only when he approaches close enough to be inexplicably jazzed about reuniting with his best friend. Monty worries that he's about to be bowled over, but the dog skids to a stop, spraying a cloud of dust and a few pebbles at Monty. The dog's tongue is an impossibly large pendulum, lolling from his mouth. It is covered in a patina of fine dust.

“You have some water for him?” Monty asks.

Darry just twiddles a beer can between his fingers. “Only what's in here,” he says.

Before the implied suggestion to get his dog drunk – something that is not happening – can gain any momentum, Bill Cosby shuffles around the fireplace and lifts his leg to urinate on the last of the smoking embers.

“He just beat me to it,” Darry says.

“You better keep your pinprick dick in your pants around my woman,” Barney warns.

“That goes for all of you.”

Monty wonders whether he was the target of Barney's glare for half a beat longer than anyone else.

"I sure hope to high hell that it's not me you're referring to as if I'm a piece of goddamned property," Jen says.

Barney seems to have realized that he has taken his tough-guy act too far, and for a moment he looks sheepish. But he's unwilling to back down all the way in front of other men. He attempts to sound genial, saying, "Baby, God should have stamped a 'SOLD' sign across your ass when you were born."

"Baby," Jen retorts with real venom in her tone, "you couldn't afford the down payment."

Barney goes red. Red even when compared to his perpetually flushed complexion. He and his brother are red-heads, the type with burnt-orange manes that bleach almost to the point of whiteness in the sunny months, the type who are perpetually sunburned even in the overcast ones.

"And," Jen starts up again, "I'd damn sure appreciate it if you took your own advice, as pertains to your pinprick dick."

It must be hell to be Barney, to be punching so far above your weight in this life. Always trying to justify the excess bounty you've received just to keep from feeling guilty about it, just to keep the knee-locking terror of knowing that it all could, and probably should, be gone in the snap of the fingers. To feel so locked into a persona of bombastic masculinity that is so clearly ill-fitting. It's almost enough to pity the guy. And Monty would, except he can't forget that Barney isn't just an asshole, he's a damn lucky asshole. Not only does he have the love of a woman whom he doesn't deserve, but he also has a nice

shiny Chevy, the payments of which cannot be fully explained by his straight job as a hack at the county jail. His alternative streams of income should have landed him behind the very bars he so reveres. Barney had a knack for coming up with quick-money schemes, and a knack for recruiting his brother to play the fall guy. And those schemes were often ethically and logically questionable, and nearly always ran afoul of the law. At present, it was murmured amongst family members that the boys were trying to get a bootlegging operation up off the ground, making them Naborly County's own Dukes. But even if true, making shine was not even the most interesting scheme the brothers had concocted. A few years back, Barney had dreamed up the idea for a mobile gasoline dispensary, and of course his younger brother had gotten the worst of it. Darry got sick from swallowing too much gas and passed out under a bus from their school district's fleet before they had even loaded up their first truck-bed of plastic red containers. Darry was once rabid for a few months after their impromptu animal-shelter-slash-pet-kidnapping business collapsed. He had also at one point been arrested, but not charged, for bringing a plastic drum full of vermin into the city proper in an attempt to jump start their extermination business. Through it all, though, Darry had managed to maintain a tenderness about him, an emotional openness that rendered him incapable of irony. Yet, as much warmth as Monty felt for his cousin, he always felt that Darry had cared for him even more, that Monty had never given back enough.

For all that, he was happy to be sitting in the front seat of his younger cousin's significantly older, crummier pick-up. A rap on the window jolts him out of his own head.

"In back," his brother barks through the glass.

Automatically, Monty scrambles over the bench seat to join Bill Cosby in the second row.

Once he's settled in his seat, Shep says, "You think I'm stupid enough to ride with those two when they're wound up like that? I'd be bleeding from the ears before we hit the city limit."

Monty watches the shiny truck jolt over the field, going too fast for off-road conditions. Reckless and stupid. He worries for Jen. He wishes she were in the backseat with him, a safe enough ride that neither of the boys in the front seat can be bothered to buckle their seatbelts.

"Goddamn she's a fine piece ass, though," Shep says. "I'd suck her shit through a straw if she'd let me."

"You're a sick fuck," Monty says without thinking.

"Spare me the self-righteousness," Shep says. "Do you and your wife fuck through a hole in a sheet or something?"

"In the dark," Darry says, piling on. And in this way, it becomes a game.

"No kissing," Shep adds.

"No touching."

"Save room for the Holy Ghost."

"Never to completion."

It goes on and on like this for most of the ride to town. Monty has never been particularly sensitive to the ribbing from his brother or cousins, but this line of insults strikes a little close to home. Their marital bed had grown cold, cold enough that his wife had started a clumsily veiled conversation with him to uncover whether he might be a closeted homosexual. Cold enough that several times she had threatened to leave. The threats usually scared Monty into performing diligently for a few weeks before the usual boudoir ennui

washed back over him. And he honestly didn't know what was wrong with him. The doctors, the urologists, had told him that there wasn't a medical issue. One had recommended procuring a ball-and-gag, a little prop that the doctor personally vouched for. Monty wondered whether he had simply aged into an old man between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two. He used to get denim-punching boners all the time, at the worst times even, but now he would give a kidney to get to half-mast on the regular. And lately, it had been even worse. This particular cold spell was verging on legendary. Five months of absolutely no hanky-panky. He wondered if that had contributed to Audrey's adamancy that he make this trek, to get him out of the way so that she could bring in a hired groin to make her feel like a woman again.

When the truck turns the corner and his mom's little house on the edge of town comes into view, Monty is relieved. Bill Cosby begins to knock his nose against the window in anticipation. Monty's mother, Sandra, is a master of canine bribery and always has a handful of treats nearby. The wreckage of the family gathering from a few hours earlier – the post-funeral cook-out – can be seen all the way down the street. Cars still line the dirt road, likely belonging to family members who drank themselves to the point of being incapable of driving. These folks had likely either caught rides with someone else, probably down to one of the bars, or had wandered off the property into the surrounding woods and passed out. Empty cups and crushed cans studded the closely cut grass and well-tended hedges. Monty could even make out some unidentifiable detritus on the roof.

The boys know to find Sandra out back because that's where Bill Cosby bolts immediately after Shep opens the passenger-side door. Sure enough, the tough old bird is puttering around the backyard in a housedress, bending over to pick up a piece of trash with

dish-gloves on her hands, dragging a thick black trash bag behind her. She moves with a purpose. She looks like the person people run into right before telling their friends how they got fucked up by a woman in a housedress.

“Here to help?” she asks hopefully, though she knows better.

“Maybe the dog will pitch in,” Shep says. “We’re headed to the bar.”

Now, Sandra is not a font of emotion by any account, in fact her stolidity is only matched by her wry wit. She’s got the demeanor of a woman who has been through the wringer more than once, the carriage of a woman who is an expert at dealing or not dealing with issues as she sees fit. But she gets misty at this – before forcing herself to choke it back – and Monty thinks it’s at the thought of her oldest boy choosing to spend his last night on this planet in a poorly lit room with the town derelicts. Instead of with her. But, of course, he likely will be with family, surrounded by cousins of varying degrees. Any two people in Sleeper can probably find a common relation if they go far enough back.

“Spending your last night on the town. A Montgomery to the very end.”

This is as good as a rallying cry to Shep. Monty picks up on the insult. She does not direct this toward her youngest son, though. Not that Monty couldn’t use a little dose of reality himself, just that she really wants the two boys to reconnect before her oldest leaves this world, and Monty would get so sensitive from some gentle ribbing that he’d shut down, at least for the night.

She said as much when Monty got back into town Thursday night. He had barely walked through the door when his mother had shoved the two boys together around the dinner table, something that Monty would have resisted if he’d had any say in the matter because when Shep wasn’t too busy being an asshole, he was a real bummer. Even a simple

dinner with this modern triune family – mother, older brother, younger brother – was a somber affair. The difference in atmosphere when Shep was present was intangible yet palpable. That is, things looked and sounded much the same, but they felt entirely different, as though a filter had been attached to the overhead light to give an uncanny cast to everything. Now, Shep had never been particularly voluble, even when death was just a pixel on the horizon. For example, Monty remembered one particular vacation, on which they drove seventeen hours down to the tip of Florida, and on which nary a word was exchanged. But that had been, in Monty's memory, simply the result of having nothing to say and the ethos that if one has nothing to say, then perhaps one should say nothing. Now, at this dinner, the silence was more malevolent. Sandra's silence was not one of disinterest, but of disapproving interest, specifically, interest in Shep's lack of manners, the loud open-mouthed eating, the inability to keep sandwich fuselage on his plate, the utter dearth of pleases and thank yous. Small things that made Shep seem an ingrate, or, in Monty's eyes, revealed him to be the ingrate Monty had always assumed he was. Still, her darting, anxious glances belied her hope of sparking some connection between her two sons. She looked nearly feral from desperation. Monty, for his part, tended to revert to his adolescence, scarfing his food and seeking permission to take his leave. And this was a good night when compared to some of the dinners they'd shared in the past, back before the specter of death had worked as a sobering agent on Shep's hard-partying lifestyle. In those days, Shep was always either high or withdrawing. Dinner was worse off for it either way. All drugs, no matter whether they worked to speed him up or slow him down, ungraciously ripped away Shep's thin veneer of civility. Amped up or chilled out, his resentment drove the bus and he would lash out either angrily or passively at their mother for favoring her youngest son.

Withdrawal took too much out of him, leaving him unable to muster the energy to argue. Instead, he would sit at the table trembling like an idiot, quiet except for the errant scratching of fork tines against his mother's good china. Then, before spearing anything, he might nod out and stupidly drool all over himself right there in his chair.

This most recent dinner, as usual, Shep ate sloppily, like a pig at the trough, spilling blobs of Russian dressing and clumps of sauerkraut everywhere. This, of course, was the greatest turn of events Bill Cosby could have ever anticipated. Instinct guided him to the sweet spot between Shep's feet and the dog nosed his thigh, rooting for anything that didn't quite make it all the way to the floor. Shep put his booted foot into Bill Cosby's flank with a thump.

"Hey," Monty barked. It was this, not the booting of a helpless canine that drew the impassive stare from his mother.

Shep responded to the rebuke with an insult. "You raised him too soft, and now he's ruined."

Monty, impelled to speak on behalf of the dog in part, and in part on behalf of himself, knowing that if he left his resentment unaired when his brother died, it would have no target and would burrow internally for the rest of his life, forever in want of a target.

"You owned one dog in your life."

"But a good dog. Wouldn't beg for a nickel."

"What happened to him?" Monty asked, baiting.

"Ran away from out by Lanny's property."

"No further questions."

Monty hoped they could return to the uncomfortable silence, but Shep put down his sandwich and pulled a piece of kraut from the corner of his mouth, setting it gently on the rim of his plate, letting it hang off enough just to touch the placemat below. “I forgot, you’re a bigshit lawyer now. Or some other type of professional asshole, anyway.”

Monty is not a lawyer; he works for lawyers as a Data-Creation Specialist. Or at least that is what the lawyers called him in the briefs they submitted to the courts. He would rather call himself an Intelligent Sampler. Monty is responsible for providing data to the statisticians who testify as experts in civil legal cases. Basically, his job is to take a complex world and break it down to easily measurable pieces, something people can wrap their minds around. It’s a big responsibility, and one, quite frankly, that had worn Monty quite thin (well, not literally). His name appeared in the evidentiary documents presented to the court, along with an affidavit that he signed attesting to the legitimacy of the data he had provided/created. This was sticky business. If he was clever enough, and ambitious enough, he could create data suitable for all kinds of sophisticated arithmetic, some of which would inevitably bend toward the case of the client (who were, an estimated 90% of the time, defendants rather than plaintiffs) of the lawyer who was Monty’s company’s client. These defendants were typically corporations. The better Monty performed at his job, the bigger the corporations that were the penultimate beneficiaries of his work. The ultimate beneficiaries were, of course, the corporations’ stakeholders (sometimes), the senior executives (often), and the lawyers (always). If he worked very, very hard for a very, very long time he would sample for Oil & Gas someday, which would make him very, very wealthy. Monty is entirely convinced that this is the way to go.

He has constructed many defenses of his choices in the time it took him to earn his Data Engineering degree (a very difficult, tedious degree to earn, it should be known) and put four years into Chicago Office (arguably second only to New York! – D.C. was a lateral move at best) of the Federal Information Board, a lesser-known agency but a potentially-lucrative one. And no, it was not the FBI; it was the FIB, which was completely different, though in Monty’s way of thinking no less important. It was a place that until recently had been regarded as one of the most stable employers of Data Engineers and Information Scientists, those people who worked their statistical chicanery on Monty’s pristine work. He had to qualify with “until recently” because certain recent rumblings about the federal government’s solvency implied that new legislation forcing a full divestment of stocks from the treasury’s assets may be just down the pipe. Nobody he had talked to was quite certain what kind of restructuring or reductions that might entail, or at least they weren’t willing to say as much within Monty’s earshot. The only rumors he had been able to sniff out said that state bar administrations might purchase stock of board offices local to their states. From there, Monty was able to deduce that such an outcome would require a major restructuring of the board, perhaps even reincorporation as a different, smaller entity. Odds were that even a major restructuring – perhaps especially on account of one – would require the stability provided by the presently-employed bureaucrats. Hell, Monty thought the legislation in and of itself was a long-shot. This Congress couldn’t pass a wet fart after binge-drinking burrito milkshakes, much less a bill in the embattled realm of the Federal Budget.

And even if – even if! – such a bill were to narrowly pass, *and* the federal government had to sell their shares in the FIB, not the FBI, thankfully, *and* that meant corporate reduction, *and* that meant position cuts, Monty was still probably safe. His direct superior (a

rotten son-of-a-bitch named Snively, who treated Monty like shit) and his superior's superior (a good guy, by all appearances besides a few unfavorable headlines in a local newspaper decades ago) had both made it clear to him on several occasions in the not-too-distant past that he was considered a rising star, perhaps even a potential Federal Excellence Award nominee, if he applied himself over the next few years. It was a fiercely competitive reward, but truly the ultimate badge of prestige in his industry. Mere nomination was top-line resume stuff, a career-maker, a ticket to the lecture and book circuits. Many winners were once-a-generation type thinkers.

Perhaps Monty's work was a little more modest than that, but he liked to think that he possessed a spiritual creativity that manifested itself in his work, if only subtly. Creating robust data sets in any number of walks of life required creativity and more than a little intellectual rigor. That was why Monty took such pride in his versatility. When most of his generation's Data Engineers were building very deep, very narrow specialties, he felt just as comfortable breaking down the burger-making process in a burgeoning regional fast-food chain to varying quantities of dollars and seconds, as he was to breaking down the construction of a man to quarks and leptons (he had taken a senior colloquium on quantum mechanics and coolly aced it). Though those deep-specialists often won awards, nimble thinkers were the ones who persisted in the popular lexicon. "No shit, Sherlock," for example. Or: a sarcastic "Way to go, Einstein!" Was it arrogant to aspire to such heights? Monty fruitlessly hopes that it isn't.

He certainly wouldn't be finding a receptive audience in his brother Shep, though. In response to Shep's insult, Monty called Bill Cosby to him, and relinquished the table to silence's suzerainty. He excused himself to the den, a wood-paneled room with rustic

wooden beams across the ceiling, a combination that gave the impression of a ski lodge. Monty always enjoyed the den for this reason, even though he hated skiing. He flipped on the television and set it to the news, something brainless. Bill Cosby lay down and scooted up against the love seat, across which Monty was strewn. After a moment, he heard the clinking of dishes, then his brother walked into the den and flopped down onto the big couch without a word, his presence likely at their mother's behest. Bill Cosby scooted to be a little snugger against the love seat. He lay on his belly, now alert, out of character for the dog that usually sprawled onto his side or back to rest, allowing him room to kick and stretch his legs and paws. It wouldn't be until later, after his mother had cleared the table and cleaned up the mess of cooking, that she would come down to console him, to pull him to the side and mediate, saying that Shep didn't mean what he said, that his big brother loved him, that his big brother had it hard. These little sidebars had become so commonplace in Monty's life that as she approaches him before they leave for the bar, he switching into a sort of autopilot mode where he doesn't really listen, just sort of maintaining a state of semi-alertness in case any unexpected keywords come up, which they do.

“Your wife called.”

Monty nods dumbly and then shakes his head to bring himself back to the present.

“You should give her a call back while the lines are up and running.”

The damn lines in this hillbilly haven were always cutting out, at least those lines that lead out of the county. Monty supposed that was how the locals liked it. They got all the outside contact they cared to get from their cable television, which had lines that seemed to never falter.

Darry and Shep are already heading back to the truck and Monty risks getting chastised if he delays them to call his wife. He's in no mood to catch any more shit about the state of their relationship, especially given how on-the-money their jokes have been thus far.

"I'll pop over to the gas station later and call from the payphone."

"She's really worried. She saw the funeral story made the national news. Your brother's kind of a big-time Hollywood guy now."

"He doesn't know that yet," Monty says. "So let's not tell him."

"It might work in his favor."

"Why is there a celebrity exemption in the contract?"

"You've just given up on this haven't you?"

Monty doesn't have a response for this. As far as he's concerned, his brother struck a bargain and the debt was about to be called. Legal and political wrangling hadn't even occurred to him before he got back into Sleeper. And even now, when certain such wheels were in motion, Monty considered this a matter of honor at its core. He believed that Shep should honor his deal.

Before Monty can suss out the right words to say, his mother ends the conversation by snapping at him. "Enjoy drinking yourself stupid on the last night of your brother's life." With that, she calls Bill Cosby after her and heads inside the house, presumably to feed him a handful of treats.

The three Montgomerys come into the Bent Wrench through the back. The screen door swings shut behind Monty with a bang and a rattle. The shock of transitioning from the streets of Sleeper to the inside of the bar is like an inverted flash-bang grenade. The senses are stupefied. The waning sunlight had tinted Main Street with a brassy glow. None of that sunlight survives in here. Two swaths of fluorescent lights track across the ceiling. And the meager light the fluorescent tubes could put out is hardly worth the bother and it is quickly swallowed up by the dense blanket of cigarette smoke. The smoke floods the sinuses just as completely as the john floods the ladies' room floor. The only odor able to pierce the veil is

the sharp scent of eighty-four unique varieties of body odor. The smell could ruin a hunting dog and its descendants.

The feeling is even more invasive for Monty. It is a gray noise beating out steadily to mark the shouts and grunts and chortles that echoed off the cinder block walls. It burrows into his flesh and lays eggs. The bar is already packed, Sunday night be damned. The excitement from earlier in the day must have whipped everyone into a frenzy. And everyone knows that with a frenzy comes an unquenchable thirst. But this place is more than just grimy. It's oppressive. There are far too many people for far too small a space. Monty for the life of him cannot picture how the tiny building can hold both the insatiable crowd and the sheer volume of fluids that they would imbibe. Space is at such a premium that the self-conscious inevitably fixate on the various encroachments to theirs that are threatening at any given time. Each time a stranger's jostle chips away at his personal space he feels the invasion as acutely as if a surgeon was fishing around for his gallbladder. But this place is more than just grimy and oppressive. It's hostile. The drinking and the excitement had turned the local folks' faces ugly, stuck in feral snarls. Aside from his amiable cousin Darry, nobody here looks willing to make a new friend

"Here's to Shep," Darry bellows, smashing his cup into Monty's.

"To Shep," someone else shouts. And for a brief moment, the phrase ripples through the bar until they erupt into a good-natured roar for Monty's brother. Shep takes it in stride, raising his own cup in mock tribute before knocking back his drink. Monty had never been cheered so unanimously in his life.

It becomes obvious that this is Shep's natural habitat. He is like a chimp who walks with a clumsy gait but becomes a wonder to behold once swinging up among the trees

branches. People come up to Shep to pay their respects, and he always has a joke or some good-natured ribbing at the ready so that each citizen has a hearty laugh before returning to the business of getting good and drunk. In another setting, he could pass for a congressman. This easy way of interacting with people has never come easy to Monty. He has always harbored too much natural suspicion: always doubting the motives of anyone who would want to talk to him, always doubting the value of what he might say. At best, he maintained an uneasy alliance with the world he came across, an unspoken agreement to do no harm and keep your distance, thank you very much. He finds himself angry at his brother for his stupid social grace. Of course his brother would be comfortable here. This was their father's natural habitat, the father that Shep knew infinitely better than Monty ever could. Decades ago, when Titus would take young Shep around to help with errands – this being after the accident, which had occurred when Shep was still a suckling infant – the Bent Wrench was a perennial pit-stop, the young boy being sent in with a couple of bucks to pay off a small wager or simply to bum a few smokes from the barflies. It was as routine as running into the gas station to grab a candy bar and soda. By the time Monty had come along, their father had deteriorated too far to drive, to even want to drive. Then the man up and died after only a handful of years. By the time Titus was done with Sandra, she had become a teetotaler and did her damndest to raise her youngest son in that fashion. And Monty, always wanting desperately to be a good boy, had tried to oblige her as best he could.

That particular combination, abstinent mother and doting son, was essentially enough to cement the social trajectory of the first eighteen years of Monty's life. Teenagers didn't have much to do around town. Underage drinking was a sport and the kids of Sleeper had a championship pedigree. Monty's great act of rebellion came when he was seventeen and

Sandra had some unavoidable business that took her out of town on a school night. It was his undeniable crush on a girl in his class, one of the few he imagined he had cultivated to distract him from his lust for Jen that had goaded him into action.

“I’m having a party,” he told her abruptly in the hallway between classes. It had been one of those brief moments when she was not surrounded by giggling girlfriends or strutting teenaged boys. The opportunity was rare enough that it overrode his natural cowardice in approaching the opposite sex.

She looked at him blankly. He did not know if he would survive the self-loathing and shame that would arise if she asked him who he was. It was a small school with the junior class numbering just under two hundred.

“Alcohol,” he uttered, perhaps in an attempt to stave off just such a question.

A few moments passed, forming a gaping chasm between Monty and his composure. Then, she smiled and said, “Okay. Pick me up later.”

Then she walked away, leaving the question unanswered as to whether she knew who the hell Monty was. Apparently, she did because word started spreading about a party at the Montgomery house. This may have worried Monty if he hadn’t been preoccupied with an altogether more pressing issue: securing transportation. He didn’t have a car, and until that very moment hadn’t even considered that he needed one. He walked to school and anywhere else that he wanted to be. Sleeper was small enough that one could blaze through it and most of its surrounding township in about ten minutes on a decent bicycle. In his small circle of friends, all as nerdy and dirt poor as him, he couldn’t find one who would borrow the family car and sublet it for a few hours. They were just as excited as him about the prospect of a

party and were unwilling to do anything that might lead their parents to ask too many questions. Monty had only one mode of recourse and the thought of it made him shudder.

“Borrow my truck?” Shep laughed at the request. “Hell no.”

“It’s for a girl.”

Shep smiled the mean smile reserved for his little brother, the one that came out when he had him on the ropes. “I see. What’ll you give me?”

“What do you want?”

He raised the beer can he was slugging from. “Hard to say. I have everything I want right here.”

“I’ve never asked you for anything. Don’t be a jerk.”

“That’s no way to talk to someone whose truck you want to borrow,” Shep said.

At this point in time, Shep was living in a house on the other side of town from Monty and his mother, sharing it with a rotating cast of friends who had a couple hundred bucks and needed a room to crash in. Thankfully, none of them were there in the mid-afternoon, likely working at some brand of menial labor, something Shep had been spared by virtue of his contract. Instead, on nice late-spring days like this one, he spent his afternoons sitting at the picnic table outside of the house, working diligently through a case of beer. Not sensing that daydrinking was something of which one should be ashamed, the picnic table was out in the front yard, about halfway to the street that ran into town. More than once, Sandra had received a call that her oldest son was passed out on the table or on the ground and that she should go by to check for a pulse. Now, Shep stood up to light a cigarette and walked away from the table, toward the road. Monty had no choice but to follow.

Without looking back, Shep asked, “Where you taking her?”

Despite spending most of the rest of the school day racking his brain for an alibi, he had come up with nothing particularly compelling.

“To see a movie.”

“Which movie?” Shep asked after pulling a sudden about-face. “I might want to see it my damn self.”

Monty hadn’t a clue as to what was playing at the local two-screen. He felt himself clam up.

“You’re not going to see a movie.”

Monty could only shake his head.

“You taking her to fuck out by the river?”

“God no,” Monty said, a surge of righteous indignity temporarily boosting his courage.

“You tell me what you’ve got planned or no truck. Lie to me again, no truck.”

Monty felt he had no choice but to come clean. For a moment, he thought he saw a flicker of pride in his brother’s eyes. For a moment, he had hope. Then his brother said, “No truck.”

Monty deflated.

“But I’ll tell you what,” Shep continued. “I’ll give you a lift. I want to check this girl out, anyway.”

In the most decent twenty minutes Shep had ever managed, he came through on his word only forcing Monty to suffer minor humiliations in the process – like sitting in the backseat alone while his date rode shotgun – and, most importantly, driving off instead of staying for the party. The real humiliation was for later, when fewer than a dozen of his

classmates showed, mostly just his crew of semi-geeks and Barney and Darry. They drank uncomfortably in near silence until a neighbor girl found her way over, already three-quarters smashed and proceeded to pass out on the floor and vomit while unconscious. The terrified boys gathered her up and between four of them carried her back to her house. They were in the process of debating whether to dump her in the lawn or on the doorstep when the floodlights crashed on and the girl's father came barreling out the door. The boys set her down as gently as they could manage while being scared plum witless and bolted back for Monty's, from which his date had already fled. But, alas, they had been identified, and no sooner had Sandra returned home the next day than their neighbor was banging on the door demanding blood. Before Sandra had even begun the sentencing portion of the trial, Monty felt as guilty as a naughty puppy and was prepared to meekly accept whatever punishment the court might prescribe. Thus ended the rebellion. Needless to say, he never spoke to his date again. And he tried hard to keep her name out of his head.

Now, in a low-grade panic Monty is jerking his head back and forth sweeping the bar for that cruelly dispassionate face.

"You find them?" Darry asks. He's looking for Barney, whose mug is nowhere to be found among the sea of vaguely familiar faces.

When Monty shakes his head, Darry shrugs. "Either fucking or fighting, I'm sure."

Two heavysset broad-shouldered men have surrounded Shep. Their backs are to Monty, but they have the cocksure postures of Montgomerys. He catches a partial profile of one that confirms which brand of relation they are: half-brothers. Strange that Monty has so many of them – and he has quite a few – given that he was raised as the only child in his home for most of his life. Titus had started early in the sowing of genetic oats, knocking up a

local girl with his first confirmed offspring: Jay Montgomery. On Shep's other flank was the youngest of the three Montgomerys Titus had foisted upon the same young girl: Ray. Titus injected some controversy into Ray's lineage by denying paternity, an unwitting joke whose punch-line Titus would never live to see – Ray is the spitting image. Two other boys, both younger than Ray but older than Shep, bore the Hipkind surname – Titus hadn't seen fit to marry their mother when he knocked her up – but it was common knowledge to whom the boys belonged, in the genetic sense at least. Life must have been difficult for those two. Hipkinds hated Montgomerys on principle, and it worked the other way around. And this was before Titus had disgraced one of their girls. Of course, Montgomerys hated lots of folks, Hipkinds not even most among them. That space was reserved for the Piggott family, though they were intermingled enough with the Hipkinds as to be considered two shoots from the same branch. Of course, thanks to Titus's dirty work, the same could be said of the Montgomerys. If all the rumors were to be believed, one could treble that number to arrive at Titus's total brood. Common sense dictated that at least one or two more young Tituses were running around in Sleeper.

Jay and Ray are nice guys. Relatively speaking. Jay in particular has always been kind to Monty, even though he has no particular reason to do so. In that way, he reminds Monty of Darry, though middle-aged, with dark hair, and even more of an alcoholic. A falling-down drunk at eleven a.m. type alcoholic. When Jay sees Monty, which is for the first time on this trip home and is the first time in a good while, he scoots over earnestly and offers a hearty handshake.

“How's things?” Jay asks. After a pause, he adds, “All things considered.”

Monty has always wished that he and Jay had something to talk about beyond banal chatter. In fact, Monty knows what he would like to talk about – Titus – but it has never really seemed appropriate. Jay knew Titus before the accident and had known him for more years in this world. It would seem that he would have some stories to tell that Monty had never heard. But it wasn't as simple as just asking. Chances were that Titus was just as tender a spot for Jay as it was for Monty, if not more so. That was definitely the case with Shep, at least. And, there was a good chance that Jay knew about as much as his younger half-sibling. Titus would have had to have been out of his life and on to the next batch by the time the guy was five. That brought up another issue: Titus didn't exactly leave their mother on good terms. Monty had snooped around and come up with the separation papers not too long ago. The grounds: cruel and inhuman treatment. That was mostly just antiquated legal jargon but not exactly an amicable parting of ways. And even beyond those major stumbling blocks, there was the issue of competition. The tacit competition for Titus's love that had long outlived the man himself. Jay, Tom, and Ray had gotten their old man's best years but the younger set of brothers had gotten his last. It was anyone's guess as to who came out ahead in that murky, jealous calculus.

So Monty has little more than a simple response to give. "All right."

"Me too," Jay says affably. He is drunk but he could definitely be drunker. "What are you drinking?" he asks. "I'll get you another one."

"I couldn't tell you. Someone shoved it into my hand."

"Good man. Let's toss back a couple shots."

This is what has always passed for bonding among this uneasy network of brothers: getting fucked up together. It managed to be simple and almost entirely ineffective in the

long haul. Any feelings of camaraderie that developed over the course of an evening was almost always nearly washed away the next day by the terrible flood of reality, regret, and a nasty motherfucking hangover. But maybe it didn't work that way with these men, whose physiology had to have been permanently altered by the omnipresence of mind-altering chemical agents.

All Jay has to do is hold up two fingers toward the bartender and two shot glasses of brown liquor are slapped down in front of him.

"To the old man," Jay says.

Monty swigs the rotgut whiskey and cannot get it down his throat quickly enough. Lit gasoline would provide a preferable drinking sensation. Jay's two mischievous fingers are up again.

"What do you think he would make of all this?" Jay asks.

It should have been a pretty simple question. What would a father think of his son selling off the back forty and dying without issue? But from the patchwork mosaic of his father that Monty had patched together from old stories, newspaper articles, and not a small amount of inference, no clear answer emerged. To put it charitably, Titus had a complicated system of morality. He was thrice a deadbeat as a husband and even a higher order of deadbeat dad. Though in truth, the man spent his last fifteen years drooling into beer cans thanks to a crushed skull, and there wasn't enough of his social security check to cover his medical bills, much less support children. But even before that, he had played fast and loose with ethics. Paying a retarded man to discharge a shotgun into the siding of the house of a judge who had the gall to convict him of criminal mischief. Leading the repo man on a ridiculous car chase before finally parking the vehicle and exiting peacefully. Right in the

path of an oncoming train. Enough trespassing convictions to amply footnote a dissertation on not giving a flying fuck about other people's property. And chronic pool hustling, a venial but not insignificant peccadillo. So what would this kind of guy say about taking twenty years of government money in exchange for a death that, due to the hard brand of Montgomery living, had as likely a chance of coming before the expiration date as not?

"Them's the breaks," Monty offers.

Jay nods. At this slight serious gesture, Monty is relieved. Apparently he wasn't so far off the mark as to cause offense.

"I can't be sure what that bastard would think – hell, nobody could – but I can sure as shit tell you what he'd do: he would fight like an ornery raccoon to the last. They'd have to send somebody out to shoot him."

This kind of randy tough talk has the benefit of paying a measure of tribute to the dearly departed while also reserving the appropriate amount of incorrigibility. In short, it is the right thing for the eldest known son to say about a man like Titus. And Monty thinks it's complete bullshit. Monty has always held a couple of beliefs about his father that he cannot substantiate but that he nonetheless believes with a furious stolidity. First, he knows that his father abused him as a child. That was probably casting too harsh a light on it, but it was true, he knows it. No, not hitting or choking or cussing out or anything that severe. His truth is a simpler, uglier one. In the image in his head, he was a baby, so young that he couldn't even hold up his own head or even focus his eyes very well. His father held him, sort of. More like Titus had laid the baby across his lap while his legs were kicked up in the recliner. A lit cigarette rested in the notch of a glass ashtray on the side table. Errant ashes and splashes of beer have glazed the surface with a sticky topcoat. A few other artifacts were

strewn across carelessly across the small table: a few empty beer cans, some opened prescription bottles, a red plastic ring, a pewter dragon figuring, and a splintered pencil. Sandra was doing chores, cleaning up after her men, trying to get something done while the baby was quiet. Titus would resent this imposition. He had a splitting headache, even worse than usual, and no tolerance for little kids and their grating high-pitched voices. Titus regarded Monty while taking a long drag from the cigarette. He flicked his ashes without looking. He put the cigarette back down on the ashtray. For a moment, he gathered up his infant son in his arms, holding the baby close to his shirtless chest. At this moment, when the baby is just burrowing into the warm flesh, he pinched the baby hard on the thigh, eliciting a drawn-out yawp. When Sandra bustled into the room with an alarmed expression on her face, Titus would just shrug and push the baby into her arms for maternal soothing. This happened more than once, Monty absolutely knows it, even though he has been told by developmental psychologists that he cannot know this. Yet he knows it.

The other thing he knows about Titus is that the man killed himself. He had heard Grandma Montgomery, may she rest in peace, tell the story of how she found him: cold, laying back on his bed with his feet on the floor, as if he had passed out while putting on his shoes and never recovered. He had seen the death certificate and its listed cause of death: heart failure. He didn't dispute either of those facts. He just thought that his old man, having grown sick of this eternally painful existence, took it upon himself to stop his heart. God knows that he had the means to do it. He hit regularly up five different doctors, taking each of them for as much as they would prescribe. And God bless Grandma Montgomery, but surely she wouldn't have allowed herself to even entertain such a notion. In fact, being the mother of four irascible young men, she probably had the presence of mind to clean up any

unpleasantness that might have been left behind before phoning the ambulance. See, there had been a fifth Montgomery brother, the youngest, Leo, who nobody really talked about because he died when he was fifteen. Gun cleaning accident. Shotgun to the stomach. Monty was no firearms expert, but he had a hard time imagining accidentally pulling the trigger of a twelve gauge when the barrel was jammed into one's stomach. It's possible. Implausible, Monty thinks, but possible. Just like it's possible Titus's heart went kaput when he was forty-six years old, just two weeks after Sandra had left him for good. Still, there was something to be said for going out on one's own terms, and Monty did recognize a grain of truth in the fact that Titus's absolute lack of regard for authority would make him a slippery target for euthanization.

"You think he'll turn himself in?" Jay asks.

Monty looks spots Shep, all the way across the bar now, holding court for a dozen other patrons.

"I doubt it," Monty concludes.

"Good man," Jay says. "What do you think they will do? People have been talking."

Of course they had. Once Reverend Billiken took to the airwaves decrying the enormity of the federal government's scheme, it became a national story. Billiken was a regular talking head on twenty-four hour news stations, and he had a congregation from coast-to-coast that tuned in on their radios and televisions to take in his broadcasted sermons. And the congregation was constantly growing. Monty figured it a product of the man's endless energy. They had only spoken a handful of times in the past two days, but he had the man pegged for a workaholic. You'd have to be if your healing-tent tour took you to Naborly County. So of course people were talking. The problem was that they probably

didn't know what they were talking about. The government hadn't addressed how it would deal with breaches, and it likely wouldn't. It would likely keep stonewalling the press until the public found another issue to twist their knickers. Monty felt certain the government wouldn't do anything beyond filing an injunction in court and seek reparations. That was how governments worked. They had mechanisms for these things, mechanisms that were designed to give them a huge advantage, mechanisms that they would fully leverage in times of duress. This government was no different. It was a slow, lumbering, paper-bound leviathan. That didn't stop people from assuming that the FBI was cutting off choke points on the roads in and out of town as they spoke, all in preparation of a burn-the-boats type raid. Or that the CIA was poisoning their water supply. Or that the DOD had nuclear warheads pointed right at Sleeper. In his line of work, Monty had learned that there is such a thing as too much data. Too much data was really only a problem because often a lot of the data is junk. Like these rumors. Like an artifact in a photograph or a hiss on a record, it would be best to not have that data in the first place. The next best thing would be to pretend that it doesn't exist. Ignore the artifact and block out the hiss. It's the only way to enjoy life.

Jay slugs his second shot and looks at the glass in front of Monty, bewildered that it is still filled with fluid. When he finds his voice, he says, "A few folks in the family are saying they've got it on good information that the feds hired a couple hit men, some local cops and deputies. Saying that they're going to get the reverend first, then your brother."

"That's literally insane," Monty says. "I haven't heard anyone say that."

"I'm not surprised. It's kind of a secret. They don't want the hit men to know that they know or something like that. I think it's a whole lot of bullshit myself."

“I’m not surprised they are keeping it a secret either. They don’t want everybody to know that they are fucked in the head.”

Monty’s a little loud, partly to be heard over the din, partly because he’s had a few drinks by now. He’s loud enough to be overheard by a drunk asshole from the county over who is looking for any excuse to impress the two girls he’s with. He steps up into Monty’s face, even towering over him a little.

“You just called me fucked in the head,” the drunk says.

“No,” Monty says. “I didn’t.”

“You sure as shit did, you fucking dork.”

Everybody nearby is silent, watching eagerly. Even Monty’s family members. He should be thinking of a comeback or an escape plan, but he instead counting prime numbers. Not one. Two. Three. Five. Seven. Nine.

“Why are you letting me call you a dork, dork? Do you like it? Is it because you want to suck my dick?”

Twenty-three. Twenty-five. Twenty-Nine.

“I think you need to ask my girls over there if it’s okay.” The two girls giggle.

Forty-three. Forty-seven.

“Go ahead. Ask them if you can suck my dick.”

Fifty-nine.

The drunk grabs Monty’s collar in a fist and pulls it tight. “I said to ask my girls if you could suck my dick.”

He looks the red-head right in the eyes. “Can I please stick my finger in your ass when we’re fucking later?”

The drunk doesn't even take a beat to grab the back of Monty's head and slam him face first into the bar. Monty's forehead makes the initial impact. At least this outright assault has managed to get Jay to step forward between the two.

The drunk holds up his hands and says, "It's all good." His brothers and cousins just the guy walk away.

Shep says, "I think the lesson here is to not wear a fucking collared shirt to the bar. A little bit of laughter is all that is needed to break the tension and send the bar back to homeostasis.

Monty now is glad to take that shot Jay forced upon him. He slams it and realizes immediately that he's about to vomit.

"Thanks for the shots," he says, even while Jay has his two fingers at attention yet again. "I've got to run and call my wife."

"You take care of that woman, now," Jay says. He probably means it. Rumor has it that he is a hopeless romantic, endlessly trying to win over the hearts of the local prostitutes he pays for company. Monty is not a romantic so he's happy that there are no prostitutes around while he's vomiting into the side of the building. He finishes his business and wanders over to the nearby gas station to take a whiz.

Monty is not the first Montgomery male to vomit onto the gravel behind the gas station, though he may be the first to vomit the entire way from the bar's exterior wall to the gravel behind the gas station. Judging by the scattered puddles of muck in this poorly-lit back lot, he seems to not have been the first to make the pilgrimage tonight. Puddled muck was just one of the detriments to doing business next door to the Bent Wrench. A humming orange light lit up the white-painted brick wall upon which Monty had placed his hand for support. Down the wall, he could see two-dimensional outlines of waist-high yellow ghosts. He casts his own specter against the wall. At a late enough hour, everything becomes a

urinal. Monty spits to clear out his mouth and heads around to the front of the building. The lights are on inside; the convenience store stays open twenty-four hours. A few drunks loll around in the shadows on the far side of the building. The phone is right next to the front door. It really inhibits privacy, but for the most part it keeps the phone from getting pissed on. Fair trade. He dials the collect call line, says his name, and then punches in his home number. His wife sounds tired on the other end of the line. The automated operator sounds bored. The two syllables of his own recorded voice sound a little sloppy. Then he can hear his end being unmuted.

“I was wondering when you’d get around to calling,” Audrey says.

“Sorry,” he says. He’s learned that unexplained apology is better than reasoned excuse.

“I know, I know,” she says. “There’s a lot going on. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Her voice begins to wash out with ‘you.’ This little dipping attenuation means the lines are struggling to stay connected.

“I really think I need to be there,” she continues.

Monty hates this idea, for reasons that make him both a good husband and a bad one. Sleeper is a popped cyst filled with quicksand. It’s an ugly thing that sucks you in. He wants his wife to be clear of this place, lest it taint her, too. Plus, she would feel compelled to do things to help out, and the family would abuse this kindness in true Montgomery fashion. Also, if she came, then she would be real. Monty had already betrayed her emotionally. At times, he felt like he was ready to go with Jen, just run off to some foreign land where they don’t speak the language and just survive by fucking and replenish fluids by drinking the

local brand of liquor. If she came, Jen would see her and forever have a concrete image in her head of “Monty’s wife.”

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

“I heard there were protests. The news said federal choppers had been spotted taking off from Virginia and Tennessee, said this was going to be a whole thing.”

“It’s all overblown.”

“There weren’t protests?”

“Nothing crazy, just some locals mixing it up with out-of-towners.”

“And—” —bzbzzt— “okay?”

“You’re cutting out.”

“If the lines go down and things get crazy, I won’t have any way of making sure you’re all right. I’m coming.”

“You really don’t need to.”

“Leaving right now.”

“It’s already dark.”

“Be there by morning.”

Any further protests on Monty’s part would be to a dead tone. That was that. Maybe this would be okay. Maybe it would even be good for them.

Funny that the news channels had called what took place earlier in the day outside of the funeral home “protests.” The only ideology behind the brief outburst of violence was insularity. Reverend Billiken’s flock had started trickling into town within two hours of the big radio broadcast the day prior. People noticed things like cars with out-of-state plates, especially since they always slowed to a crawl right at the railroad tracks to minimize the

jarring of the choppy surface. Locals had long given up on their vehicles' shocks. The influx didn't do much but fuel rumors about what horrors were in store for the small town, at least not until after the funeral let out, when the locals wanted nothing more than to get to their cars so they could get on to their next order of business, likely eating or drinking. But standing in the street outside of the funeral home, between the locals and the lot in which they had parked their cars, was a solid wall of out-of-towners, standing in solidarity for Shep's cause. A few locals managed to push through without much more than a nasty exchange of words and some half-hearted shoving, but when the county deputies tried to clear a path, it seemed that the gathered interpreted it as oppressive state action. As a group, they responded with chants. A few bold folks stepped up to curse in the deputies' faces. Now, not many local folks cared for the deputies of the Naborly County Sheriff's Department. In fact, for every kind word they could give you about them, they had two profanities. But these were *their* deputies. It was like a stranger calling your bitchy sister a bitch. It would not stand. Truth be told, most folks didn't even need that much provocation. Anxiety over a potential federal response, coupled with their suspicion of outsiders, had ratcheted up so that any outlet that presented itself was a good one. So there had been a fracas. A brief one. By the time Monty and Shep had finished receiving people at the altar and made their way outside, the whole mess was in full swing and it took another hour to get the out-of-towners cleared out to parts unknown. The hillbillies had made their point apparently because there didn't seem to be any outsiders wandering the streets. From what Monty had gathered from a chatty deputy, a few broken hands and jaws, some scrapes, bruises, and light concussions were there extent of the fallout. Nonetheless, when the reverend emerged behind Monty and Shep, he was immediately cuffed and taken away for

inciting a riot. Monty hadn't seen him since, not that he minded the absence all that much. The reverend had a way of talking to Monty that made him feel stupid, like he was just one of the other no-account schmoes milling around Sleeper.

Still, he would like an update. He dredges some loose change from the pockets of his jeans and drops them into the slot. His mother would have been glued to the television whenever she wasn't trying to clean up the catastrophe in the yard.

"Anything new?" he asks when she picks up. The difference in clarity between local and long-distance calls is staggering.

"Well, you know, fighter jets headed down from D.C. Tanks spotted on the highways. Just the usual. Oh, and your brother has been linked to a terrorist cell from Pakistan. And here I thought he just spent all of his time drinking next to his picnic table."

"Audrey's headed down," Monty tells her.

"Good. That reminds me," she says, "your cousin's girlfriend called here asking after you."

Monty has to take a breath to keep his voice from jumping up a register. "Really," he says with as much composure as he can muster.

"I raised you better than that, so I know I don't have to remind you how wildly inappropriate it is for an attached girl to be calling a married man."

Sandra wasn't particularly religious, but from time to time Monty remembered that her moral code was ripped straight from the most conservative parts of the Old Testament.

"I'm sure she's just looking for Barney," Monty says, hoping it isn't true.

"Mm-hmm," she grumbles back.

Monty doesn't have the gall to ask if Jen had left her phone number, so he simply tells his mother that he loves her and gets off the phone. He just stands there, next to the phone, for a moment. He's right there, next to the technology that would let him speak to Jen even though she might be a couple of miles away. Somehow, his forebears have managed to thwart the laws of audiodynamics to make such a feat possible. Yet, because he doesn't have the right combination of numbers, he might as well be standing next to a tomato can on a string. There were only ten thousand possible combinations, fewer if he eliminated the numbers he knew belonged to other folks. Maybe, he would get lucky. But alas, he does not have enough change to dial even the first number. He considers stepping into the convenience store to get a bottle of water to clear his head and to possibly break a bill for change, but he hears a ruckus coming from the Bent Wrench and knows that his brother is probably at the center of it.

A tangled mess of people are falling out of the front door and a steady stream of men are slinking out of the back. Monty is not in a big hurry to get in the middle of whatever is going down so he walks over. He does not run. By the time he arrives the mass of people has separated somewhat. A mob of Montgomerys and their loyal friends are spilling over into the street, separating Shep who is screaming an epithet-laden tirade from whoever he is screaming at. Jay and Ray are doing the heavy lifting here in holding Shep back. It looks to be an assortment of Piggotts and Hipskinds who have their backs to the wall of the bar. Somewhere in between them, Barney sits astride some poor bastard who is getting the absolute snot beaten out of him. This is literal, each crunch of the fist sends blood and mucus flying. Both sides seem content to let this little drama play out until it seems clear that Barney is not going to stop punching until he runs out of fists. At that point another cousin

pulls Barney off and tosses him toward the street. The Piggotts immediately swarm around their fallen comrade.

Monty sees Darry standing toward the rear of the crowd and heads over for the scoop.

“I could barely tell you what happened,” he says. “Barney came in hot.”

All Monty wants to do is ask about Jen, but he doesn’t. Not yet.

“He hadn’t finished his first beer when he heard that sorry motherfucker talking about how they should serve Shep up to the feds on a silver platter. And then he just lost it.”

“Where was Jen when all this went down?” Monty asks, no longer able to contain his curiosity.

Darry shrugs. “Barney came in alone.”

Shep, apparently having said all he has to say to the rival clan, comes up to them and slugs Monty in the arm. “Where the fuck were you?”

He doesn’t even wait for an answer. He is wired. Monty can see the whites all the way around his irises, and he doesn’t seem to blink. Shep is more animated than Monty has ever seen. All manner of physical tics seem to be afflicting his brother. One second he is punching his hand into his fist, and the next he’s scratching his scalp through his thinning hair. Yet he doesn’t seem rattled at all. Monty was mistaken before. This is Shep’s element: the moment immediately following the outbreak of chaos. This is where he has the mind of a great military tactician. His one true talent is, having committed a crime, not getting arrested (most of the time).

“We should get Barney out of here,” he says. “Before the cops come.”

Darry waves him off. “You think they’re going to give a shit about a little fight, with all this other stuff going on?”

“Besides,” he continues, “Barney is buddies with most of those guys anyway.”

Shep considers this. “But what if they arrest me? Like they did the reverend.”

Darry thinks on this, though he doesn’t look too concerned. “What do you want to do?” he asks.

“Let’s head to the park,” Shep says.

Shep was referring to a partially-cleared tract of land just south of Main Street. There is a ravine and a piss-ass river running through it. It had always been a popular place for high school kids with forties and spliffs.

Shep addresses Monty for the first time. He points to the gas station. “Grab a twelve pack and meet us there.” Shep does not offer to pay before walking off with Darry.

Inside the convenience store, Monty briefly considers buying the shittiest beer he can find, which, in this dump, is akin to trying to find the craziest person in a psych ward, but he realizes that he’ll have to drink some of this poison himself and so settles on an innocuous light beer.

Case in hand, he walks the railroad tracks away from Main Street toward the park. This was instinct for anyone who had been born and raised in Sleeper. The locus of Sleeper lay where the tracks crossed Main. The street ran east-west and the tracks were a straight shot north-south. When kids started feeling the urge to explore their geography, usually it started by following the tracks as far as they could in one direction. Monty, Barney, and Darry had been no different. Their big adventure had come a little more than a year after his father had died and just a few months before their father Lanny would get himself killed when his car ran out of gas on highway. He had allegedly been walking on the pavement in the middle of the road when he was struck by a passing motorist. Exactly who it was that

had hit him was never conclusively resolved. But despite the malicious presence of death, those days had been Monty's halcyon days, the interim period between those first five toxic years with his father and the crushing self-awareness that had rushed in with adolescence. It had been the weekend, one when Barney and Darry were with their father, per the custody agreement. On that weekend, the boys decided to steal their parents' eggs, stuff them into their respective backpacks, and ride their bikes toward the nicer houses in the outer part of the township. The rich people all lived north of town, around the reservoir, so it stood to reason that they should follow the tracks.

It seemed like a great plan, such a great plan in fact, that Barney took credit for it, even though it had been Monty who had initially mentioned the tracks, and the boys took off without any hesitation, but when they got a ways down the track, each of them began to wonder how far they would have to go to get to the reservoir, and each of them tried to avoid thinking about the ride back. The railroad ties were uneven and protruded a couple of inches out of the ground at minimum, meaning that riding on the track itself was painful and liable to destroy a bike. It wasn't any easier once they got away from town. The track was lined with loose gravel that kept giving away under their tires, causing them to slide to the base of the mound, where unmown grass was tall, sticky, and somehow robust enough to go through the skin and leave something like a papercut behind. So they just rolled their bikes alongside them as they walked the railroad ties. It was tiring work, especially in the midday heat. Darry was the first to cry. He stopped in the middle of the tracks, threw his bike down the mound into the grass, sat down to sob. He stayed there until Barney bullied him into walking down and getting his bike out of the grass. Darry plowed in and emerged with his two-wheeler and a slew of tiny cuts along his arms. The boys walked their bikes along the tracks

for a ways but hadn't come across as much as a cross street in what seemed like hours. They began to question whether they were heading the right way, whether they were the same pieces of railroad track, whether they should just give up the ghost. Of course, Barney was entirely unwilling to turn back, seeing as it had been his plan and all, so he marched them forward as though they were walking across Bataan. Darry even looked the part of POW, walking with his head down in a mope, his arms bearing the marks of some unseemly torture, his face that of a man who at the same time ashamed of and baffled as to how he had gotten into this particular situation.

Though all three boys would have preferred to just call it a day, none dared to be the one who spoke first, not even teary-eyed Darry. Instead they trudged along, dragging their useless bikes along the bumpy tracks.

"Man, it'd be nice if we could at least see a train," Darry moaned. These were the days before the massive regression back to cargo transport along the rail system.

"Shut the fuck up, lunchbox," Barney snapped.

"I'm tired," Darry complained. "I'm thirsty."

"He's got a point," Monty said. "We might be a zillion miles away, and we have to go back the same amount."

Barney stopped abruptly. He turned and Monty was surprised to see tears in his eyes. "You two always take the same side. What did I ever do to you that was so bad?"

As an adult, Monty probably would have said that it was simply his general dickish demeanor, but even then Barney's obvious pain seemed too harsh a penalty for such a petty crime. As penance, they followed him for a while longer without complaint. When a stalled out car at a crossroad presented itself, it was too irresistible a truce. So without a word, they

unloaded the entirety of their egg stash on the abandoned vehicle and began trudging back toward Sleeper.

The whole ordeal had seemed traumatic then, and when they finally made it back home, they limped on their sore legs with puffed out chests, like veterans who had just barely survived their final battle. Now, it was pretty funny. Any paper map would clearly show that the reservoir was only about three miles north of town. Even funnier, a half a mile in either direction the Blue Dot and Green Star highways flanked the tracks. Had they chosen the road, they could have pedaled up there in under twenty minutes. But railroad tracks held an allure for young boys, and grown men apparently, that was undeniable.

Monty clammers down the slope toward the shadows he sees movement in the park near the river. Nobody acknowledges his presence. It seems Shep and Darry are trying hard not to. Both are standing a few feet from Barney, looking at the dirt they are pushing back and forth with their shoes.

“Beer?” Monty asks.

Barney is the only one who looks up. Even under the sparse light of the new moon Monty can tell that his face is ashen.

“Are you fucking my girl?” Barney asks.

Monty is in the absurd situation of looking and feeling guilty of something he hasn't done. It would be a different question altogether if he had been asked “Would you fuck my girl?”

“I'm married, asshole,” he says in an attempt to regain the offensive

“Married men fuck other women all the time. It's practically a sport here. Don't dodge the question. Are you fucking my woman?”

“I shouldn’t have to answer your fucking question. I’m your goddamned cousin.
You’ve known me since forever –”

“ – I used to know you.”

“And I’m happily married. So fuck you for asking.”

“If you’re fucking her, I’ll kill you. I’m not joking, not even a little,” Barney says.

Barney doesn’t have the guts.

“I’m not fucking her. I’m not fingering her. I’m not eating her pussy. I’m not doing
shit.”

Barney looks mollified until Darry interjects, “I notice he didn’t say anything about
assplay.”

Monty, Barney, and Shep all respond simultaneously. “Shut the fuck up.”

“You’d better not be,” Barney warns. But the warning has lost its edge. The anger
has leaked from Barney’s visage and he is left with nothing more than an expression of
uncertainty.

“She’s a spiteful bitch. I figured she might have fucked you just to get back at me for
whatever she’s decided I’ve done. I guess she was satisfied with just stealing my truck.”

“What do you mean, stealing your truck?” Monty asks

“What I said. We were fighting at the gas pump. I went in to pay and came back out
to nothing.”

Monty feels like an asshole because he has so little room for sympathy when it comes
to Barney. And because his mind can’t help but flutter at the thought that he, Monty, was the
first person she called after a fight.

“So are you and her done?”

Barney’s lips form a straight line and he shakes his head. “Can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s pregnant, and I’m not an asshole.”

Darry cannot contain himself. “Wait a minute. She’s pregnant? When were you going to tell me?”

“Once I was ready for your fat ass to run and tell Ma and everybody else.”

“Wait a minute,” Shep says quietly. “You’re not an asshole?”

For a few seconds, the brothers actually make eye contact with smiles on their faces. It is a singular moment in time. It is short-lived because despair floods in. Jen is now biologically, categorically off-limits. There is a part of his brain – the part that operates on the basis of intelligence and not hormone – that tells him that he should be relieved.

“Not that kind of asshole,” Barney says.

“I’m going to be an uncle?” Darry asks. “This momentous occasion calls for a celebration. Let’s get shit-housed.”

“Well, I can get on board with that last part,” Barney says.

Monty rips a hole in the top of the case and extends it to his family. When each of them has popped the top of their drink, they toast Barney.

“To wild women,” Shep says.

“To my brother,” Darry adds.

“To the immutability of life,” Monty says.

He drinks his beer with purpose. He resents Barney for so many reasons right now. Most obviously, he despises his cousin for getting the girl of Monty’s dreams pregnant.

Through a simple act of sexual recklessness he has secured a mate. No matter what, those two will always have a connection. It's unfair that something so easy to do can have such lasting consequences. But on a deeper level, Monty is angry at his cousin for shaming him. Audrey wanted a baby. Well, that's not entirely true. One week she wanted a baby more than her next breath, and the next she was unwilling to make the commitment. *To what*, Monty hadn't the courage to ask. He suspected it wasn't the commitment to the child that concerned her. Still, thanks to her swings in attitude, they had been trying off and on for a year or so with no results. On the most fundamental level, that made Barney a better model of the species than him. That was perhaps the most unbearable part. Monty wants to lash out like a child, to lash out at Barney, at Jen, at Audrey, at Shep, at his dead father, and anyone who dared come into view. But Monty too reserved, too passive, for that kind of thing. Instead he lashes inward, at the only target worthy of his wrath: himself. He wants to have Jen. But she does not belong to him. Because she is a human being and not a piece of chattel. He can't have her the way he wants to have her. He wants unqualified possession of her. He can't shake the feeling that he deserves it. All of this is to say that his inner state is almost exactly like that of a three year-old whose treasured action figure has been snatched away. This is Monty at his worst. It is also him at his most honest. It is not lost on Monty that it perhaps follows that he is honestly the worst.

Monty clears his bottle and tosses it into the river. He starts another one.

"Way to show some initiative," Shep says.

Monty is jealous, and Barney is an asshole, but Shep deserves better than to have a spiteful brother tagging along for his last night on this earth. So Monty slows down and resolves to put Jen out of his mind, now and forever.

The Montgomery men follow the tracks back toward town, which takes them past the Pour House's back lot. Normally, there isn't much to see. It's not an inviting place, there behind the bar. There is the smooth back wall of the building, a gravel track too narrow to admit a full-width vehicle, and an open dumpster. The wooden fence that separates the stinking metal tub from the woods has somehow managed to persist through the years, even though it has always seemed a strong gust away from falling over. Neither the fence nor the dumpster have ever been so much as sprayed with a hose, and the odor of them both reach the men on the tracks before the sight. Sometimes, when the proprietor can be bothered, a

single naked bulb casts a yellow light over the small lot. More often, the area is pitch black, save for the glowing tips of cigarettes of those men whose senses of smell could no longer be offended by even a high-grade stench.

Tonight, a good deal more seems to be going on in the darkness. The burning embers from the smokes of a few bystanders encircle some type of commotion. Somebody is getting thumped pretty good, good enough to break up his yelping pleas. It's a strange type of beat down being given. None of the chaos attendant to a normal drunken brawl. Instead, it has the silence of malicious intentions.

The kind of silence and bad intentions Monty imagines his father and uncles shared when they set out to defend the family name or one of its womenfolk. One of Shep's favorite family yarns involved the latter, one of the younger sisters. Either Kathy or Jean. Which of them was beside the point. The point was that somebody had wronged one of them, and that somebody had been a Pugh, a family with some shared relations to the Piggotts, which meant that the offense – cheating or abuse, whichever was beside the point as well – could not stand. The four brothers – Bobby, Jules, Titus, and Lanny – rarely agreed about anything, but on these issues they stood as one. Even the normally level-headed Bobby demanded retribution. Titus led the charge down to the Pour House to yank that bastard Pugh off of his barstool, drag him outside, and throw him into the bed of the idling pick-up. From there it was off to the Baptist church, a place sure to be empty approaching midnight on a Saturday, a place where the cops wouldn't think to look, and most importantly a place to which they had access, given that their father, a devout carpenter, had built the damn thing in the first place and often volunteered his time to make repairs. Pugh must have been terrified when they through open those doors and he saw waiting for him at the altar a fifty gallon drum balanced

on end under a gently dangling noose. Monty imagined it being all business, the stripping him down, the getting him up there on that barrel and laying that rope on his shoulders like the laurels heaped upon a winner of some perverse sport. Even the playing around, the pretending to kick the barrel out from under him, would have been delivered straight. It wouldn't be until the next morning when they arrived mostly scrubbed up, mostly sobered up, and in their Sunday finest that they would laugh at the bare ass cheeks of the man who had been thoroughly humbled in front of their congregation before being cut down.

Though a point of pride for his brother, Montgomery finds this type of thing unsettling. And this distaste for ganging up to beat down is so deeply ingrained that he actually begins walking toward the altercation, yelling for the assailant to stop. Monty can't see shit, but from the ragged sounds of the victim's breath, it seems like the beating has stopped for the moment.

"Mind your own fucking business or it'll be you," a vaguely familiar voice says from the inner circle.

"Then you're going to have quite the goddamned mess on your hands, Jason," Shep says from behind Monty.

Jason. Jason Montgomery. One of Bobby's boys. There's no love lost between Titus's issue and Bobby's, but they sure as hell aren't going to throw down behind the bar, at least not over something like this. Not the night before Shep is supposed to die.

"Shit," Jason mutters. "I don't like this guy, Shep."

Monty naturally assumes Jason is talking about him. He's hurt but not surprised. It's as if an ancient but unspoken truth has finally been uncovered, and that the truth is exactly

what everyone suspected. Like when McDonald's teases a secret new food-item months in advance and it turns out to be a hamburger with special sauce.

"Who is it that you need seven guys to match up with?" Shep asks.

Monty is close enough now to see the target of this Montgomery branch's abuse: the right reverend, Kenneth Billiken. Automatically, he exhales every vestige of a breath from his lungs. All he can think is "what the fuck?"

"He's got this coming, Shep. Back off."

Shep ignores his cousin. "Jeffrey. Michael. Sam," he says. He greets the men, some family and some family friends, so coolly that he sounds like a home room teacher taking attendance.

Finally, Shep addresses Jason. "What, pray tell, did he do to you that warranted the Piggott treatment?"

This is Shep's show now. Monty's part is finished and he falls back in place between Barney and Darry, both of whom are calm but have the alertness of people who have caught a surprise rock in the side of the head before in similar situations. It's tough to get the drop on these guys anymore.

"He's a charlatan, for starters," Jason says.

It's at this moment that it all comes together for Monty. He understands why Jason and why now. In addition to being a mega-popular televangelist, the reverend also has a reputation as a faith healer. In fact, he had been in Naborly County on a healing-tent tour when the Montgomery men – Monty, Shep, Barney, and Darry – had approached him on Friday afternoon. But it had been at the funeral that Jason had first run into the purported

healer. Just before the funeral, actually, when Jason burst through the front door with his dad on a gurney.

“Gangway,” he shouted with no good humor in his voice.

Jason was a self-serious dour son of a bitch at all times, but especially when on a mission. It was here that the line of locals that had made it inside of the funeral parlor to receive the laying on of hands parted like the Red Sea. Monty had been talking to his mother who was sitting near the empty casket when Jason burst in. Their conversation, like all of those conversations around them, died with a catch in the throat. Monty made a gesture to excuse himself and started on his way toward the action, certain that he could mediate to a rational resolution. He caught sight of his uncle and felt his stomach drop. Bobby’s condition had worsened considerably over the last two days. It had been somewhere around four in the morning the day after Monty arrived when Sandra’s phone rang with the news that Bobby had been struck a glancing blow by passing motorist while out on his early morning walk. The impact had been enough to launch him a dozen yards into the road-side ditch where the paramedics had found him. The bastard that hit him had kept going, but at least had the decency to stop off at a pay phone and dial for an ambulance. So it was that before even six o’clock had arrived that he, Shep, and his mother found themselves inside the three-story community hospital. There, they encountered a group of familiar faces almost immediately. It was a scene from a night terror. The entire motley crew of cousins had made an appearance, and by all indications had taken over the main floor’s waiting room. Jen was absent, Monty noted. Montgomerys were on the floor, and dangling from chairs, baby Montgomerys crawling from place to place. Empty soda bottles were scattered across the floor and the unmistakable scent of cigarette smoke pervaded. The entire scene looked like

something that should have fallen under FEMA's jurisdiction or something from the secret, salacious life of carnies when not on the road. Kathy, the ever-harried younger sister, pushed through the rabble to greet them. She circled her arm around Sandra to escort her back to console Bobby's wife.

"Y'all go on up and see him," Kathy said to the boys.

Nobody could blame the lady at the check-in counter for looking harried. Her proximity to the quickly arising gypsy city in the waiting room not only exposed her to the various smells and sights typically forbidden by hospital decorum, but it also made her the de facto face of the hospital and, thus, the target of all situational frustration in need of venting by the Montgomery clan. And there was a great deal of frustration. On top of the worry over a beloved family member who had yet to regain consciousness, a number of aggravating circumstances beset the Montgomerys: the hospital, like all hospitals, being something of a mixture of a school and a jail, triggered the males' automatic distrust of authority and institution. This made them touchy and aggressive. And being dirt poor, a general condition of Montgomeryhood, they were quick to ferret out any freebies attendant to the visit. As such, the small supply room experienced a rash of soda and packaged peanut thefts before being locked by the supervising nurse. Finally, a general aversion to the written word meant that not a one of the waiting family members was quietly passing the time with a book or newspaper. The adults talked, fought, joked, and guffawed while the children built forts and wrestled and threw blocks at each other. Knowing that asking his relatives for Bobby's location and status would result in directions studded with vague landmarks and armchair diagnoses, Monty walked straight up to the receptionist, whose face belied a mixture of trepidation and optimism. Shep followed a few steps behind. Not only did Monty's shirt

have sleeves, but it also had a collar, which automatically made him a strong candidate for Montgomery family ambassador.

“Bobby Montgomery’s room number?” he asked.

She cast a glance at the mob. “You’re with them?” she said, hesitating before the last word.

“They been much trouble?”

“You know how situations like this can be,” she said with an edge of pleading in her voice. Monty wasn’t sure whether ‘situations like this’ meant awaiting the rousing of a comatose patient or the riotous atmosphere of a Montgomery family gathering.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Two-thirteen. That’s his room number.”

Monty thanked her, likely chalking up the first sentiment of gratitude directed toward the poor young woman. The brothers did not speak on the way up to Bobby’s room. Shep took a seat near Bobby’s head while Monty leaned against a window on the far side of the room. All manner of tubing and wiring wrapped around and penetrated into Bobby’s body. Bandages covered most of the wounds so that only a few scrapes were visible. Machines clicked and activated and deactivated. Pumps churned. A monitor near the bed dinged every now and then.

“He looks like shit,” Shep finally said.

“Yeah, looks real bad.”

The brothers waited in silence, unsure of what to do, sure only of the futility of speaking further, either to each other or to their uncle. Finally, mutually agreeing that enough time had passed, they headed back to the lobby. There they got a run-down of the damage, the worst being a broken hip, something that could be deadly to a man pushing

seventy. Aside from that, the family was pretty relieved with the broken ribs and wrist and with the collapsed lung. His head was fine. No bleeding, no swelling around the brain. Head trauma and heart disease were the biggest killers of Montgomery men, so the family could be excused for letting its guard down. But millions of other things can beset a body broken by trauma, and one of those millions seemed to have gotten its hooks into Bobby, who looked ashen and flaccid on his gurney. He looked like he definitely should not have been moved from the hospital. Nonetheless, Jason had taken his father and absconded to the funeral home and was intent on shoving the cart toward the reverend.

“Go,” he barked, once he reached the front of the line.

The reverend gave Jason a quizzical look.

“Heal. Fix. Whatever it is that you do, do it,” he said.

“Have you prayed over it?” the reverend asked calmly.

“Get real, preacher.”

“You underestimate the power of asking for what it is you want.”

“I just told you what I want.”

“Let me teach you how to pray.”

Everyone listening anxiously for the magic words.

“And then you’ll fix him?” Jason asked.

“I don’t fix anybody, son. The Lord does.”

“That’s not what the TV says. The news showed a guy what was blind since birth and you used that fancy knife and made him see with your blood.”

“I am a vessel. Nothing more.”

Jason was clearly exasperated with the exchange. He came for a solution, not a sermon. “Will you please help me? Or at least tell God to help me?”

Reverend Billiken reached out with his scarred hands and enveloped Bobby’s own limp hands. “Let’s pray together.”

The crowd hushed even further.

“Lord, Giver of All Things, Master of Masters, if you so will it, heal this man. Strike this malady from him at the cost of my own flesh, a payment I humbly submit.”

The reverend broke off in a stream of undecipherability. Not a man or woman in the room could tell whether it was Latin or some other mystical tongue. Those gathered sighed as one entity, disappointed at the inimitability of it. Then the reverend drew from under his robes his sacred blade, sharp of edge but the dull color of worn iron. The blade refused to reflect light like its general-issue steel brethren. It was unsettling. He pulled the blade across his upward-turned palm and viscous, scarlet blood began to puddle. With two fingers of the other hand, he pressed into the puddle. He raised his fingers up, blood running down to the folds of skin in between them, and he pressed them to Bobby’s forehead.

“It’s his hip that’s hurt, not his head,” Jason protested.

The reverend seemed not to hear, spreading his blood-covered fingers and resting them on Bobby’s eyelids. The bleeding palm he upturned over Bobby’s lips. The reverend spoke a few more words nobody understood and moved his palm under the hospital gown to Bobby’s chest, smearing a trail of blood across it, already beginning to brown as it dried. He held the palm there for a few moments and crossed Bobby’s forehead with one of his fingers. The reverend whispered a few words that into his ear and then went back to his lectern from which he pulled a dark towel that he used to clean the blood from his hands.

“That’s it?” Jason asked. “He’s fixed?”

“We shall see.”

Apparently, he had not been fixed, because now Jason has the reverend’s collar bunched up in one hand and that same scarlet blood all over the other one. Jason’s meaty fist is the only thing keeping the reverend upright. The reverend sees them through his tears and utters, “Oh, thank God.”

“Don’t count your chickens yet, preacher.”

“Let him go,” Shep says.

“Fuck off. Doctor says Pa has an infection now, might not last the night. You saw what preacher here did with is blood,” Jason says.

“I heard that you loaded him up in your filthy van against doctor’s orders. You ever think that might have done it?”

“No,” he says with a hitch. “I didn’t do this. He did this.”

He shakes the reverend for effect before letting go. The reverend collapses in a heap. Monty approaches and kneels next to him. He pats the reverend’s back as though the man of God were a child who had just skinned his knee for the first time. Meanwhile, Shep squares up with his cousin.

“No,” he says. “Some asshole driver did this. And when we find him, I’ll be right next to you and we’ll give him worse.”

“Your word?” Jason asks.

Shep nods. Jason slinks off back around to the front of the bar, and his entourage follows. The reverend tries to speak but has to clear his throat with several hacks before he can be heard.

“He’s related to you?” he asks in a hoarse voice.

“You’re lucky,” Monty says. “He’s one of the more reasonable ones.”

This possibility is almost enough to render the reverend unconscious. Now that Shep has seen his cousin off, he turns his attention to the reverend.

“Where are your blackshirts?” he asks.

“I’m afraid I was hit in the head,” the reverend says. “What is a blackshirt?”

“Your security guys.”

“Because they wear black shirts,” Darry clarifies.

The reverend nods and moves on.

“That driver. The one who hit your uncle. If you find him, you wouldn’t actually hurt him.”

“Don’t worry yourself about that, rev,” Shep says.

“They will never find him,” Monty offers, in hopes of making the beaten man feel better. “They never do.”

“Promise me you won’t hurt him,” the reverend says.

“If I live long enough to find him, you mean,” Shep challenges.

“Yes. If God grants you that much life, promise you won’t insult him by wasting it.”

“I’m not going to lie to a man of the cloth, rev.”

“You won’t make that promise then?” the reverend asks, thoroughly dispirited.

“You didn’t answer me before. What are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you. You and your brother. Your mother said I might find you at a local . . .” the reverend pauses looking for the right word – den of iniquity, lair of sin – before settling on, “watering hole.”

“You found me,” Shep says. “Just in time, I might add.”

Shep insists they go into the Pour House to talk, even though the reverend visibly shudders when he sees that barely-illuminated sign above the door. Monty can see the reverend steeling himself, telling himself that this is one of the trials God has set before him, as he gathers the strength to walk back through the door he was just dragged out of. The reverend’s expression is one of the girding of loins, not so different from his expression two days ago when he had fallen on the hot pavement while making his way to the prayer tent. Then as now, after having fallen, the reverend looked up to find Shep with an extended hand. The boys had been in such a position thanks to Barney. Everybody but Monty had a scheme on how to save Shep. This was Barney’s. It was a simple plan. Meet the reverend and convince him to help Shep. Barney hadn’t gotten much farther than that. Still, it was somewhat more sophisticated than Darry’s plan, which was to hide out at his place, where nobody would know to find them, until the whole thing blew over, maybe forever. Sandra’s idea was along the lines of Barney’s in that it involved securing the efforts of a third party – namely Monty – and relying on that party to make everything right. This faith in her youngest son caused Monty some regret for not having put any thought into his brother’s longevity. If Shep had a plan of his own, he was keeping it to himself.

Barney had fully executed his part of the plan by dragging Shep, Monty, and Darry to Drogo, Naborly’s county seat, where the reverend was to do his magic, and by shoving his way through the gathered crowd to secure them a space in the front row to witness the reverend’s approach to the tent from his tour bus. The reverend’s tumble had nothing to do with Barney, though he proudly crowed afterward that it had been divine affirmation that his plan was best. When the reverend looked up, something he saw in Shep’s face gave him

pause. It was here that Monty acted unconsciously. He reached out and grabbed the reverend's sleeve.

“My brother is going to die on Monday,” he said.

This was so far Monty's greatest contribution to his brother's effort, but he couldn't even say that he had intended to do anything. It had just happened. A horse puts the same amount of thought into swishing its tail at a fly. If time slowed for this moment, it immediately sped back up as three men in black suits were upon Monty. One landed a heavy chop on Monty's forearm to get him to release his grip on the reverend. The pain was unreal. It left Monty wondering if a single blow were capable of shattering both the ulna and the radius. Monty was grateful to the reverend for barking at his aides to halt, as he was just about to be slammed to the pavement by another of the hulking brutes.

“What do you mean, son?” the reverend asked Monty.

“Those contracts everybody is talking about coming due. My brother signed one and it's up on Monday.”

The reverend looked to Shep. “Is that true?”

Shep nodded.

“That would make you one of the first.”

Shep nodded again. “Signed up on day one.”

The reverend paused to consider this. The crowd around them began teeming with energy. These people had not been prepared to spend so long in the immediate vicinity of their idol. One of the aides whispered something into the reverend's ear.

“Come with me,” the reverend said to Shep. He looked to Monty. “You too.”

Monty had thought that Barney and Darry were going to start an all-out brawl when the aides prevented them from following. But they were obviously outgunned. The smallest aide had four inches and twenty pounds on Darry.

Making up for their prior exclusion, those two take the lead in the Pour House. They walk to a rear booth and evict two old men who are arguing with each other about something. These two old dolts are so liquor-soaked that they seem not to notice that they have been forcibly lifted out of their seats and propelled toward the bar. Barney slides in next to Shep, and Monty takes his seat next to the reverend. That leaves Darry to go snag a chair from one of the tables.

Even in the scant light of the bar, the reverend's injuries are obvious. His brow is swollen along the ridge and his lip is beyond split, it has been sundered.

"Smokes, rev," Shep says, "we need to get you some ice."

The reverend shakes them off. "My aides are trained in first aid. They'll fix me up when I return to the bus."

Shep looks around. "Your blackshirts might not need to be trained in first aid if they were to do a better job of not letting you get your ass kicked."

The reverend gives a weary look. "Tomorrow promises to be a long day, as does the next and the one after. I thought it best to have them sleep while they can."

"Dumb," Shep says.

"I never imagined somebody would . . ." he trails off, unable or unwilling to finish the thought aloud.

"It's a jungle in here, rev."

"It's worse than that," the reverend says.

Darry arrives back at the booth with not only a chair but also a pitcher of light-brown beer and four plastic cups stacked together, the rims of which are lodged between his teeth. He pours the beer and slides the cups to his brethren.

“I didn’t think you would want one,” he says sheepishly to the reverend.

“You were correct,” the reverend says.

“You said you had something to tell us,” Monty says.

“Go get the man some ice in a cup, dipshit,” Barney instructs his younger brother.

“It’s really not necessary.”

“It’s not a problem,” Barney says.

Off Darry goes. The four men sit quietly for a minute, listening to the bar noise. The clack of pool balls. The interminable clicking of cigarette lighters. Occasional whoops. The unmistakable guffaw of bullies coming from the bar, where Jason has now set up shop with his lackeys.

“I am conflicted,” the reverend finally says.

The boys wait for him to continue.

“I believe with all of my heart that what the government intends to do is a high sin. But the longer I remain here, the more I question our current course of action.”

“What are you saying, rev?”

“People are getting hurt. My flock. And now this,” he pauses. “I can’t help but wonder if God is trying to speak to me.”

“So you want to turn tail,” Shep says. In the space of a breath, he is riled. Not at the thought of fending for himself, Monty thinks, but at the perceived cowardice of this man across the table. “It’s amazing what a single ass-whopping will do to a man’s ideals.”

“I’m not worried about my own flesh,” the reverend says, “though I do think those men might have killed me.”

He pauses here. He can’t help it. He’s a practiced minister who speaks with rolling emphases and drawn-out pauses like it was second nature.

“I have a responsibility to my flock. I told these people to come, and they will stay unless I tell them to go. They have already been knocked around by your friendly neighbors. That will be nothing compared to what the National Guard will do.”

“They are calling in the Guard?” Monty asks. This is alarming news to him.

“I have heard that, yes. I have also heard that this isn’t even on the government’s radar. That they don’t have a response planned beyond the lawsuit.”

“Lawsuit, right,” Monty mumbles. “They’ll file on Monday?” he asks the reverend.

The reverend swings his head around to look Monty squarely in the eyes.

“Monday?” he says incredulously. “They filed months ago. Don’t tell me this is the first you’re hearing of it.”

Monty looks at Shep. Shep shrugs.

“I might have gotten a letter or two,” he says.

Monty is about to lay into Shep for keeping this quiet. Maybe, if Shep had told Monty about this when the letters arrived, Monty could have at least ensured that Shep had adequate representation. It’s also an absolute certainty that Shep has kept this from their mother, for she would have driven up to Chicago and crammed the paperwork down Monty’s throat, insisting he take the case himself despite the fact that Monty has never even stepped foot in a courtroom. Still, he did like to think of himself as something of an armchair lawyer. He read most of the briefs that used his work. Hell, he felt like he even understood most of it.

The legal system was a system just like anything else. It was a sort of argument assembly line. In go assumptions and evidence and conclusions, out comes the grandest argument of them all: that of the judge. Surely there wasn't much more to it than crafting a good argument. Perhaps he could take an initial stab at it. Right before turning it over to an official lawyer, of course.

"The point is," the reverend continues, "I'm not sure I want to take that chance. Do you want the blood of these people on your hands?"

"People make their own choices, Rev. Isn't there a free-will thing in the Bible that says that?"

"Indeed there is. But that doesn't absolve me, or anybody who wields the power of influence, from my responsibilities.

"What do you propose, reverend?" Monty asks.

Darry returns with the ice. The cubes have a brownish tinge to them due to the pervasive rust that cannot be scrubbed from Sleeper's water supply. The reverend ignores the cup.

"I am planning on holding a service at first light in the courtyard of your motel," he says to Shep.

Shep has a unique arrangement with the town's shadiest motel. Though all of the Chateau Pittoresque's tenants are more or less long-term situations, Shep has been leasing space there for almost a decade. Most of that time, he has been in one of the tiny one-room shacks that comprise the enterprise. Two years ago, though, Bubba, the owner, was forced to move his double-wide trailer onto the premises. Something in the tax code possessed him to

lease out part of his home to a tenant, and it was Shep to whom he reached out. The two built a makeshift wall dividing the trailer in half, and Shep moved in.

The Pit hadn't always been this way. Nearly eight-five years ago, a generous but cagey Frenchman complained to his second-generation wife every day for two consecutive weeks that they must leave the city.

“We are too old to deal with the heat of the city,” he grouched.

“We are too old to deal with its crime.”

“We are wealthy enough to retire. It's time for a vacation.”

Finally, she agreed, if he agreed to keep himself busy enough to not be a bother. So they bought a nice patch of land in a quiet lake town in which they had spent a long weekend. The lot was bigger than even the Frenchman had imagined.

“Large enough to run a hotel even,” he boasted.

As with all good boasts, exaggeration was present, but not much. On that nice-sized parcel, the Frenchman had been able to commission the construction of a modest motel of two buildings, one a four-unit roadhouse, the other a two-way split between the Innkeeper's Suite and the Guest Suite. As a re-energized man of wealth and vision, he had the units constructed from steel-reinforced concrete blocks, a newly available material that promised decades of durability over their wood counterparts.

The buildings looked pleasantly modern and, from the road, looked to be arranged like the arms of a man welcoming a guest into his home. The row of guest rooms lead directly away from the street and terminated with a small, shaded concrete pavilion that stretched to the suites, which themselves jutted off at a gentle angle to present the building's front to the street. In a nod to his mother tongue, he named it *Le Chateau Pittoresque*, “The

Quaint House.” Just as with the rest of Sleeper, the man quietly profited off of the steady tourism industry. For nearly fifteen years, he kept himself busy by cleaning and maintaining the guest rooms and hob-knobbing with customers, many of whom returned year after year. The woman was very happy because it kept her husband busy, which allowed her to pass her time attending to the world of the mind, ordering books in any of several languages and any genre under the sun and devouring them. Though business varied from season to season, the man always had enough to keep himself entertained, and enough to turn a nice little profit. But when their state got caught up in the panic of regional self-sufficiency, miles and miles of pristine forests and plains were laden with tons of steel. Locomotives now churned regularly through hamlets that had only recently achieved clean running water. Little places like Sleeper that traded on their seclusion were vivisected and left to writhe.

For the first few years after that, things were not great, but they were okay. But by then, even the perennial customers had fled for quieter destinations. The lady was miserable and the man was distraught. By now, he had grown accustomed to socializing with guests and felt very lonely. Perhaps that explained why he said yes a local no-account in his late twenties, who knocked on his door to ask whether he could sign a more long-term lease. Perhaps that was why a few months turned into eight years even after the young man had proven to be a shifty character.

After eight years, the man’s wife decided she could not bear to hear another story about stolen hand soaps from the guest units (which he should have stopped replacing years ago), and she died. The shifty tenant, now courting for a wife of his own, pounced on an opportunity that he recognized only through sheer instinct. He agreed to purchase the lot

from the Frenchman, who after all these years would repatriate to his home country. The Frenchman was never heard from again.

The motel's new owner did find that wife and manage to get her to squeeze out a couple of children, the first of whom turned out to be Bubba's father. Bubba's father spent his entire life in the Innkeeper's Suite, which had quickly expanded to include the guest suite. By the time he was ready to marry and get down to the business of making Bubba, his old man had moved out to a small patch of land on the lake, bought from years' worth of steady income from long-term rentals. An unsophisticated man with a handsome windfall, he simply rented the rooms out dirt cheap in order to keep them full. The rooms became pit stops for otherwise transient locals, the place to hunker down for a few months or years after wearing out his welcome on the sofas of friends and family. And now Bubba's father stayed behind to "keep an eye on things" from the Innkeeper's Suite with his new family. This remained the arrangement for five years, until Bubba's father inherited the place in full. He didn't do much in the twenty years between the inheritance and his own death aside from letting the place deteriorate. When Bubba inherited the place eight years ago, it was already most of the way toward being the dump that it is today.

Bubba used no system of accounting and made no paper agreements. He had a bank account grudgingly, simply because he could not trust his neighbors. So it was no surprise that he bought a nice little double-wide in the local trailer park the same day that his account had accumulated enough to make a down payment. And it was even less of a surprise failed to pay his lot fees. He had been forced to lease out the Innkeeper's Suite simply to make the trailer payment. When he was finally evicted, he hired one of Bobby's sons to move his trailer back to his birthright. After renting space and electrical hookups to a couple of other

trailer folks unable to swing it in the big league trailer park, the Chateau had become the Pit, Sleeper's own take on skid row. This is where the reverend hopes to make his stand.

“My team has informed the local news stations, so we can expect a strong media turnout. Once the flock has gathered, I will perform a final service before sending them away.”

“So that's it?” Shep asks. “Game over?”

“My team and I will remain behind. For now.”

With this, the reverend excuses himself and walks toward the bar's exit, careful to avoid making eye contact with Jason, who stares after him.

“So tell me about this lawsuit,” Monty says.

Montgomery men are a sensory-driven breed of man. They experience the world through sight, smell, and touch. Food is to be tasted. Fine women are to be fucked. And the truth is to be told, not read. These men do not read instruction manuals. They do not send letters. A bill is due only when a collector shows up at the door. A warrant is only real when a deputy does the same.

Monty, of course, is different, perhaps in this way more than any other. He has always concerned himself with grades and diplomas. His work consists entirely of translating the real world on to paper. He reads instruction manuals. He reads instructions

for things that he has no intention of doing. And occasionally, he writes a letter. Usually, he writes a letter to complain about a company's product or to do his part in influencing his congressional representatives.

His greatest accomplishment, if he may be so bold, is the thesis he submitted and defended for his Data Engineering degree. *The Broad Applicability of the Metric Equivalency Model*. A radical argument, all original work, that seemed to sum up Monty's life philosophy, namely that absolutely anything could be understood in terms of numbers so long as the engineer took care in assigning metrics and in collecting a valid sample set. He had received a perfect one hundred on both the document and the defense, both of which comprised the whole of his intellectual *bone fides*.

He has also written a letter to his brother. He did this upon the advice of a therapist. He carries it around with him at all times. This too at the advice of said therapist. The point is not to give the letter to his brother. The point was to write it, to express his anger in concrete terms, and to always keep it on his person. The therapist promised that if he did this, the right circumstances would present themselves for its destruction, that he should then treat that destruction as a ritual, a kind of rite of passage, that following its destruction he would feel some kind of release. No such circumstances have presented themselves going on four months now. He had hoped that they would immediately upon his return to Sleeper. Often, the letter, the envelope folded in half in his back pocket, worn down to a consistency not unlike linen, weighs on him heavily. He can feel it threatening to tear away his back pocket. At other times, he forgets about it entirely. This is one of those times, for he has more paper in his arms than he can keep track of. When his brother said he had received a letter or two, he had vastly underestimated the government's paper dragon. Unopened mail

dominated Shep's trailer. It was stacked in corners. It was spread across the kitchen counters. It was stuffed under the couch. The place was an arson's dream. After a reasonably thorough scouring of Shep's trailer, Monty had gathered at least a dozen thick manila envelopes. They had been stacked so high in his arms that he almost had not noticed the handful of strange cars parked in the dark out in front of the motel. Now, he is carrying them in a stack around eighteen inches high, into his mother's house so that he can start making his way through the pile. Perhaps something would give him an idea of what would happen tomorrow. After the other three drop him off, they peel out like assholes, likely waking any sleeping neighbors, and tear off to their next destination.

Bill Cosby greets Monty at the door. His tail is wagging so hard he might take flight. His nails scrabble in excitement, trying to find purchase on the kitchen linoleum. Sandra is nowhere to be seen. Probably asleep already. She won't get up. She doesn't like to be around her boys when she knows they've been drinking. Monty heads back to his childhood bedroom and sets the documents on his night stand. A note is sitting under the lamp with seven numerals scratched across it. It is all he can do to keep himself from running to the phone. He dials the number. He gets just the voice he was hoping for.

"Hello?" she says.

"So you've had a pretty interesting night," Monty says. "How's the new truck?"

"He's mad, isn't he?"

"Insofar as he's capable of feeling human emotions, I'd say yes."

"Can we meet up to talk? Legionnaire's in a half hour, say?"

Monty agrees and hangs up the phone. The Legionnaire Club was an old dive out toward county's edge frequented mostly by ex-law enforcement and war veterans. An out-

of-the-way place that young folks occasionally went to for a burger but rarely to drink. Out round that way, they didn't put up with the same kind of ruckus they did downtown. And the club was of course steeped in Montgomery lore. Montgomerys were like the onion to Sleeper's stew. They had been there since damn near the beginning, and there was almost nothing in the latter that the former hadn't pervaded. Titus had been a fan of the Legionnaire, though he only dropped by on special occasions since he bristled against the relatively high sense of decorum around the place. And on special occasions, he was welcomed there. He was a veteran, after all. It didn't seem to Monty that his father had time to ship off with the Army between siring all those kids. And the old man's term consisted of a measly year and a half. Yet, he must have weaseled his way to an Honorable Discharge, because the Army saw fit to mark his grave with the official veteran's engraving. Shep was convinced the old man had driven tanks in 'Nam. Monty was convinced that Shep was pulling that out of his ass. Regardless, it was clear that when Titus came back from his service overseas, wherever that may have been, he had carried an even greater sense of entitlement. True, he was never much one to cop to authority, but a rash of speeding tickets in the mid-Sixties attested to his increased disregard.

Monty takes the county road at a leisurely pace. It's very dark as midnight approaches, very different from the perpetual sheen that sticks to Chicago's corners and crevices from all the light pollution. Here, the street lights barely work, when they're put up at all. And lots of things shift in the darkness out along these outlying roads: idiotic deer, stray cattle, rolling drunks who have ditched their cars somewhere along the drive home, and the deputies who lay in wait. None of these would have slowed Titus, the last least of all. It would have been this very road that Titus had sped along when he was pulled over for the

third time one summer night. That wouldn't have necessarily been damning in itself – Naborly's deputies weren't the keenest officers of the law when it came to paperwork. They preferred practical solutions like warnings and threats. So it would be conceivable that the deputy pulling Titus over for the third time would have been clueless about the other two stops. Except, this time, Titus had been stopped by Sheriff Abermarle himself, as he had been the first two times. Abermarle had been retired for the last twenty years, dead for the last ten of them. He had developed a reputation as a genial old sheriff. Folks called him Sheriff Granddaddy and they meant it to be taken as a compliment. He wasn't the kind of bully that fills out the ranks of so many law enforcement organizations. He was intent on being decent to people, while also looking out for them. But that didn't make him Santa Claus. Sometimes, it entailed being hard on folks. Folks like Titus. Especially after the first two traffic stops didn't work.

Titus had been drunk, the family story began. It began like this to elicit a laugh from whoever was doing the telling. Folks laughed at this or said things like "Of course he was," or "What's new?" or "And – don't tell me – was the sky blue?" The story started off with a joke and ended with one, with Titus paying a retarded kid to discharge a shotgun into the side of a judge's house. These were the family jokes.

So Titus was drunk. And he was driving. Which wasn't really as big of a deal back in the sixties. Deputies had a reputation of pulling over only the flagrantly impaired drivers and doing little more than issuing a directive to head straight home. Abermarle had done the same with Titus, twice. Yet Titus, apparently jonesing for the company of the fine folks at the Legionnaire Club, wasn't ready to go home, and he sure as shit wasn't going to let some crotchety old lawman give him a bedtime. So when he saw those flashers for the third time,

he had gotten angry more than anything else. Instead of pulling to the side of the road, he jammed on the gas and cruised like a missile toward his target. He didn't stop till he kicked up a cloud of gravel from the Legionnaire's parking lot. Even then, he refused to get out of the car or even roll down his window to address the sheriff. At least not until the sheriff went back to his cruiser to radio for backup. Then, Titus jaunted on into the bar and ordered himself a pitcher. When the sheriff dragged him out of there with the help of a few of the patrons, Titus cursed each and every one of them, vowed to get his revenge, though on that night only got himself a fat lip from an old Navy SEAL who didn't take kindly to that kind of insulting talk. And it was only the judge who refused to set bail until the following Monday – the only person involved in the process who wasn't an expert marksman, Monty had always noted – who got any type of comeuppance. After that, Titus only rarely worked up the nerve to return for a dinner with his family, and most of the other Montgomerys kept their distance.

That made it so that Monty walked through the front door with a few reservations, including that he would somehow be marked as a bad seed. But once inside, Monty realizes that nobody notices him at all. Except for Jen, who is tucked away in a corner booth all by herself. She waves him over with a smile. Maybe it is the family lore that imbues the place with such an electric charge. Maybe it is that he is meeting a beautiful woman to whom he is not married for the first time since he'd met his wife. Maybe it is because he senses himself treading in the footsteps of his old man, straddling the line between the man's ethics and the beast's desires. He feels for a moment an intimate connection with his father. Monty had always condemned his father's desire for flesh that had driven him from woman to woman. Yet, had that desire been kept in check, had Titus done the decent thing and stayed with the

first girl he had knocked up, Monty wouldn't be here, wouldn't ever have been anywhere.

This didn't make Titus right, but being right had never been the point.

Jen pats the spot on the booth's bench that is directly adjacent to her. As soon as he slides in, he is conscious of each beat of his heart, each one seeming to have a jarring echo. She leans toward him and speaks in a hushed tone.

"So? How did he seem?"

He could smell the mintiness of her toothpaste still lingering on her breath, the tangerine-scented shampoo, the spring-freshness-scented fabric softener she used on her sweater.

"Calmer than you would think," Monty says.

"That's not good," she says.

"How so?"

"He talks out of his ass all the time, but that's all it is. When he stops talking, that's when bad things happen."

"What are you saying?" he asks. "He hits you?"

"No. I mean, I think he would. If he got mad enough. But he hasn't. Yet."

Monty notices that she is patting her belly. She isn't showing at all, and Monty realizes that she doesn't know that he knows about the baby.

She continues. "He hits the stuff around me. Breaks stuff, you know? He likes to scare me."

Monty reacts to an urge and grabs her hands. They are cold so he rubs them with his thumbs. "Why would you want to be with somebody like that?" he asks.

She doesn't say anything right away, like maybe she's trying to figure out the answer. Finally, she says, "That's not him. That's him like two percent of the time. It's only when he's really angry. He can't help it that he gets like that. He had it hard. He took it hard when his dad died."

Monty wants to scream out in protest. Barney had been ten when Lanny died. Monty had been six when Titus croaked. For all the shitty things Monty had done in his life, he was and still is less of an asshole than his cousin.

Jen must sense this because she says, "Sorry. That's right. Your dad died, too."

Monty doesn't know how to respond. He doesn't know where to take the conversation. He doesn't want to dump on his cousin any more. He doesn't want to talk about his own father. What he wants, he thinks, is to talk about the baby. That she's pregnant with Barney's spawn makes him feel a little sick inside. That she hasn't said anything to him makes him feel a little angry. Then he gets a strange new feeling, a burgeoning masculinity, a need to protect this girl who is carrying the child of a man too volatile to be anything resembling a good father, a man who resembles Monty's own father too closely. And this child would be his blood, diluted as it may be. Jen, too, falls under the purview of family, he realized. He feels compelled to protect her and this coming child. Out of nowhere, she puts her hand on his arm.

"I don't want to go back to him," she says.

Now they are holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. Their heads are only a few inches away and the fresh smell of her breath makes his stomach churn with anticipation. They are so close and they are looking at each other baldly, no filters, no affectations. What happens next is a breach of the trust held between Monty and his wife,

but he isn't thinking about anything but these newly discovered feelings of masculinity, lineage, history, vulnerability, and heroism. What happens next is that he leans into her and gives her a hug. For an immeasurably small beat, she is rigid in his arms, but then she melts into him completely. He collapses into her, all this tension, pressure, buzzing around him now instead of inside of him. It is all he can do to not break down into a sobbing wretch. Instead he focuses on this feeling of a charge, the exchange of electrons between two bodies, a new chemical imprint on his brain creating a deep and permanent bond, one that plumbs at least as far as the he had ever felt with his wife when they were at their best. He has already been unfaithful when she kisses him. He has already given himself over completely to this woman. So even though she kisses him, he is more firmly mired in the wrong. If he has his way, he'll never not be kissing this girl.

But this is a feral brand of kissing of which the patrons of the Legionnaire Club disapprove. This is a young man's kissing. This is all of him rushing into her and all of her rushing into him. They must leave even though they have nowhere to go where they can be together. They are like teenagers in this way, and that is exciting in and of itself. So, like many teenagers of Sleeper before them, they drive. Jen slides into the passenger seat of Monty's sedan and they head east, away from Sleeper.

"If we were running away," Jen says, "where would we be going?"

Monty, too, has been pretending that they were headed out of this shit-ass county to start a new life without any of the complications of the old one. He's elated that this isn't merely a fiction in his head. It's still a fiction, but it's running through her mind as well. They share a half-assed dream between the two of them, which is more than can be said for a lot of people. If they were running away, they would literally be headed toward the ocean. It

sits waiting for them, still and massive, only a few hours down the road. They could make a life together in a tired little beach town, the economy of which would be driven primarily through the sales of alcohol and novelty tee shirts. Every spring, Monty would shovel away the sand that had piled up against the fence and the front of the house, returning it back to the beaches so that it can slowly build up again. He would take pleasure in the innocuous tedium of such a life because inside of his home he would have this woman for whom his feelings can be described in terms that are absolute.

But if he were to ascribe to the Montgomery doctrine for living, he should be headed west, deeper into the bowels of the South, where its antebellum ideals sit preserved, untouched by the transience inherent to coastal geography. Its mountains are weathered and rounded, but they are mountains nonetheless. To Arkansas. That is the rallying cry of the Montgomery man when he runs into trouble or into troubling ennui. In a way, that instinct was an empirical nod to circularity. Though Monty's generation had no tangible ties to the Ozarks, their parents had been born there, and Grandma and Grandpa Montgomery had spent most of their lives there before striking out east for undisclosed reasons. Monty's Montgomery instincts were more tempered than those of most of his cousins. His inclination to head into Arkansas started and ended with a trip to the county clerk's office in the region that his grandparents lived, a reconnaissance mission to retrieve vital documents that could help him further piece together a cohesive picture of his heritage. Maybe, if he were feeling adventurous, he would stop by a local library to peruse some old newspapers. The pull he felt was mostly intellectual, as opposed to those of his cousins who were drawn for reasons much more primal. It was as if on a very fundamental level, he was born into the role of outcast, even from his own family. He believed at his core that he was weak-kneed, well-

meaning, and dutifully courteous. Where his father, his brother, and his cousins saw the darkness of night as an opportunity for invisibility, he saw it as a thing to be feared. He always had. That was why he had feared it as a boy. After his dad had passed and his brother had into the Airstream trailer in the backyard, Monty and his mother had a house to themselves. Each night, he would read a story to his mother. This pleased her, and pleasing made him feel good. At story's end, when she was pulling the covers up to his ears to make sure he didn't get cold, he would try to talk with her, meaningless chatter that was less about conversation than about getting her to stay for as long as he could. Whether she humored him for five minutes or fifteen, she eventually always ended up padding down the hallway to the master bedroom at the other end of the house. The distance between them was untenable, dark and filled with plenty of places to hide for those who would harm him. Still, eternally desperate to be a Good Boy, he stayed in his own bed for as long as he could manage. He would only lay on his right side, where he would not have to turn his back on the door. He willed the open doorframe to stay empty, all the while growing more and more terrified that some creepy shape would shuffle in to occupy it. On a good night, he would worry himself unconscious for a few hours of restless sleep. Good night or bad, however, by the time midnight crept up, Monty would be in bed, awake and terribly alone. He could stand it no longer and would sneak as quietly as he could out of his room, careful to keep the springs of his bed and the loose floor boards from creaking. For a short time, his mother had let him into her bed. Then she forced him into a sleeping back on her floor. Then, worst of all, she began to close and lock her bedroom door, and no matter how desperately he pleaded, she would not open it. So it came to be that from the ages of seven to ten, he slept in that same sleeping bag on the living room couch, which offered the small solace of being able to see his

mother's closed door. That, at least, made him feel less alone. So did the sounds that came drifting in from his brother's trailer, muted though they were by the window panes and shut blinds. His brother stayed up late, drinking and carousing with friends, playing heavy metal at an obnoxious volume. This comforted Monty. Even more comforting was when the deputies would show up to calm things down. For those ten or fifteen minutes, the living room would be lit up by swirling red and blue nightlights. One night, the deputies showed up and they stayed for hours, flashers going the whole time. This night Monty remembered dipping in and out of sleep carelessly secure knowing that he had protection right outside of his window. In all other respects, it had been a terrible night for Montgomerys. One of the twins, Jules's boys, had stabbed a man to death in order to steal his guns, which he planned on selling to acquire cash so that he could buy his drug of choice. By the time the deputies had shown up at Shep's, the place from which seventeen year old Darwin had embarked before committing the murder, the cousin was well on his way to Arkansas with several underage girls, each of whom had offered differing accounts as to whether they had been kidnapped or simply coerced. But Arkansas was not a magical land of origin. Cops were waiting for Darwin and promptly arrested him and sent him back to Sleeper for trial. The conviction had been a major blow for the Montgomery reputation. Before they had been likened to horse thieves and backdoormen, but now they had to count a murderer among their ranks. Some, like Shep, did so proudly. Not because he endorsed the act of murder. But because it had been a Montgomery who had done it.

So heading east just feels right. It's the opposite direction. It's heading toward the future, not the past.

"Anywhere but here," Monty says to answer Jen's question.

“That’s where I want to go, too.”

They don’t make it that far. They barely make it another mile before Monty pulls the car off the road and onto a trail running alongside a fallow meadow. They follow the treeline until they are far enough from the road to avoid the notice of patrolling deputies. Their lips meet again and their hands roam each other’s torsos. They clamber into the backseat where Monty can press himself fully against her. He drives his hips between her open thighs. He continues to press against her, and time and again she yields with her hips, accepting his advances. He has never experienced atavism like this. For a period of minutes, he is finally outside of his own head, free from his thoughts. He still has some unconscious thread of decency, of civility, within him, though, as he can’t bring himself to unzip his pants so as to fully consummate this searing new love. Instead, they simulate the act until her entire body goes entirely taut before giving way to cascading trembles and his thrumming loins release in a wash of opiate pleasure. As he returns to his body, he wonders – briefly – if, somehow beyond the sharp feelings of hurt and betrayal, his wife wouldn’t be proud of him, of the masculinity he had just mustered. But with his flushed forehead pressed against Jen’s, he cannot stay out of the moment. He cannot help but listen as she regains her breath, as she pulls off his shirt and her own so that they can lay with their flesh against each other and feed off of the mutual warmth.

Monty awakens in the bed from his childhood sick from regret and overconsumption. He is not alone. His mother flits around the bedroom with a subtly purposeful noisiness. She had been a teacher up until two years ago, when she retired. Though several decades of dealing with insolent whelps had worn her out, she was still well-equipped to deal with hungover sons. If anything, her last few years on the job had forced her to become even craftier in asserting herself. The hard-nosed discipline that had been her calling card fell out of favor and drew her into conflict with the administration.

Shortly before her retirement, indeed perhaps contributing to it, she had been saddled with a particularly disrespectful class full of brats, kids whose only requirement during their hour-long period with her was to mix dough or chop carrots or some other simple domestic task and to do it quietly, and they couldn't even do that. The kids were all rotten, but the worst by far had been Johnny Mason, a brown-toothed acne-growing pustule who never had a nice thing to say to anybody. Half the time, he didn't show up to class, and those were Sandra's favorite days. And when he did come, he would sit at his countertop and stare at his cell-phone, not even pretending to complete the day's assigned work. But one day, crepe day, of all days, Johnny thought he'd participate. Maybe his phone was dead. Maybe he thought crepes were some kind of hallucinogen. But whatever the reason, Johnny Mason cracked his eggs into the mixing bowl and started making his batter.

The students made terrible crepes of course. The technique for a uniform, thin pastry was difficult enough on the proper equipment, and it was nearly impossible on the classroom ranges, some of which only worked on high-heat, some of which failed to work at all, and nearly impossible on the cheap griddles, warped from naïve students running the still-hot pan under cool water. The best of the students, the Suzy Buckwalthers and Antoinette Dunns, they ended up with slightly-thinner-than-normal pancakes. The rest of them ended up with scrambled Bisquick. The rest, that is, except for Johnny Mason, who upon screwing up his first attempt decided that crepes were not for him after all and that his lumpy, barely-mixed batter could be better used for coating the bottoms of girls' ponytails. And he would have succeeded had Sandra not been keeping an eye on him, out of curiosity if nothing else.

“Back to your station, John,” she commanded.

The little bastard waved her off with a dismissive hand gesture and continued creeping up behind none other than Suzy Buckwalther, a snitty little bitch herself, but miles less irritating than the Mason boy.

Sandra stood up and pointed at the boy. "I said get back to your station, John, or I'll be forced to call your dad." It was her typical line for putting the fear of God in boys. Even though schools were afraid to administer discipline, fathers were still whacking asses on the regular.

John stopped, the room went silent except for the occasional cut-off snicker and the hiss of open gas lines. Sandra remembered, too late, that John's father had killed himself some years ago. A glimmer of malice crossed Johnny's eyes and he said, "Well, I'm saying that you should shut the hell up, or I'll be forced to tell you what a cunt you are."

Even the gas lines sucked in their breath. Sandra did not have time to be taken aback, lest a mutiny accumulate. She had to seize him *before* the other children started laughing so that they would be laughing at him and not her. So she stomped over to him and grabbed his upper arm, jerking it just enough to make him drop his bowl, the contents of which spilled down the front of his pants.

"Looks like you had a little accident," she said, just loud enough for those nearby to hear. When she shut the door behind them to march him to the principal's office, she heard the whooping erupt from her classroom. Johnny did not resist, he having gotten in his piece and realizing how far across the line he had been.

Sandra had hoped that the incident would be enough to have Johnny Mason removed from her class, or at least suspended for a good while, and she felt vindicated when dour Mr. Silvestri cast his droopy eyes over Johnny Mason slumped in his seat and expressed how

disappointed he was. But before the next period was out, she was summoned back to the principal's office where she found Johnny Mason, still sitting in the same resigned posture, and the woman who had to be his mother, sitting in the seat adjacent, stiff-backed, head up and on a swivel, eyes looking to destroy. She took in Sandra's appearance like it was a burst of gamma rays and then turned to Silvestri and said, "Is this the bitch who humiliated my son in front of his peers?"

Sandra looked at Silvestri disbelievingly, but Silvestri's basset-hound expression could not be breached. "This is Mrs. Montgomery. She was the teacher involved in the incident today."

The word "incident" escalated Sandra's heartbeat. Incident implied things, bad things, things that ranged from gross misconduct to light pedophilia.

"I want this bitch fired."

"How many times are you going to let her call me a bitch?" Sandra asked.

Though Silvestri emanated resignation, he asked the boy's mother, "I would appreciate it if you would refer to Mrs. Montgomery by her name." Then he looked at Sandra. "I'm not going to fire you. Nor am I going to suspend you, but I will need to record a formal warning in your employment file."

Sandra was fit to be tied, put on a spit, and roasted. "For what?"

"For making inappropriate comments about the boy's father, for defacing his jeans, and for physically assaulting him."

"Assault? Defacing? He spilled his damn batter on his damn fool self, and if I hadn't grabbed his arm, he would have assaulted another student and just ruined her hair."

"Be that as it may, we'll need to record this incident in your file."

“And what about him,” Sandra spat.

“He will receive three days of on-campus suspension, during which time we will find a way for him to continue his home-ec coursework without physically attending your class. Now, is everybody satisfied?”

Sandra had not been satisfied. She had been insulted, enraged, made to feel powerless. And while she ground out another few years in the classroom, she had assiduously avoided confrontation, instead meting out what justice she could in her own way: ensuring the biggest pains in the ass had the worst equipment, that they were assigned the most arduous projects – churning butter being a personal favorite of hers, and, most of all, in her gradebook. In that way, she could get some satisfaction without raising enough of a profile to draw criticism.

This was the methodology she had started applying to her sons as well. Like, now, when she knows that her youngest is trying to sleep off a hangover, and she wants to express her disapproval without eliciting a confrontation. So she makes just enough noise shuffling papers and sliding open drawers to wake up her son, who had come in too late for respectable folks last night, but does not make enough noise to warrant any type of accusation from him. Were he to say anything, she could simply respond, if she even chose to respond, by saying that she wasn't going to rearrange her schedule just so he could sleep in. Monty is well-aware of what she is doing of course – invariably, on those few occasions when he had come home drunk in the past, she had found some reason to scoot around the bedroom first thing in the morning – but he is not prepared to allow her the satisfaction of a successful rousing, even though his entire head feels wobbly, his throat is gratingly dry, and the water glass on his nightstand is empty. She's gotten better, he thinks. In a deft stratagem, she had poured

out his water while he was sleeping. She is hunched over the computer desk, her rounded shoulders bobbing as she corrals any loose pens and paper clips into their appropriate stations. She turns and catches him looking, and he can't close his eyes quickly enough to feign sleep.

"It's about time you woke up," she says.

"What time is it?" he mumbles, unaware of whether those are the actual words that come out of his mouth.

"Almost five-thirty."

Not even three good hours of sleep. No wonder he can't find the wherewithal to get on top of his shame or even tease out where things currently stand with Jen, his wife, his brother, or his cousin.

"Get moving," she says. "We've got to head over to your brother's place."

Monty wants to ask why now if the reverend's address isn't going to be for a few hours, but he knows better. He just wants some water and to figure out exactly how fucked his life is.

"What are all those?" his mother asks, gesturing toward the stack of documents on his nightstand.

"Not sure yet," Monty says. "Haven't had a chance to go through them yet."

He's telling the truth, but she knows damn well what they are. She would have shuffled through them first thing. Monty casts one heavy-lidded eye toward the mountain of manilla envelopes. Fear shakes free the last vestiges of restful slumber. The pile belonged on the desk of an attorney, and a damn good one at that. It did not belong on the bedside table of a severely hung-over, self-loathing know-it-all. But it sits there canted to one side, and

Monty needs to figure out what to do with it. That question lingers in the air between him and his mother like an ethereal whisper. But the answer won't manifest itself. This, he supposes, is what it means to be struck dumb.

His mother's stern face softens in the silence. "Your brother pushed you pretty hard last night, didn't he?"

Monty thought he felt terrible before. No, *now* he feels terrible. All of that shame he had been denying burst through the dam, puddling in his gut. But he can't very well deny it. Instead, he forces a non-committal grunt.

"I'm hoping," Sandra says, "that he'll learn from this experience and slow down a little."

Maybe it's the hangover keeping his own Denial Defense System off-line, but he sees truly for the first time that his mother really has not considered the fact that Shep may die today. She has been counting on something happening, counting on her youngest son to make something happen if it came to that. It's in this loopy, painful state that Monty resolves to do something nice for his mother today. He has fucked up his marriage. He has fucked up his cousin's relationship. He has quite possibly screwed up an unborn baby's entire family life. He will do something good for his mother.

All of the coping mechanisms he had developed in the last few years of therapy – therapy he needed, mind you, because of his fucked up father, his fucked up brother, his always-enabling mother – they all are sheared from his mind, like chains struck away with a chisel. He had worked hard to develop and, finally, internalize a syllogism that made it possible for him to keep a remove between himself and all of the dysfunction awaiting him back in Sleeper.

It went like this:

He shouldn't think about things he can't control.

He can't control his brother's behavior or his mother's reaction.

He shouldn't think about his brother's behavior or his mother's reaction.

The logic of it was simple but unshakeable. It was easy to do this after a while, with lots of practice. He lived some nine hundred miles away from them. The phone lines weren't great. He had plenty of his own problems to worry about. Like his wife's dissatisfaction with the state of their marriage. He had a job that kept him occupied.

Now he realizes that the logic is still good, but one of the premises is faulty. Just because he can't control something doesn't mean he shouldn't think about it. What kind of person doesn't think about the people close to him? This logic has kept him functional day-to-day, but perhaps it has stripped him of his humanity. Perhaps it's that kind of thinking that led him to betray his wife and cousin.

No. That's a poor attempt at justifying. He likely won't be able to simply create an intellectual argument that will make this problem go away. He'll need to actually do something. Still, the problem will be there. But, for now, he has another problem: the problem of his brother's euthanization. This problem, too, requires doing. What it is he's to do, he's not sure yet, but he knows he'll do it, whatever it is. The first step, the hardest step, is getting out of bed without vomiting all over his mother's good linens.

He manages that much, at least.

He lurches blindly toward the kitchen. If it's before three o'clock in the afternoon, Sandra's got a pot of smoky black brewing. Monty needs that dark sludge to sluice away the acrid coat of stale beer on his tongue. He starts pawing through cupboards and drawers,

looking for something he can keep down. The old snack drawer had been recommissioned as a storage bin for bulk non-dairy creamer. It's jarring to see that, to be presented with such irrefutable evidence that he had been gone more than he had been home over the past few years, and that the people close to him had carried on just fine without him. A flash of anger presses in on Monty's chest and then is gone. He finds some staling crackers to cram into his mouth and does so huffily.

He's on a more even keel by the time he returns to the kitchen freshly scrubbed and dressed. He sets his briefcase on table and opens it. Just once, he'd love to be surprised with stacks of cash or kilos of cocaine bound tightly in clear wrapping. Once more, he's disappointed. He thumbs through the documents, not even reading them so much as absorbing a cold sense of dread from them. It's Monday morning, and he's not in his office, he realizes. He hasn't any idea when he'll be back. By not working through the weekend, he is already behind. There is sampling to be done, but it won't be done right now. He replaces his work documents with his brother's legal documents and snaps the case shut.

Just as he decides to grab one more cup of coffee, the front door swings open. Bill Cosby bounds in, his leash skittering across the linoleum behind him. Sandra follows him in without closing the door. The dog swings his head from side to side, beating a rhythm more impatient than even his tail. He whacks his head against Monty's hip a few times in loving approval before bolting away to find either a fresh bowl of water or an open toilet lid.

"It looked like he could use a walk," Sandra says.

They sneak out while the dog is still slaking its thirst with violent, resonant lapping.

It's strange riding in his sedan with his mother in shotgun, perhaps feeling some of the lingering warmth from Jen. The trip to the motel is less than a mile away but they have

to ditch the car before covering even half the ground. Monty still had no clue as to where the out-of-towners had receded last night, but he knew where they were now. Their cars line both sides of the two-lane road, taking up all of the narrow gravel shoulders and jutting out edgewise over the blacktop. Perhaps the remaining space was wide enough for one lane of traffic to pass through, but Monty doesn't want to take that chance. He particularly doesn't want to take the chance of being trapped in the middle of this aluminum gauntlet if the mob were for some reason thrown into chaos.

“You up for a walk?” he asks his mother.

“Are you?” she asks, her eyebrow cocked skeptically.

Monty pulls the idling car over to the shoulder, leaving a good thirty yards between him and the nearest vehicle. The air outside is damp with just a hint of coolness to it, a refreshing change of pace from the humid evening before and day that awaits. The sky is still pre-sunrise gray and it's too soon to tell whether the sun will burn the clouds away. Sandra is looking up.

“We could use the rain,” she says.

Monty appreciates her attempt at small talk, but he's too wrapped up in his sins from the night before, from the past few years, for him to engage. On top of that, it feels like his head contains a tightly coiled spring that is near ready to snap and his briefcase strap is digging into his clavicle, straining to support the weight of the government's claims against his brother. He expected it to be much lighter on the walk back. After he had passed off the papers to the reverend. He wonders which of his failings is more damning: the act of passion last night or the affected posture of neglect toward his mother for the past couple of years. Classic omission versus commission stuff, acute versus chronic, all of the necessary binaries

for a right solid mess. The kind of stuff Monty usually enjoyed teasing apart. When it wasn't pertaining directly to his own shortcomings as a decent human being, that was. Thing is, he knew what he owed his wife. The vows that he had made were as clear as the act that had reduced them to empty promises

What he owed his mother was not so easy to determine. On the one hand, she was the proximate cause to his entire existence. On the other hand, the mother-child relationship is necessarily not one based on reciprocity. Parents love harder, good ones at least. They disregard their own interests in hopes of furthering those of their children. But Sandra had exceeded even these standards, enough to make up for Titus's massive underperformance. Almost, at least. Despite Shep's frequently voice resentments toward Monty's more privileged childhood, Sandra had been operating at superhuman levels since Shep was an infant, since Titus had gotten his skull crushed. It must have been unimaginable to her that she would give birth to her first, greatest blessing and within the year have her husband reduced to a near invalid. Seven surgeries. Seven *long* surgeries, surgeries where the best doctors in the world – doctors from the Mayo Clinic, from internationally renowned trauma departments at the university hospital – set to the delicate work of putting Titus's skull back together. How many hours had she spent in hospital waiting rooms with a babe in her arms? How did she manage to nurse an always hungry baby while playing nursemaid to an always ornery husband? Monty didn't know because Sandra had never talked about it. She had never spoken of it as a burden that she was made to trudge through, nor had she spoken of it as the achievement in human resilience that it was. Instead, she silently stowed the weight of her own personal apocalypse and pressed on across the wasteland that was her home. And then what of the long recovery process? What about when the doctors had decided that there

was nothing left to be done besides numbing the man's head, add a measure of ease to his convalescence? What is a woman to do when her husband ingests the month's prescriptions and then some in the first week? When he swishes those pills down with the can of beer that the doctors order he never sip from again? That hell would have been nothing compared to the rest of the month, when Titus was in the perpetual grip of the worst headache imaginable *and* withdrawal from high-octane opiates. When any sound, even that normally treasured pattering of little feet, would send him on an incendiary tirade.

"Hey, little boy," he would say to his five year-old.

"Yes, daddy?" Shep would ask, basking in the attention from his old man, equal parts hopeful and afraid.

"Why don't you walk down to Grandpa's and ask him to give you some of his back medicine to bring back to me?"

"Doesn't he need it?"

"Just tell him I'll be very upset with you if you don't bring some home," Titus would say. "And I will be."

It wasn't as simple as just leaving him. For even though he was an unmitigated nightmare, it wasn't his fault, not really. When his brain had swelled up in the aftermath, the doctors told her, it had been damaged pretty badly. He wouldn't be stupid, necessarily, but a lot of the things that made him who he was would be gone. Those parts of the brain didn't work anymore. The parts that controlled impulses and emotions didn't work anymore either. And he would need help. He would need help putting on his shirt, finding his cigarettes, remembering the names of some of his younger nephews. In short, she had lost her husband

and gained a patient. What kind of woman would leave a man in such condition? What of her vows?

And then, just when she thought she could make it work, that she could manage this boy and this man – the man by hiding his medicine and doling it out regularly and weathering his verbal assaults, and the boy by giving him enough affection for the both of his parents – just then, she would find herself to be laden with another child. Eleven years down the line, her child only a scant few years away from being able to strike out on his own and shed this albatross of a home life, and now she would have to do it all over again. And now Shep was jealous of his baby brother who demanded so much time from the one person who was responsible for all of Shep’s emotional fulfillment, and he acted out with anger and with drugs. And Titus was more ornery than ever since there was now more of that infernal crying and even less money to go around. And then one of the two inciting instances would occur in Shep’s life, one of the two points where you could look back and say, “Right there is where the wheels came off.”

“Not surprised to see you here,” said Shep’s counselor in the first group meeting at the summer camp for boys with substance abuse issues.

“Me?” Shep asked.

“You are a Montgomery, correct? As in Titus Montgomery?”

“That’s my Dad,” Shep said with fierce pride.

“The same Titus Montgomery who got busted shoplifting cigarettes from the grocery store last month? They had to move the smokes behind a counter because of him.”

Here, Shep found out how irreconcilable pride and shame are, how they created a dissonance, and that you had to carry around that dissonance without a clue as to how to deal

with it. With every action, every interaction, here the grating sound created by the difference of those two chords, a nameless sound unlike either of its sources. It's not shame. It's not pride. It is something entirely different. And what hope do you have of dealing with that when you can't even give it a name? So Shep ran with it. Ran away with it, away from camp, and, later, away from the harshness of the world as presented to a sober person. And, in a way, he was ruined. In more ways than one, Titus had ruined him.

Sandra didn't have a choice then. It took Shep's breakdown to see that she had to get her remaining son, the one whose innocent face had yet to be permanently marred by disappointment, out of there. So she did.

She never expected Titus wouldn't last the month without her, couldn't even see it through until the divorce was finalized. Shep would never forgive her for it. And now that he was gone, the family could proceed with lionizing him, never considering what that implied about her and her choice. And she couldn't determine whether being an unwilling widow was worse than a divorcee.

She had lost so much because of Monty. And she had given up so much for him. Monty owes her a debt for this. The debt could easily be repaid by just living a good life, by not being scarred by those things that she had spared him. But Monty couldn't be unscarred, not entirely. He must find another way. How, for the life of him, he can't figure out.

Way in the background Monty hears a locomotive tear through the downtown strip with the muted menace of a distant summer storm. An altogether different type of rumbling issues from in between low-slung buildings and trailers. These foundationless hovels had been strewn across the hardpack clay to sit in a few rows next to the suite building, approximating the shape of a horseshoe, an arrangement that created a rough courtyard. For the entirety of the community's collective memory, the space had been a living pastoral of the poor, rural-adjacent subclass, entitled *Coexistence with Vacancy*. Convincingly empty despite the presence of an idler or two lounging and snoozing among the weather-beaten

picnic tables and semi-abandoned vehicles. Not a nickel to be found on the premises. But, since last night the courtyard had become jam-packed with people whose pockets bulged with change, devout listeners from other small towns in the reverend's broadcast footprint. People who lived along the margins, just this side of poor, just this side of country. Though modest in most settings, gathered like this in defense of their shared biblical interpretation, they were loud and easily incited.

Locals are beginning to see them as a nerve-frying presence, nobody more so than Shep's hotelier/wallmate/friend (in that order), Bubba. Unbelievably, Bubs is again tearing around the edges of the property on his golf cart, armed with a long, nail-tipped dowel for the spearing of garbage. Every story swapped at the local bars about the gathering of listeners found Bubba skittering through the grounds like a traumatized knight atop a spooked mare waging his doomed crusade against the mob's detritus. Monty agrees that his approach has something of a gallop to it.

"How's things?" Bubs says.

The way he sucks on his vowels like butterscotch candies makes him sound like an idiot. Monty cleansed himself of the local accent's hyper-syllabic clutches years ago. Bubs always reminds Monty to maintain a sense of gratitude about this.

"Not great, Bubs," Monty says.

Before he can warn not to ask, Bubs says, "Amen, brother. You know what I mean?"

No longer whipping around at the speed of electric-battery, Bubs must compensate for the lack of motion. He writhes in place, his pathos manifesting as Acute Degenerative Nervous System Disease.

"Must be contagious," Monty affirms.

“You do know what I mean?” Bubs asks. His gaze is intently vacillating between Monty and Sandra. He makes no move to say anything more.

“Christ, Bubs. Why don’t you just tell us what the fuck you mean?”

Sandra chides Monty with a well-practiced screech. A few of the visitors shoot Monty a glance of serious disapproval. Monty is tempted to give them a primer on the fossil record, but he’s trapped by the tractor beam of Bubba’s urgent stare.

“Amen,” Bubs says with a slow wink. He drags the tip of his thumb across his Adam’s apple with emphatic deliberation. Then he kicks his cart into gear and is off to spear another incursive foam cup.

Monty and his mother make eye contact in alarm.

“I do believe that man is going to kill someone,” Sandra says.

“Dead wrong,” Monty says. “I think he wants us to kill somebody.”

After a moment, Monty wonders aloud, “Who do you think the mark is?”

“I don’t know who that crazy man wants us to off, but I sure hope it’s your Uncle Bobby.”

Monty laughs, ninety percent sure that she is joking.

“That man – that *grown* man – decided to relieve himself in my woods yesterday. Not even in the woods. On the edge of the woods.”

Monty loves riling up his mother when she’s like this, struck angry either by the sudden recollection of a past misdeed or outraged by the obscenity regularly programmed for primetime cable television.

“A man has got to mark his territory, Ma.”

Sandra dresses Monty down entirely with one sharp look.

“You wouldn’t have that smile on your face,” she says, “if you knew that I only found his leavings because I caught Bill Cosby eating them.”

Now Sandra smiles. She lays it on him one more time. “And I couldn’t tell you what that man puts into his mouth, but I sure know I wouldn’t want *my* dog eating it.”

She waits a beat before putting the bullet in his brain. “Especially if my dog licked my face as much as Bill Cosby licks yours.”

Grasping at straws, Monty says, “How do you know it was Uncle Bobby? Maybe it was a polecat or a raccoon or something.”

Sandra snorts out a laugh. “Oh, I know,” she says.

Dozens of solid, dependable cars had been crammed onto the motel’s two acre lot. They would have surely spilled over into the neighboring lots were it not for the makeshift militias on border patrol. During the pilgrimage’s nascence, the Pit’s neighbors had been on their own. Sluggo Barron, owner of the permanently unfinished renovation next door, staked out his western border with a shotgun, a six-pack, his buck-skin slippers, and a lawn chair. That combination alone all but guaranteed an imminent flesh wound. Still, a quorum of local men had deemed security insufficient. The mere specter of vulnerability gifted dozens of disgruntled local men, mostly Sluggo’s cop and fire buddies, with an excuse to brazenly tote their pistols, rifles, and pump-action boomsticks. A few Montgomery men milled around the border as well, easily identified as kinsmen by their gait, a splayed-footed shuffle, wide-swinging elbows, and head jutted down and forward like the Fonz walking into a fierce gale. All of the natural-born Montgomerys inherited the same prosimian locomotion, and it was inescapable. Even Monty, who regularly scoffed at the uniformly atrocious posture of his relatives, would unknowingly slip into his natural stride if distracted enough.

As a general rule, Monty assiduously avoided guns. From his perspective, the absolute best-case scenario in any encounter involving a firearm was the one where nobody got shot. And Monty didn't exactly have "best-case scenario" luck, not even close. Monty's life was more like a collection of vignettes to be presented as the definitive answer to the ageless question, "What's the second-worst that could happen?" Conscious of this, Monty and his mother hew close to the outer walls of the buildings to avoid both the mob and the vigilante security force. Even then, Monty expects to catch a stray round with his frontal lobe at some point. Fortunately they arrive Shep's half of a double-wide, which was two-thirds the way around the horseshoe, without so much as a shrapnel-related injury. Here, though, the mob has spread to entirely encompass the trailer. Upon realizing that he will have to ford this stream of humanity, Monty feels an unnerving slash of fear. If the rest of the mob is rumbling like an oncoming train, this particular cross-section is shaking like a tank under mortar fire. Before diving in to the throng, Monty tells his mom to keep close. She grabs a fistful of shirt from Monty's shirt. They push into the mob and are absorbed into it immediately. Flesh, sweat, and pleated chinos press against Monty from every angle. He feels his mother's grip slip. He intends to wheel around and recover her but pain detonates from his orbital bone. Monty only stays on his feet because there is no room to collapse. He shakes his head in hopes of clearing the artifacts from his vision. Instead, the he finds that his right eye's cone of vision is quickly being blotted out. He scans the crowd wildly with his one good eye to find the anonymous fist that just crushed him. Everything is too fast, too disjointed, and he can't make sense of anything through the fog. He covers his head with his forearms and cowers behind them.

Then he remembers his mother. Without bringing down his arms, he pivots and squints through his good eye. Peeping from between his elbows, he sees his mother slap three red-faced men in a row. Each is stunned and unconsciously winces when she raises her open hand again. Monty does, too, as a conditioned reflex. She had only struck him a handful of times in his life, and not since his fifteenth birthday. Not at all coincidentally, he had not uttered the word “cunt” out loud since the very same birthday. That woman could swing a world-class palm. Shep, who has had a lot more experience with the business side of her hand, often said that fist or no, pound for pound, she threw the meanest right cross in Sleeper.

“Anyone else want to slap my ass?”

Apparently not. She grabs her son’s arm and hustles him through the rest of the way to the trailer steps. There, a couple of the reverend’s security men had managed to keep a little space around the trailer’s entrance. They smile back at Sandra as she breezes between them. She climbs the first trailer step and turns to examine her son’s eye.

“Oh, wow. You really got popped. How are you feeling? Okay?”

“I’m fine,” he says. “Jealous, if anything. You got to tag back the guy who got you.”

He’s bullshitting his mother now. Emasculated, without malice, by his mother – such a strange, but comforting, feeling.

“Well, I sure hope so. Odds are, it was one of them.”

Inside the trailer, Monty is greeted with the opaque funk of cigarette smoke and body odor. Since Shep was usually either asleep, drunk, or hungover, he didn’t air the place out much. He could not be bothered to open a curtain, much less an actual window. And since a musty old box fan had been charged with the too-big responsibility of conditioning the air for an entire half-trailer, things got dank in the summer. Now, with Barney, Darry, Shep, the

reverend, and two of his goons crammed into the small living room, the place is sweltering. No wonder Sandra heads straight toward the freezer in the little kitchenette adjoining the living room.

Even after a few days, it took Monty a moment to gird his loins before plunging into the hot, stinking mess. An improvement over his first visit, where he retched unproductively over the toilet in the unit's stall-sized bathroom that shot off to the right immediately upon entering. Thank Fortuna because immediately upon entering was exactly when he needed it. Of course, the toilet itself was the ouroboros of vomiting. A deep yellow patina coated most of the toilet rim and underside of the seat, guaranteed to knock loose any lunch one had left in his stomach. Now, Monty hardly dry heaves at all before making it to the living room, where he sees Barney for the first time since encountering Jen last night. The hangover, crowd, cold-cocking, and stench had distracted him from how uncomfortable he would be upon seeing his cousin. His focus was acute at the moment.

“Rev, I’m curious,” Barney says in a stage whisper, “do you find the word ‘faggot’ offensive?”

“Words aren’t offensive. It’s the intention behind the word, whether it’s being used in love or in hate. Communication is a gift we sh—”

“Like if I said, ‘Look at this faggoty faggot here. What kind of fag—’”

Now Sandra cuts in. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Barney. Will you please shut that bottomless garbage pump of yours for once?” Then, ashamed, she says, “Sorry, reverend.”

“I think it needed to be said,” the reverend says with a smile.

“Well, then,” Sandra continues, “and just what in the hell is wrong with you, Shep?”

Barney starts to squirm with a retort, but Sandra uses her prescience as a former educator to anticipate and shut down Barney's intention with a quick chop of the palm in his direction.

"If I hear one more piece of trash come out of your mouth, Barney Montgomery, I'm going to open up this wastebasket and shove the first thing I find in your mouth."

Barney sits stiff-lipped. The other boys cannot resist prodding him.

"The very first thing?" Monty asks.

"She won't do it," Darry says. "Say something."

"Nah," Shep says, "he's too much of a candy ass to do it."

Sandra wheels on her oldest son again, the counter dividing the kitchenette from the living room never looking like less of an obstacle.

"I'm not done with you," she says.

While her attention is focused in front of her, Monty takes the opportunity to pantomime dropping his trousers and squeezing out a turd into the wastebasket. It was a crowd-pleaser. Even one of the security detail let loose a quick guffaw. Sandra pauses from chastising Shep so that she can shoot a look of absolutely murderous intent. Not poison murder. Not gun murder. Something more visceral, maybe knife or brass knuckles. Monty is just grateful only his imaginary pants were down or else Sandra might have spanked his bare ass then and there. She turns back to Shep and delivers the rest of her sermon.

"Honestly, Shep. And you don't have a single sack of vegetables in the freezer? And not even an ice cube tray?"

"You know, Ma, you're right," Shep says. "I really could use a cold drink right about now. I am getting nagged at something fierce."

“Laugh it up, you big three year-old. What happens if your brother’s eyeball bursts from all of the swelling?”

Monty laughs and says, “That’s not possible,” with great confidence.

Finally, the others in the trailer notice Monty’s dotted eye. The boys issue a few impressed whistles and hisses.

“You should see the other lady,” Barney says with a grin, though his confidence is belied by his glance darting between the garbage and Sandra.

“Not a scratch,” Darry says.

“Except for a touch of hypoglycemia,” Shep says. “Old ladies have trouble with their blood sugar.”

“Mom’s blood sugar is fine, thank you very much,” Monty says, getting in on the bit. He’s pretty satisfied with himself.

“You little shit,” Sandra says in mock outrage before walking over and giving her son a squeeze on the arm.

She’s a good mom, Monty thinks.

Sandra swings a fist at Monty’s hurt eye. The phantom pain of anticipation sends him stumbling backward into the wall. Sandra stands with her balled fist frozen in mid-air. Her eyes are wide enough to show the backs of her eyeballs.

“I swear to God, reverend, I didn’t hit him!”

The concussive force of their laughter rocks the walls of Shep’s half-trailer. This dingy little dwelling has become a place of great comfort, never mind that it’s filthy, noisome, and humid. Nothing about this partitioned sardine tin belies that it is a holding cell. Nothing indicates that this family is sitting with the condemned and his chaplain awaiting an

uncertain execution. The feeling is more reminiscent of a family gathering on a cold-weather holiday. Not the terse series of lapsing conversations that Monty brought his wife back to from time to time. Certainly not like the last Christmas he returned for. They had been young and optimistic then, on the cusp of their first miscarriage, excited to break the news to Sandra even though it was still early. While sharing their modest feast of salad, cocktail weenies, and an over-cooked tenderloin, they shared the secret they had been sitting on for seven weeks. Before Sandra's eyes could even start to get misty, Shep broke in with cruel mockery.

“Now I know exactly how stupid someone would have to be to bring a child into this world.”

Any attempt to bring up the topic again was dispatched similarly.

“Bet you're praying he doesn't turn out like me. You too, Ma, right?”

Soon enough, nobody challenged him, preferring to just wait out his presence. Sure enough, before Monty had even sliced his first gray cube from his meat course, Shep was out the door without a word.

“He's so disrespectful,” Sandra said.

He was. Always. The table hadn't been cleared yet when Shep returned. He was too fucked up to be simply drunk. He snarled incoherently and slammed a few doors violently before leaving again. The rancorous display was disturbing. All night, Monty lay awake, certain that if he slept, they would all be murdered by daybreak. Instead of snoozing, he visualized committing fratricide in as many ways as he could, so he wouldn't hesitate in case the deed needed to be done.

Lifetimes had passed in the four years since, and nobody was quite the same person they were then. The tenor of the room testifies to that. This feels like one of the scarce

Christmases with the whole Montgomery clan together, those few holidays Monty had seen before Titus and then Lanny died. Maybe like the first Christmas after Barney had learned to use the telephone, when he and Monty crank called 9-1-1 to a spectacular response. Or when they managed to smuggle a couple handfuls of sawdust from Grandpa's woodshop into Shep's mashed potatoes.

Those few years had been too brief, as is the feeling of good cheer in the trailer today. The half-unit's flimsy door rattles against the frame, and tension comes flushing back into the room. One of the reverend's men, the youngest member of his security detail by far, emerges and flashes a big smile to the reverend. His cheeks brighten under his patchy beard, showing off the vestiges of past battles with acne. He shoots the reverend a thumbs up and says, "We're all good to go."

The family eagerly awaits the details. The reverend senses the room's focus shifting to him, and clarifies, "Oh, my goodness, no. My young associate has simply convinced your neighbor Randall to vacate his place for a few days so that we can stop driving back and forth to the hotel."

Shep is suspicious. "Just a minute. Who in all of fuck is Randall?"

The reverend reaches up from his spot on the couch and raps his knuckles against the paneling that divides the two halves of the trailer.

"Go to hell," a muted voice shouts from the other side.

"Get fucked, Randy," Shep hollers back. He murmurs the name to himself a few times struggling to believe that Bubba has such a stupid name.

"Anyway," the reverend says before rising to his feet, "I imagine we need to get that place in order before I deliver the sermon."

The reverend is a well-practiced leader. He rattles off a list of commands to his young subordinate with a decisive air. “Tell Tom to go get some sponges, gloves, disinfectant, and anything else we need to scrub that place from top to bottom.”

“I’d burn his sheets, if I were you,” Shep adds.

“And get vaccinated,” Barney chimes in. “For everything.”

“Enough,” Sandra says, cutting the boys off before they could complete the circle.

“After you send Tom to the store, wait for me outside,” the reverend continues with his unshakably patient tone. “You two are still with me,” he says to his silent retainer. To the rest of them, he says, “You know where to find me.”

Conscious of the weight of the strap on his shoulder once more, Monty steps into the reverend’s path. One of the mute men in black strides quickly toward them but the reverend waves him off.

“That lawsuit you were talking about,” Monty begins.

“Yes?”

“All of the papers are in here.”

Monty unslings the briefcase and pushes it toward the reverend.

“Whoa,” the formerly charging blackshirt says.

“It speaks,” Barney quips, shooting Shep an incredulous look. “I thought you cut out his tongue, Rev.”

“You know what, Monty?” Sandra asks rhetorically. “Why don’t you go ahead and take that crap in the trashcan. Your cousin looks hungry.”

Throughout the course of the exchange the reverend has failed to call off his dog. Monty now has a hand the size of a porterhouse clasped tightly around his wrist. Despite the

distractions, Monty hasn't stopped paying attention to the reverend. As a practiced televangelist, he always seemed to exercise an incredible amount of self-control, but for just the briefest moment after Monty raised the attaché case, he slipped and started to raise his hands into a defensive posture. It was little more than a twitch: slight hitch of the elbows, outward turn of the palms, extension of the fingers, all simultaneously.

Almost immediately the reverend has forced himself back into his easy carriage and he simply says, "I can't take that."

The reverend's aborted recoil has not escaped Shep's notice either.

"Thanks a lot, rev," Shep says with a grin.

"It's complicated, but —"

Shep interjects. "No, I mean, I've always wondered about a preacher's mortal weakness. Werewolves and their silver bullets, vampires and their garlic, demons and holy water. That kind of thing."

"I thought it was garlic bread," Darry says.

"You are too fucking stupid to be believed," Barney says.

Sandra walks between Monty and the reverend, ducking beneath the blackshirt's wrist-hold. She bends at the waste and begins rummaging through the garbage bin.

The reverend watches her disconcertedly from the sides of his eyes. "Let's walk and talk," he says. "And, please, Bruno, release this man's poor wrist."

He does, but he jabs his thick index finger toward Monty one time in a silent warning before receding into the background. The reverend continues making his way out.

"Wait!" Monty shouts.

The reverend pauses. His more aggressive associate coils, ready to pounce. The other is already out the door, getting the “all clear” from the rest of the six-man contingent.

“Well?” Monty asks. He cannot resist a riddle. “What is a preacher’s weakness?”

“Lawyers,” Shep says.

“The devil’s holy water?” he asks. In this moment of jocularly, the brothers seem to have the bond their mother has been trying to force upon them for all of these years.”

“They are,” Shep agrees.

“Wouldn’t it be ‘unholy’ water?” Darry asks.

“You fu-u –” Barney starts before cutting himself off.

Too late, though, as Sandra has drawn herself back to full height. She has something in her hand: a lemon-lime soda bottle filled with about two fingers worth of a pulpy black liquid. A tobacco chomper’s make-shift spittoon. Monty gladly follows the reverend back outside into the stark daylight. After lurking in Shep’s tenebrous living quarters, the stark late-morning daylight bombards the senses with the jarring suddenness of a rifle’s report. Blinking back the light ignites pain from the swollen flesh heaped atop Monty’s orbital bone. A clammy tingle starts from the base of Monty’s skull and slides down his spine to burrow into his pelvis. He wobbles on his feet. The profuse sweating from so many fleshy Christians packed so tightly into such a small space does the work of smelling salts and keeps him on his feet. He cannot get into Bubba’s half of the trailer quickly enough. Though, when he finally arrives, the desire to leave presses even more urgently.

“Goodness,” the reverend says.

Bubba’s half of the trailer is just as shadowy and oppressive as Shep’s. If not for the pervasive stink, it would be a suitable location for a thieves’ den. Previously thought an

impossibility, Bubs's half of the trailer stinks even worse than Shep's. A different, but equally pungent strain of body odor lingers, but any reprieve from a somewhat less offensive quantity of stale smokiness is entirely offset by the wretched conflagration of a dozen different foodstuffs, all of them spoiled or spoiling. A half-finished bowl of mac and cheese sits partially submerged in the sink. Four or five swollen hotdogs float in a pot on the stove. In fact, all four burners on the compact range are occupied by an aborted or unfinished meal. A plate of burnt hamburgers sits on the counter, attracting more flies than anything else.

"That poor man," the reverend says.

Monty knows that this would be the state of Shep's place if their mother didn't make sure to visit every day and perform some rudimentary sanitation.

The grabby security man, whom Monty has begun mentally referring to as Handcuffs, emerges from the after-model bathroom and says, "It gets worse, Reverend."

The bathroom is a mess of exposed pipes and layered grime. But it's behind the shower curtain where the worst surprise of all awaits: an open litter box appears to be filled with one giant clump of urine topped by an overflowing pile of desiccated feces. Worse yet, the cat seems to have given up on the toilet situation and has been doing its business in the tub itself. Drawing back the curtain wafts the worst of the stench toward the men. It feels like being submerged in a vat of ammonia.

"Has anybody seen the cat?" the reverend asks with concern.

The fact is that a decomposing kitty corpse could be masked by all of the other nostril-assaulting layers of scent. It is clear to even the most dense among them – probably Handcuffs – that this state of living is not the product of indifference and ignorance. This is most of the way along the downward spiral toward a psychotic break.

“Top to bottom boys,” the reverend commands. “If there is a cat in here, you need to find it.”

The blackshirts don’t move yet. They know by now that the reverend’s orders never come one at a time.

“Len,” he says, glancing at not-Handcuffs, “get Junior to run down to the store after Tom to get the highest-rated particulate masks he can find. Once he gets back, get to work. Dispose of anything questionable. We’ll reimburse this poor man later.”

The men nod and deploy.

“How does he shower?” Monty asks.

A stiff, crusted rag that had been carelessly tossed into the sink bowl along with a foreign-object studded bar of hand soap solves the mystery. They shut the bathroom door behind them.

“This won’t do at all, Montgomery. Let’s chat after the sermon. We should have the carpet ripped up by then.”

“What about the papers? Shouldn’t something be done, like, now?”

The reverend pauses to consider his response to such an obvious statement.

“Do you remember our talk on Friday night?” the reverend asks.

Monty grunts in assent, trying to figure out which part of their talk the reverend wants him to remember.

“Your brother told me that you were the smartest person he knew. The smartest person in Sleeper even. You didn’t refute him. If you’re as smart as he seems to think you are – perhaps as you think you are – then you should be able to take care of it yourself.”

He lets this sink in for a moment, seemingly resisting a mocking smile.

“If you’re half that smart,” he continues, “you’ll be able to find someone more suited to handle those documents than a clergymen.”

“I just thought that you might know somebody . . . more capable,” Monty offers.

“Montgomery,” the reverend says with the soft tone of a father, “have you ever considered how much more unsatisfying you have made your life by stubbornly clinging to your utter lack of faith in your fellow man?”

He had not. He is and has always been a faithless sap. Yet even a derelict like Shep, for all the atrocities he has witnessed – many of them of his own making – could manage to have enough belief in his younger brother’s intellect to forestall any dread stemming from his impending demise. In not so many words, he had said so himself.

The four Montgomery boys had met with the reverend and his bruisers immediately after Friday night’s religious revival in Colbertville, the joint situs of the state fair and the reverend’s now-aborted faith-healing tour. Colbertville was nearly as much of a shithole as Sleeper, distinguished only by its proximity to Grand Bank – the finest mid-sized city in the tri-county area – and by the fact that it was home to the Sugar Shack. The thirty-seven year old establishment was the stuff of legend in Sleeper. The food stunk. Everything except the ice cream, which managed to still be ice cream despite the incompetence of the purveyors. The ice cream was middle-of-the-road ice cream. It was delicious but not spectacular. The spectacle was in presentation and pricing. No way that place stays open for more than six months, much less the better part of four decades, if not for a menu item called the “Iced Cream Friday.” Twenty scoops of ice cream in a freighter-shaped cone, all of it smothered with enough whipped cream, caramel and chocolate syrup, and crushed peanuts to embarrass an inveterate diddler with a food fetish. Not entirely devoid of nutrients, the Friday also

featured four peeled bananas reinforcing the port and starboard bulwarks of the waffle cone vessel. This alone might not be sufficient cause to drive to this crappy little town, but the damned sugary leviathan had always been accompanied by a challenge: any two people who combined to house the whole thing in under a half an hour ate for free. Who would do this to themselves? Titus and Lanny Montgomery, just to name a couple. Men like the boys' fathers compulsively sought deals. "I got a good deal on it" explained away hundreds of ill-advised purchases. To these people, and Sleeper consisted almost entirely of these people, three pounds of dessert at no expense was simply irresistible. No matter that splitting the gas to get to Colbertville negated any savings. No matter that the inevitable stomach evacuation negated any benefit received. No matter that the cynical owners had a ringer in the several scoops of a secret recipe known only as "Sour Mustard Iced Cream." The mustard was easily identifiable. The sour, not so much. Repeat gamers like Titus and Lanny found themselves staring down the barrel of at least half a dozen of these scoops each once the owners had decided that the young men had enjoyed quite enough free ice cream. Of course, the sense of being screwed over – this sense the primary motivation for any Montgomery accomplishment – only ensured that they polish off every last sour rivulet of melted cream. Monty couldn't deny his own several attempts at the prize, attempts that always rose or fell based on his partner's ability to take on a heavier load. Old "Six-Scoops Monty," they mocked.

So it was with no small measure of shame and nausea that he arrived with his kin and settled into a booth with the reverend, while the reverend's own men broke into teams to take on the challenge and left them alone for the first time. The reverend knew the basics of Shep's situation from a brief meeting before the start of the revival so they got down to business quickly. Other than the reverend's pledge of support, the thing that stuck with

Monty from the meeting was a profound sense of shame. Afterward, he realized he had never felt so humiliated while leaving the Shack. A high bar, indeed.

The reverend had asked them to brainstorm with him to come up with some ideas for strategic direction. Darry and Barney popped off cockamamie scheme after cockamamie scheme. Monty and Shep remained largely silent, though at one point Monty could not stifle his laughter any longer. Darry had stooped to rehashing plots of terrible movies.

“Let’s inject him with a drug to make him temporarily dead. We show up with the ‘corpse.’ The feds realize he’s dead and drop it. Three days later, he wakes back up. Bam. Done deal.”

When Monty laughed, the reverend glanced at him disapprovingly. He asked, “Something funny?”

“It’s the three days,” Monty said. “That’s a pretty specific half-life for an imaginary serum.”

The reverend did not acknowledge any humor he may have found in the incongruence.

“I think it’s time we heard your suggestions, young man.”

Monty had nothing. In this case, it was precisely for lack of trying. He had accepted his brother’s passing, maybe even looked forward to it just a little bit, in the darkest corner of his psyche. The reverend was content to let Monty squirm. Only when Shep stepped in to his defense did the conversation move on.

“He’s working on something,” Shep assured the reverend. “Trust me.”

Maybe Shep's defense was something of a turning point. Maybe that is why he so fervently needs to properly place these legal documents in the right hands. Maybe that's why he is once again extending the briefcase toward the reverend's hands.

“Son, for reasons we'll discuss after I address the flock, I regrettably need to remain uninvolved in that particular domain. Now, shall we take our leave before we contract *Toxoplasma gondii*?”

This time, the bright sunlight has almost no impact. The battery of sensory assaults has anesthetized Monty's faculties. As he creaks down the rotting wooden steps, an emaciated cat springs from beneath them and slashes at Monty's exposed calf before running off with a limping gait. Monty flinches and misses the last step. His foot hits nothing when it should hit rotting wood, instead it plummets to the ground, dropping Monty to his ass in the process. His tailbone hurts from the impact, but even worse is the way that the wooden step scraped his lower back. He's convinced he's left a layer of skin on Bubba's front steps.

“Well, I guess we can call off the hunt,” the reverend says. “I'd find a doctor if I were you. And, before you ask, no, I do not know anyone 'more capable.'”

Seven angry red scratches are already swelling, leaving Monty wondering what could have happened to that nasty cat's other toe.

A maelstrom of terrible options thrashes all around Monty. The mob churns in the courtyard, and it surely would have crashed over Monty were it not for the blackshirts' efforts to maintain a small pocket of space around the trailer's immediate vicinity. Yet even here, in the eye of the storm, Monty is safe only at the sufferance of his champions, none of whom have shown anything more than indifference for his wellbeing. To retreat back to Bubs's side of the trailer was to put himself in position to be Patient Zero for any number of infectious pandemics. Without the reverend as a peaceful intermediary, Shep's trailer strikes him as a hostile environment. Even if it wasn't, that was due only to the benevolence or

ignorance of its occupants. Monty had wronged his cousin last night, even if he and Jen hadn't fully consummated their betrayal. He had wronged his brother in recent months, too. His inaction and apathy toward the ending of Shep's life were treasonous. Sure, the context partially exculpated him. But when it comes down to it, sometimes context is just context. Being less wrong is a far cry from being right. Spending so much time in the service of lawyers has heretofore obscured this little nugget of wisdom for Monty.

But if the trailer is an unattractive choice, then venturing away from it is one that is retina searing. Leaving meant either trudging through the mob armed with little more than hope of avoiding another black eye, or it meant darting straight for the property line behind the trailer right into the sights of the border-patrolling militiamen who were so eager to peddle some death. Who was to say that they would recognize him as one of their own? Who would recognize him as friend? Who would recognize him at all? Some of his own cousins might not even recognize him in time to prevent his taking the butt of a rifle stock to the head. More importantly, the briefcase would be at risk either way. Eventually, he would have to leave, either to see a doctor, a lawyer, or his wife who might be arriving at his mother's house at any time, but he would prefer to leave with his family.

So he heads back into his brother's home. In comparison to the devastation he had witness on the other side of the panel divider, the noxious smoke is but a minor annoyance. Somebody new has arrived since he left. He can see only the man's wide back and thick trunk. He's wearing a white shirt with short sleeves and a collar and has his shirttails tucked into a stiff pair of unbelted blue jeans. The cuffs of his jeans are tucked into a pair of well cared for work boots. Most telling, though, are the man's exposed elbows, which are wrinkled and rough and, most importantly, jutting out just so much. Not for the first time, the

telltale Montgomery elbow jut betrays the identity of its owner. Only two living Montgomerys would wear a shirt that was either tucked or collared, and Monty was one of them.

“Uncle Bobby!” Monty calls.

His eldest uncle is not particularly beloved by Shep or the two cousins, but Monty has always admired the man, for his ability to live to such ripe old age with his dignity – and gray matter – intact. His uncle turns slowly, with a grimace.

“Your hip is supposed to be broken,” Monty says.

“Says you,” the old man shoots back with a smile. “Leave it to our lot to embellish an old duffer’s injuries. Half of them had my plot dug already.”

“The infection?”

“Penicillin, lad. These off the grid types wouldn’t know anything about it,” he says gesturing to the other Montgomerys in the room, “but hospitals are pretty well equipped to handle those kinds of things.”

Shep and the cousins are already shooting each other ugly looks on account of the slight. None of them seem to even consider that their own cousin Jason nearly beat a man to death over a classic Montgomery fishing tale.

“So you emerged unscathed then?”

“Not exactly,” Bobby says, pointing to the hardened cast that engulfs his forearm, wrist, and part of his hand. “I got a couple busted ribs to boot. Other than that, just some soft-tissue damage downstairs.”

Darry snickers. Bobby creaks around to face him. “Not that downstairs, you daft fool.”

He turns back to Monty and says, “Bum ankle and knee. Those quacks tried to sell me a bill of goods on a wheelchair, then a walker, then crutches. Persistent little bastards. But I’m not about to give them something else to pad my bill with, especially for some apparatus designed with the specific intent of slowing me down.”

Bobby is a talker. He’s also a Montgomery, even if he is the family’s white sheep. That means he doesn’t mind talking about himself, doesn’t mind tossing a few compliments his own way either.

“Can you imagine me in a wheelchair?” he asks. “Might as well carry a sign that says, ‘Steal all my shit.’ Besides, this town has about as many ramps as your brother has sense.”

He issues an aside to Shep, “We’ll get back to that in a minute.” In the process of addressing his oldest nephew, he catches the man-child mocking him. Shep resumes the vacant look of an idiot immediately.

“Now if we were talking about the Township,” he begins, jabbing his thumb into his own chest, as though his area of authority were simply an extension of himself, “we’d have a different story. We’ve got standards out here in the boonies. All of my establishments are up to code as far as that goes. I suppose I may run a mite tighter of a ship than old Hawk Woolley.”

Hawk, Bobby’s long-time rival and the city’s mayor, rarely could avoid a disparaging mark or two in any conversation of Bobby’s, deserved or not. Hawk was a certified asshole, no doubt, but that charge could be levied against most, if not all, of the people in this very room, not least of all Bobby. Whether Sandra was a certified asshole depended on whether Barney had been forced to hang a lipper with recycled tobacco any time recently. The eldest living Montgomery was legitimate in his capacity as a business owner and Township

Supervisor, but only just. Indeed, most of that handful of registered businesses operating within the township were up to code, but only by technicality. Building code required that all businesses that employed more than eight people or that received more than eighteen customers contemporaneously in the ordinary course of business be handicapped accessible. Perhaps only a half dozen of the township's business were even in that ballpark. With support from Township Counsel, Bobby's long-time friend Clayton Shortz, Bobby had managed to shoehorn all but two into a dubious loophole by using (or abusing, depending on one's perspective) his executive privilege to decree that the building code applied not to businesses, but to the buildings that housed those businesses. In this way, he figured to slough outdoor employees away for regulation purposes. Same for patrons who mingled outdoors, say on a bar's patio. Just like that, he had brought four businesses up to code without so much as have a conversation with a proprietor. The local grocery store and a popular bar out in the most far-flung stretch of township, called The Holler, were the only businesses that he couldn't dislodge from his crew. He had managed to whittle down the grocer's eligible staff below the threshold by discounting the bag boys who carried groceries outside for the elderly patrons, but he couldn't get around the other requirement. Fortunately, the owners readily widened the bathroom door that had been their only offense. The Holler had put up a fight. The place was run by Hipskinds, so they were by disposition inclined to argue against anything Bobby told them to do, and Bobby wasn't inclined to give them the benefit of the same manipulations he had given to the others. Nonetheless, Bobby opened an investigation, stalled it, and marked the case "Pending" and thus, not in violation.

So whether Bobby ran a tight ship was debatable. Not debatable: none of the township's businesses were marred by unsightly wheelchair ramps.

“Anyway,” Bobby says, “While I’d love to continue indulging you with the shortcomings of my esteemed colleague, we should get back to the business at hand.”

Shep scoffs, “Yeah, nice of you to show up. You come with a plan to save my bacon?”

“Not exactly, kiddo. What I would like though, is to have a face-to-face with this reverend of yours. We can’t have the same type of incident that we had last night outside of the funeral home. What went on over there, is none of my business, of course, but whatever’s going on out here is happening on my turf. And I can’t have good people getting hurt on my watch.”

“What about me? They’re going come here, take me away, and kill me. Are you saying it’s not going to hurt? Or that I’m not good people?”

For the briefest glimmer of a moment, Bobby’s bullshit queue seemed to have run empty. Not for very long at all, though.

“First of all, I don’t think they would kill you here in the township.” He opens his mouth to run down the rest of his improvised laundry-list of exculpatory technicalities but snaps it shut suddenly. “They’re coming, you say? Who told you that?”

“Christ, Uncle Bobby,” Shep says with disgust. “Glad to see you’re still true to form after the accident.”

The brewing argument is interrupted by a bullhorn’s droning monotone.

“It’s starting,” Darry says.

The family piles out of the trailer, but the makeshift pulpit near the old motel office is still unmanned. The droning is coming from the street, where Hawk Woolley is the one

barking through the bullhorn, artfully framed by the twirling flashers of the city's police fleet.

“What kind of bullshit is this?” Bobby mumbles.

Even with amplification, the Mayor's guttural commands are reduced to mush in the noise of the crowd. The mob is unmoving, like a herd of vacant-eyed cattle, which only serves to visibly frustrate the mayor. He begins waving his arms at the cars behind him. City police line-up in full riot gear: helmets, Kevlar vests, shields, and mace canisters. County deputies are bolstering the force. Even a few volunteer firemen are on scene to prep the hose atop the city's one truck.

“You don't think I give a shit about you, Shep?” Bobby asks. “Watch what your uncle is about to do for you.”

He storms over toward Hawk, shoving his way through the mob with great vigor. Monty pities himself for being emasculated by a one-armed septuagenarian with a rack of cracked ribs who still struck a more intimidating image than his nephew ever could. Shame presses Monty forward into his uncle's wake. By the time he emerges on the other end, relatively unscathed thanks to the police distraction, it looks like he has lucked into a front row seat for an old-man fight. The enmity between these two men stretches back for decades, from the very moment Bobby ascended to office. First Montgomery ever to win a fair election.

In fact, the Montgomery surname itself very nearly cost Bobby the gig – he only managed to squeak out a victory by plurality. He could thank for his victory his reasonably competent work on the road committee years prior and the sympathy of the “you can't help who you're born to” crowd. The sundry folks of Sleeper all had a cousin or a brother of who

can get their assholes in a pucker. The real boon had been the repaving of Main/Church/Lake Street, the serpentine river of rubble that wound through hills and fields on either side of the one-mile stretch through central Sleeper. Bobby effected this effort by underbidding the other contractors with his own company and then stiffing his laborers. For a very short time thereafter, cars were not jolted to their very nuclei when crossing the railroad tracks.

Part of getting the job done quickly and reasonably well was making sure the work crews were riffraff free. Bobby did not cut his brothers in on the deal. He was barely going to profit as it was. And in the middle of tearing up an old strip along Lake Street, he canned Titus's teenaged boy. Shep worked hard in bursts and nursed hangovers in longer ones. As far as Bobby could see, having the boy, a minor, on the construction crew was charity enough, particularly given that the regs didn't allow youngsters on such crews without written parental consent, an impossibility given that Titus wouldn't put his mark on anything that didn't have a check made out to "CASH" on the other side. So when the boy was hungover, Bobby saw fit to teach him a lesson in two parts. Part One: a dressing down in front of the older men, a public shaming of sorts. Part Two: labor detail, hauling chunks of dredged up concrete in a wheelbarrow, even though it could have more easily been shoveled directly into the back of a truck. Addendum to Part Two: carry out Part Two while entirely up the boy's ass to keep him from slacking. Administering the discipline kept Bobby from other, more important jobs, from checking the grading, the temperature of the emulsion, and the other types of details that he alone among his kin cherished. But it was a sacrifice he had been willing to make to a point, even though he could feel the stress of not-plumb grades and mixed-consistency asphalt and improperly applied topcoats, and he could feel them

viscerally, as though an asphalt emulsion sat heavy in his stomach, heating him from inside out. So when the boy had the disrespect to walk off the site when they knocked off for lunch, Bobby had the audacity to disallow him back on the site the following morning.

There had been no yelling. Then. Not until Titus showed up an hour later, telling the boy to stay in the truck, and grabbing Bobby by his shirt collars. The crew's eyes were collectively honed in on the altercation, machinery disengaged and attenuated from a roar to an idle mumbling. Bobby would lose in a fistfight. The musk from Titus's coiled forearms was laden with dominance, a mix of gasoline and deer urine. Best to let Titus yell it out, to take that menthol-and-coffee-soaked breath until Titus had hollered himself quiet. In all the shaking and yelling, not once did Titus ask for Shep's reinstatement, in fact loudly arguing to himself that the boy would be better off on Lanny's and his own crew. The yelling was the point, and at some point Titus was satisfied and stomped off through hot wet asphalt. After that, the project went as smoothly as one could have hoped. And that was the surge that pushed Bobby out of the family and into office.

The asphalt had hardly set when the rains started up. Had there been any sense of geologic awareness in Sleeper, it would have been common knowledge that the city proper was set in a minor topographical depression. Had Bobby had the time to look at his street-grading notes in the aggregate, he could have drawn the same conclusion. He had not had the time, of course, but Hawk Woolley, now in office for his fifth year, later made some time to check it out. He very publicly put the crux of the blame on his township counterpart, going so far as to append the accusation to every flood advisory warning dispatched to the people, even going so far as to plaster it on the gas-station sign -- at a loss of potential profit, the proprietor would add ("Hell, people ain't stopped having birthdays.") -- but Sleeper folk

weren't the skedaddling type, so they holed up and drank plenty. Then the waters rolled along the new impermeable surfaces as smoothly as the beat-up trucks and sedans had just days before, and Sleeper found itself submerged.

"An act of God," Dollar Bill said even as pooled water tickled his ankles.

"The wages of sin," a Piggott replied from the next barstool over. "For putting a Montgomery into office."

Most people leaned toward the latter explanation, in no small part due to the Mayor's exhortations.

But there was nothing to be done, no coordinated effort. The lawmen, the only ones who took such warnings seriously, had long since removed their families to safety in neighboring counties and failed to report. Had there been anything worth looting, there might have been worse than pilfered cigarette cartons and pillaged liquor aisles. Even then, most folks were happy to give back something. Makeshift rafts sledged inventories to higher ground wherever it might be found. Had folks expected some type of government relief, they might have been let down or angry enough to do something besides dourly salvage whatever they could.

As storms are apt to do, this one blew itself up just before blowing itself out. Waters rose to car-sweeping depth and the new main strip was one big riptide right down to Big Willowill Lake.

Bobby sensed that he was losing his constituency, something that his pride simply would not allow. So, unsolicited, Bobby forded the stream by way of a piece of cable just so he could climb a tree and pull down a cat. A small group of bystanders, including the mayor, huddled on the steps of City Hall to watch. Then, instead of heading back the way he came,

he plunged forward to the very steps the mayor stood upon. He shoved the wet and terrified creature into the mayor's arms, saying to the rest of the bystanders, "You ever seen old Hawk here risk his bacon for anybody? Didn't think so."

With that, he wandered away, keeping to higher ground.

"Just an old stray tom," a Piggott commented, unwilling to dish even a modicum of credit to the rival clan, "didn't ask to be saved by no one."

"Would of been better off staying up in that tree," the most besotted of the town's drunks, Dollar Bill, said.

Hawk, for his part, had nothing to say except for, "This isn't my cat."

Hawk has a hell of a lot more to say right now. Bobby does, too. And they both seem intent on saying their respective pieces at the same time.

"This is township jurisdiction," Bobby says, "so pack your clown show up and ship it back to your high-fallutin' city limits."

"You're wrong, Montgomery. This parcel is city land."

"Like hell it is."

"Hell though it may be, it's the city's hell. See, your northwest corner back there," Hawk says, pointing to the back left part of the lot, "cuts across the city limit by just a hair. And you know what the State has to say about that. If it's a little bit city, then it's all city for law enforcement purposes. So I'd recommend moving along if you don't want to be brought up on obstruction charges."

Pride and instinct wage such a fierce battle that Bobby is literally struck dumb. Ceding an inch of power or an inch of land to the city and their yahoo mayor causes pallid jolts of discomfort to radiate from his bowels. On the other hand, this shit show was a plane

crashing into a tire fire on top of an orphanage, and instinct for self-preservation told him to wash his hands of it. It was a short, brutal campaign in which instinct was decimated. A land army has better odds of marching on Moscow by way of China than reason or instinct had of overmatching a Montgomery's pride. Accordingly, Monty has some sense of what to expect. Yet the one thing he hasn't anticipated is his uncle wordlessly shuffling away. This devastates Monty, who has always traded psychologically on the mythos of his family name. He lived his ornery fantasies vicariously through the imagined daily confrontations of his kinsmen. Somehow this made tolerable his own meek, passive existence. But if his patriarch so willingly took a newspaper smack to the bottom, then all of that other stuff was just a bullshit story he was telling himself. And if his identity had been forged so strongly on the implications attendant to the Montgomery name, implications that served both as foil and as backbone for his own character, then his identity itself was an imaginative story built upon a foundation of arbitrary misconceptions. And if that is true, then Monty can't see how he isn't, by definition, an insane person.

A better question is this: if he was simply making up his identity, then why didn't he choose a less shitty one? Why not be a bullfighter? Or an explorer? Or a messiah?

This construction, too, falls apart. Monty can squint through his dissembling narcissism enough to realize that he is now a man standing apart from the crowd and staring into the teeth of a municipal militia. But he is so unmoored from his body he can only manage indifference toward the implicit risks of its current placement. If not for his own discomfort anchoring him to his body, he may very well have been raptured. But like cold sausage in a skillet, the flesh around his eye felt like it was quickly expanding against the suddenly too-small casing. Inflamed face meat was now starting to affect his field of vision.

And the ragged laceration on his calf burned persistently. Even these sensations, though, are only registered as vague patches of neural activity.

His focus is wholly consumed by Hawk Woolley. His mind whirs with frantic guesses at how Hawk sees him. As a stranger, a citizen, an enemy, or as nothing of note. Maybe weak, maybe dangerous. Small hometowns have idiosyncratic memories: they can immediately recall the full history anyone who sticks around, but they are quick to move on from those who strike out in search of greener pastures. All hometowns, metropolitan to barely-politan, are petty and jealous. They won't tolerate anything less than being one's exclusive intended. And the non-committal folks like Monty, the people who insist on alienating themselves from anywhere they happen to live, can't claim to be *of* any place at all.

“And just what the hell are you planning to do?” Hawk barks.

Monty senses a vague obligation to do something, perhaps something on behalf of the Montgomery family banner. To do what, he couldn't say beyond noting a simultaneous, vague instinct to be obstinate and belligerent. Perhaps this was his big moment to advance his brother's cause. The whole place has the feel of the beat just before the blast of a thunderhead, the moment where the brain thinks the eyes are still seeing something where the lightning used to be. Like that moment but stretched outward infinitely.

The thunder rolls from a pocket within the mob yelling either in anger or panic, then from another pocket, then another, then dying away before starting over again. Local kids are darting through the mob. These filthy little streaks of terror carom off of adults, chasing and screaming with complete abandon. A few of the city cops started to raise their rifles before

reasserting self-control. Down to the last man, the entire force projects an air of being palpably uneasy.

“Where are their parents?” the police chief asks Hawk, who has clearly asserted command of this operation.

The children are patently local. Disheveled, feral, and aggressive. These children, or children just like them, behaved the same way in the funeral parlor yesterday. Lots of them, then as now, were little Montgomerys. Uncle Jules casually referred to them in the collective as the “little shits.” Other than the brief appearance of a heavily sedated Bobby on a stretcher, Jules had been the only one of the original brothers in attendance. He and Bobby were the only ones to have survived life’s travails this long. Of course, his sisters were milling about to greet the large cross-section of friends and extended family who had turned up looking for a good time. They seemed to live in the periphery of the boys’ legend, as was the case with most Montgomery women. The men had rampant paternal streaks and strove to keep their women a safe distance from life’s unsavoriness. The fact that they were also sparing their wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters the sight of the boys’ own unsavory behavior was merely happy circumstance.

But when they were waist height, boy and girl Montgomery alike were shit-kickers. Unlike today, the little shits weren’t terrorizing the assembled, they were terrorizing the snippy old mortician who owned the joint. Breck Burnside had a monopoly over Sleeper’s death business. As a result, he could be callous and insensitive when trying to push an upgraded casket model on a grieving widow. After Burnside’s decade in the business, he considered bodies little more than hunks of meat. That’s not to say he was devoid of spirituality. He only knew that whatever was valuable about the human form was long gone

by the time it showed up at his door. Nonetheless, Burnside was unabashedly discomfited by the idea of directing a funeral where the hunk of meat was still walking and talking. And that was before Hawk swung by in the early morning hours with a squad of volunteer firemen threatening to shut him down. That was before the Montgomery clan arrived with its eternal circus. Before one hour of the visitation period had elapsed, Burnside had already shoed a dozen children away from the only two locked doors in the building: the door to the morgue and the door to the second parlor, which currently housed the items the mortician had accumulated from years of directing funerals. It was hard to tell which door to guard more closely. It would be a disaster if the kids got anywhere near the corpses, but it might be even worse if they managed to expose the fake wreaths, suit jackets, lost jewelry, or any other items that the children's parents might recognize.

Monty, Shep, and the cousins were another of Burnside's problems, as they kept squirreling booze into the parlor despite repeated remonstrations. People often claim that a funeral is a celebration of life. They say this with a straight face, never mind that they just emerged from a room of black-clad mourners sniffing through and blotting their noses. In Shep's case, it truly was a celebration. And since Shep had the novel problem of not knowing how to behave at his own funeral, he defaulted to partying. Until the reverend's arrival heralded swarms of people seeking his healing touch, the gathering might as well have been held in a sports bar. Even after the reverend's muscle had shoed away most of the crowd and he had performed his shtick upon Jason's demands, a shot of tension remained as ambient radiation. At that time, though, the people were in the hands of a capable leader. The reverend knew how to lead the masses. So he guided them with his sonorous tones, ritualistic affectations, and well-oiled emotional triggers. They became a unit singular in momentum, a

surging wave, the picture of ordered energy until the wave crashed upon the strangers in the parking lot after the sermon.

At the Pit, the reverend's absence is sorely felt. The people in the mob are restless and nervous. The armed men patrolling the borders are even more so. In an alarming turn, the police are jumpiest of all. They can't even decide on whether to brace themselves with lethal or non-lethal force. If Hawk doesn't get the men in order, the result will be semi-lethal – which will almost certainly turn out to have been too lethal.

Hawk is breaking the bad news to the police chief about the keepers of these children.

“That's the problem, Chief,” Hawk remarks. “Their parents are the other armed force on the premises. Might even have you outgunned.”

Hawk decides to wait out the children.

The thoughts of corpses and guns have finally combined with Monty's waxing urge for self-preservation, and he has the sense to skirt around the crowd and the police and make his way to the street where he will be on the outside of whatever may go down. The Montgomery name could be un-besmirched another day, by another Montgomery. He pauses to sit down atop a car with out-of-state tags to get his bearings. He watches the men from all three factions – the mob, the law, and the vigilantes – as they hurry about with escalating urgency. Monty spots Bobby among the vigilantes. He has the knowing posture of a man stirring up mischief.

“I didn't think I'd see your face again.”

The pleasant voice startles Monty, but he's instantly relieved to see that it's Jen. She's leaning against the hood of the car he's resting on.

“You'll never not see me again,” Monty says coyly.

“I’m impressed,” she says. “I thought once your wife showed up you would pretend I didn’t exist.”

“My wife is here?” he asks.

“I talked to her a few minutes ago and pointed her to the trailer.”

“But how did –?” he begins.

“How did I know it was her? I guess I don’t, but I assumed the lady wandering around asking everybody after Monty Montgomery was your old lady. She’s pretty, you know,” Jen says with an arched eyebrow.

Dread seizes Monty as he realizes that his wife is somewhere in the building catastrophe. He moves to go find her.

“Why, thank you, kind knight,” Jen mocks, “I would love an escort to the trailer. You know, so I can get to my boyfriend safely.”

“Of course,” Monty murmurs without taking his eyes off the crowd.

“Are you always this humorless when she’s nearby?” Jen asks.

“Nearly.”

Tension radiates from the police, threatening the crowd's last vestiges of order. Zealous followers of the reverend had congregated toward the platform set up for his address. They crowded the pavilion between the two concrete buildings, largely confining their zealotry to that area. The crowd spread outward into the courtyard and became less dense and dogmatic as one moved away from the platform. These folks with more even keels had been the buffer between the fanatics and the world outside of the courtyard. But the sight of out-of-shape officers and deputy sheriffs in riot gear spooks a few of the people who are least suited toward a spooking. Already, wild-eyed believers are working away from the platform

in search of safety, a task made more difficult by the fact that firearm-bearing men of questionable ability and judgment hem them in on three sides. Only by squeezing between the two building and out into the back lot could one move away from each faction simultaneously. A number of people force their way through the bottleneck toward the backyard despite a dubious-at-best improvement in safety. This new offshoot of the crowd find themselves hemmed into an already small lot made smaller by the dozen or so cars parked haphazardly, where vigilantes still flank them and the only escape routes are back the way they came – an impossibility at the moment due to the flow of the crowd – or into the dense, unfamiliar woods that loom just behind the rear property line.

Despite the mob’s creeping descent into entropy, Monty finds himself able to traverse the crowd more readily. He is already banged up enough to be numbed to the threat of further injury. He’s numb to just about everything. No processing, analyzing, or observing. Just cutting through the crowd to find his mate and remove her from danger. He headed to the trailer on instinct and found her right away, standing on the edge of the crowd, pleading with an irritated blackshirt to let her into the trailer.

Monty thankfully sees a glimmer of recognition in the blackshirt’s eyes while he approaches. He doesn’t see any enthusiasm, though.

“She’s with me,” Monty says as coolly as possible.

“Oh yeah?” the guard challenges just to be a dick. “Then what about her?”

He’s pointing at Jen. It’s a great question.

“We’re . . .” he starts to say before trailing off. There’s a hint of desperation as he tries to make eye contact to enlist Jen’s help. She won’t look at him, and doesn’t seem willing to offer any descriptors of her own. Then they both speak at once.

“We’re friends,” he says.

“I’m fucking his cousin,” she says.

Audrey is not stupid. She notices his hesitant, weird answer. So when she says, “We need to talk,” he feels like he just had an icicle shoved into his rectum.

“Inside,” he says, flustered.

“Now,” she says.

“Keep it moving,” the blackshirt says

When they start walking, Handcuffs cuts Monty off and lays a meaty palm on his chest.

“This one okay to pass?” he asks his partner.

His partner is not amused. Handcuffs shrugs and moves along, no doubt looking for a frog to pluck the legs from. Monty has barely had a moment of relief when Bobby comes huffing up to the blackshirts. Of course, Bobby breezes past the blackshirts while Monty is escorting the consternated women up to Shep’s door, reminding Shep that his most hard-fought battles are with the parts of life that others take for granted.

“Hold it right there, young man,” his uncle says jovially, deploying his universal sobriquet for males over the age of three.

“We need to talk about some new developments.”

“Well, let’s do it inside,” Monty says. Even though the blackshirts hold the crowd at bay, Monty would like to put a couple layers of vinyl between himself and the mob.

“No can do, kiddo. It’s a sensitive matter that I’d like to keep between us level-headed adults.”

Bobby pulls his nephew a few steps away from the entryway and rests his hand on Monty's shoulder while staring expectantly at the women. The old man's face is frozen into a sort of genial half-smile. Audrey's on the other hand vacillates between disbelief and anger as she glances between her husband and the elder Montgomery. Her gaze lingers on Monty for a moment, waiting for something. It never arrives.

"That's wonderful," she said. "You boys talk."

Both ladies disappear into the murkily lit trailer, both more irritated with Monty than when they had first seen him today.

"Nice girls. Pretty too," Bobby says. "Pissed at you, though."

"What 'developments' do we need to talk about, Uncle Bobby?"

Bobby glances furtively between the three blackshirts watching over the entrance, one behind them, the other two facing the mob. They're far enough away by Bobby's judgment.

He speaks in a low baritone. "We need to know where the reverend is."

"Shit, your guess is as good as mine." That's the honest answer.

"Don't get smart, boy. You're better than that."

The last word is delivered smeared in vitriol. Monty has a few ideas who 'that' might be, and he cannot help but feel insulted. Bobby has a knack for reading people. The knack is shared widely among the Montgomerys. The uses to which the knack is put, though, diverge wildly. Titus had liked poolsharking, while Lanny had liked talking his way back into the bars that had just bounced him. Titus had surely passed the gene to Shep, as Lanny had to Barney. Without it, the latter would have been condemned to a lonely existence cast out from society. Darry probably had a little bit of it, too. More than Monty, anyhow. Bobby perhaps had the knack more than any of the brothers, and used it to indulge his fondness for

politicking. In the time it took to complete a brisk handshake, he would have an angle on the personality of his new acquaintance. He reads Monty easily.

“Son, I don’t mean to snap at you, but there are a lot of . . . implications in the air. Some of them are harmful. Surely, an astute an observer as yourself hasn’t missed it.”

Monty has never seen the master manipulator at work from this perspective. He’s impressed. Even though he knows it’s happening, he can’t find any way to disagree with his uncle.

“Of course,” he says.

“I don’t doubt you, though I can’t blame you for doubting me. It isn’t like I’ve gone out of my way to pat you on the back over all these years, much as I might have liked to.”

They haven’t been close. Most of Monty’s admiration had been from a distance. Sandra hadn’t been among Bobby’s biggest fans since her separation from Titus. He had been instrumental in getting Titus the house, even though Sandra had the kids. Monty can see how that might have gone down now.

“Uncle Bobby, just cut to it.”

“To the point, right. To tell you the truth, I think Hawk Woolley – all bullshit aside – is going to get a lot of people killed today. He’s jumpy up there. He’s making the cops jumpy, which is making the people jumpy, both those people in the mob and those with guns next door. And I’ve got it on good information that the sheriff’s field commander up there is of the same opinion. Word is that he just wants to ask the reverend a few questions. Now, if we could just get the reverend to talk to him for a minute, he would be willing to assert jurisdiction over that clown.”

“Which would make you the highest-ranking civilian,” Monty says.

“I wouldn’t blame the Sheriff’s Department if they were inclined to see it that way, but that’s up to Sheriff Vandenburg.”

“A friend of yours, I’m sure.”

“We’re congenial, of course, but I might not say ‘friend’ in circumstances like these.”

“I don’t want to get involved in your pissing contest.”

“You don’t know as much as you think you do, son,” Bobby says with a touch of irritation but no malice.

“Ok, Uncle,” Monty says, pressed to boldness by his own irritation. Probably everybody inside that trailer was waiting to disembowel him, and here he was wasting the final minutes of his life with his wheedling uncle. “Can you honestly tell me that you haven’t already cut a deal with the commander over there? Can you tell me that?”

Bobby looks like a busted rummy player forced to play his last card by default.

“All right, yes. The truth is yes. I haven’t talked to the man personally so I might be getting played myself, but yes, the plan is for me to relieve Hawk. But you can’t look at that man up there trembling in his loafers and say that this wouldn’t be a much better situation if I were up there instead.”

A blackshirt has finally had enough of the conspiratorial whispering and starts toward them on the auspices of checking in with his fellow team member.

“The truth is, I don’t know, Uncle. Let’s go inside and see what we can figure out.”

“No, thank you. Look, I’m counting on you. When you find out where he’s holed up, come find me next door,” he says, pointing to the lawn where he had been chatting with the militiamen. He stops to pat the strolling blackshirt on the back.

“Keep up the good work, young man.”

He then heads back into the throng, a subtle limp just visible as the day continues to take its toll on the old man's broken body. Monty ducks back into the trailer, which once again feels oppressive, both in smell and in feel. Shep hasn't moved. He is still lodged in his recliner. Monty cannot even remember whether he followed them outside to catch what they had thought would be the beginning of the reverend's sermon. Sandra's still busying herself with her futile cleaning. Audrey stands exactly where Monty had stood when he first arrived this morning. He smiles because he knows how hard Audrey is trying to make it look like she is casually standing instead of following through on a strongly held resolution to not sit on any of the furniture in this filthy place. Jen is curled up next to Darry on the couch. Monty is happy to realize that he's not jealous of this scene at all. But then he processes that Barney isn't even present.

"Where did he go?" Monty asks, pointing to the empty space on the couch.

"We thought he took off with you," Sandra says sternly. "Where the hell did you dart off to?"

"Following Uncle Bobby."

Shep snorts. "Of course you were."

"Oh, really?" Sandra asks. "And where did he have to go in such a hurry?"

"To get into a fight with the mayor."

"What an asshole," Shep comments, without clarifying which of the two assholes he is referring to.

"Then he went and talked to some of the jerk-offs over there." Monty says, pointing in the right general direction.

Sandra and Shep share a knowing look. "Who was he talking to?" Sandra asks.

“Don’t know, I didn’t follow him that far.”

“I can guess,” Sandra mutters.

“Bill Pickerington,” Shep says.

Sandra nods in approval. Neither of the two seem to care that the others don't get the reference. Audrey cares.

“How about letting us know who that is?” she asks.

Shep gives his younger brother a look that says ‘Can you believe this woman?’

“Retired deputy,” Sandra says. “Two sets of armed idiots out there: Pickerington and his county buddies on one side and then Slug Barron and the rest of the volunteer firemen and some other local guys on the other side. Which makes me think I know where Barney headed off to.”

Barney and Darry had both been volunteer firemen from the day they could pass the physical battery of tests, much like Lanny had. No matter the reason – five-alarm fire, chili cook-off, or trying to shut down an act of civil disobedience disguised as a funeral – if the volunteers were called to duty, the boys were present. That was why they had joined the crew outside of the funeral home very early Saturday morning, even though their loyalty to their elder cousin demanded that the funeral go on as planned. So they had instinctively understood why they were huddled with the other men in the parking lot across from the funeral home drinking weak gas station coffee waiting for the sun to pop over the horizon and provide some welcomed warmth. What they didn’t understand was why Mayor Woolley had urgently demanded their presence.

The urgency had dampened the usual level of camaraderie and horseplay that attended a gathering of these men, as had the presence of the mayor himself. The mayor

came off like a drill sergeant, what with his hair cut high-and-tight weekly and his mustache trimmed short and his heavily starched shirt tucked into a pair of creased slacks held in check by a thick leather belt with a spit-shined buckle. Hawk wasn't alone. Chief Halloran was there, too. Halloran was Hawk's inverse. Though he was their chief and the city's fire marshal, he exuded no more authority than a property insurance salesman – fitting since it was his given occupation. Halloran slouched against the fire engine, wearing the ill-fitting fire jacket he had just scrounged up from the extras in the truck's cabin. He looked like a tourist waiting for his turn to pose for a picture with a real, live fireman. He was wearing the same pleated khakis and crumpled shirt he'd been wearing out at the Pour House the night prior. Perpetually apoplectic, Halloran never stopped fidgeting, always wiping spittle from the sides of his mouth or pushing oily strands of hair back behind his ears. Accordingly, it was Hawk the crew regarded warily, not their commander. Hawk looked like a leader, while Halloran just looked like the guy who sold him a cut-rate homeowner's policy. But Hawk had clearly requested the chief's presence, else he would have been absent as usual.

The crew grew antsy as a few minutes turned into forty-five and no explanation for their summons had yet been issued. It was getting impossible for the men not to start fucking around. The crew consisted of eight hooligans, all of them having been the boys on the school bus who ruined every field trip, now grown man-sized and given their own bus, one that came equipped with horns, flashing lights, ladders, and industrial-strength water guns. Assembling these men without providing them an inferno as a distraction was guaranteed to result in a little goosing and nut slapping, if not a full-on wrestling match. Hawk's disapproving glare, combined with the guys' massive hangovers, had been the only things

keeping the grab-assing in check. Regardless, the morning's chill had flushed Darry's earlobes to an angry red, which might as well have been a pair of bull's-eyes for Barney.

At the two hour mark, the brothers slipped off to jimmy open the funeral home's fire door and help themselves to the coffee-making equipment in Burnside's cluttered little office. At around nine, the funeral director finally showed up and scarcely afforded the assembled men a nod. The gathered, now about a dozen of Sleeper's finest could hardly stifle their laughter as Burnside fiddled with his keys at the front entrance, though the giggling was more likely due to the sense that whatever was supposed to happen was finally going to happen.

Still, Hawk made them wait. It might have been intolerable had Burnside not come out to dress down whoever in the group had decided to ravage his pantry, which gave everyone a good chuckle. It wasn't until ten thirty that the reverend showed up to begin preparations for the afternoon's performance. His timing was both a relief and a disappointment, as a cabal from the fire crew had been just about to let the air out of Burnside's tires.

Now, Hawk was a tough, mean, and ornery sumbitch, but he was no bully. Bullish would be more appropriate. Since he wasn't a bully, he didn't accost the reverend outside of the funeral home, where the reverend might feel intimidated by Hawk's advantage in numbers. Instead, Hawk went inside after the reverend, bringing only Henry Halloran with him. They found the reverend and Burnside in the back office, the one ravaged by Hawk's volunteers.

"Gentlemen, I'm glad to have the opportunity to speak with both of you at the same time," Hawk said.

The reverend stepped forward and extended his hand. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure," he said.

"Hawk Woolley. And this is Henry."

Burnside piped in, "Hawk's the mayor. I'm not sure what Henry does for the city, but he's something or the other."

"He's the Chief Fire Marshal," Hawk said. "And that's the reason I wanted to talk with both of you."

"I assure you," the reverend said, "there will be no pyrotechnics as a part of this ceremony."

"I'm sure there won't," Hawk said. "Because I don't think there is going to be a ceremony."

"Sir, with all due respect, this is a private function on private property, so I fail to see the point from which you derive your authority."

"With all due respect, Reverend, I derive my authority from any situation with implications for public safety. I'm not sure if you are aware of the ramifications of your little announcement yesterday, but this is a small town, a private town, where people mind their own business, mostly. Now you've gone and invited in Lord-knows-how-many strangers into our town. And, pardon me for having to say this, but a fair proportion of those strangers are probably zealots and whack-jobs. And that doesn't even begin to take into account the federal attention you've likely brought upon our community."

"I'm impressed by how quickly you have been able to amass your forces," the reverend said, "but surely they can be put to better use than intimidating an old reverend and

mortician. Perhaps, they could be persuaded to stand up for Shep Montgomery, if and when the authorities come for him.”

“You talk real nice, reverend, but it sounds like you don’t listen too good. ‘Round here, folks mind their own business, mostly, and that includes their business inside or outside the boundaries of federal law. So long as they follow our rules, we let them be.”

“Then, as a man with a conscience, Mayor Woolley. How can you simply stand by and watch as a murder-for-profit takes place?”

“That’s a pretty heavy-handed interpretation, Reverend. You’ll forgive me for my old-fashioned ways, ways that say you sleep in the bed you make.”

“I see that you are an absolutely obstinate creature,” the reverend said, forcing himself to check his anger, lest it turn to wrath. “Regardless of your views on the topic, you still do not have the authority to break up a peaceful protest that breaks no laws, especially one held on private property.”

“Well, looky here, Reverend. I’m not a lawyer and I don’t particularly care for their ilk – one social rung above insurance salesmen if you ask me. No offense, Henry.”

Halloran was preoccupied observing the knick-knacks that adorned every flat surface of Burnside’s little nest. “Hmph? None taken,” he mumbled.

“Anyhow,” the mayor continued, “the plain and simple fact of the matter is that Henry noticed a whole lot of fire safety issues on the way inside this building, and given the likelihood of such a high turnout at your service today, he was thinking that it might be in the best interests of the constituency to conduct a little fire code inspection. He sure would like to see what’s behind the door in the closed-off wing, I know that much.”

Hawk could see that his bullet had hit its mark. Burnside perked up with a worried look on his face. Packrats get very protective of their belongings and will do nearly anything to make sure that what is private stays private, even if there is nothing to hide. Some small part of Hawk hoped that Burnside would show a little spine and go for the fire inspection. He sure would like to see what kind of funerary leftovers the mortician was hoarding in the Maple Blossom Room.

“That sounds like a threat, Mayor,” the reverend said. “And I know you wouldn’t be threatening me, knowing how deeply I value my First Amendment protections.”

“You really missed your calling, Reverend. You should be a member of the bar. Thing is, I’m not really addressing you at this point. I’m addressing Mr. Burnside, here – affording him a little courtesy, actually – to make sure he’s got all of the facts he needs when determining whether to go forward with this little dog and pony show tonight.

“How about it Burnside? You up for a quick looksee?”

The director looked up at the reverend apologetically. “I’m sorry. I just – can’t,” he said meekly.

“That’s just fine. Then I’ll be glad to conduct the ceremony outside, in God’s funeral parlor. I trust your public spaces are up to code.”

“I was afraid you might take your media frenzy to the streets. Let me extend you a little courtesy, and let you know that permits are required for such a use of public space. Lestwise, you’re outside the law, and I’ll be forced to send in the troops. I’d recommend you hurry on down to the City Hall and get started. Those permits can take time.”

“This is tyranny,” the reverend barked.

“No,” Hawk said, drawing out a pause, “it’s a man fulfilling his civic duty.”

“This isn’t the end of this,” the reverend said. He was getting huffy. “You, you –“ he stuttered, at a rare loss for words. “You are an agent of evil. By standing in my path, you are standing in the path of righteousness. You are sanctioning a government that euthanizes its own citizens. For what, you ask? For war? For conquest? For national security? No. For money. Pure and simple greed. You see, they’ve worked out a calculation, and if you do the math, you can see that they have put a price on a human life. You know how much, on average, these pawns get each month?”

“Haven’t really thought about it,” Hawk said.

“Seven hundred dollars. And if you add up all those years, all those payments, you get a sum-total. And aren’t you even a little bit curious as to what the final tally comes up to?”

“I must admit, Reverend, my curiosity is piqued.”

“Two hundred and ten thousand dollars.”

Henry let out a long low whistle at the sum. Clearly, he insured folks for much, much less.

“Tell you the truth, Rev, I woulda thought it’d have been less,” Hawk said.

“It is less. Do you know what the average projected lifetime payout to a retiree was when they came up with this little scheme?”

“You know I don’t, Reverend. And I really don’t want to get caught up in a game of trivia for the rest of the day.”

“Two hundred and ten thousand three hundred and ninety-six dollars. You understand what that means?”

“I’m not a doggone static—stasic—statistician, Reverend. So just do me the courtesy of laying it out for me.”

“That means that the government decided to sanction murder on account of it saving them about four hundred bucks a head. Don’t you see something wrong with that?”

“I can see your point, Reverend. But here’s my point: I don’t do politics—“

The reverend interrupted. “But you’re the mayor!” he belted.

“Politics has nothing to do with it. Politics is for the beltway bozos, and if it were up to me, we’d fire all their asses and do for our own. I reckon we’d do just fine, too. You see, I’ve been around for a while, and I’ve learned that when the feds come to town, all that’s accomplished is putting a huge pain squarely in my ass. And fortunately, we here in Sleeper don’t give the feds reason to come to town often. We like that. But this thing you’re trying to do? It’s like begging for a gray-suited babysitter. And I will do everything in my power to keep those muckety-mucks in Washington away from my city.”

“I understand your position, Mayor. I want as little to do with this government as possible myself. But, you see, I don’t get to make the choice – we don’t get to make the choice. You can’t just build walls around your city and keep everybody out because you don’t just keep evil out, you keep the Lord out, too. You’ve read the Book of Joshua, right, Mayor? Jericho tried to do exactly what you’re trying to do, and do you know what happened?”

“Indulge me,” Hawk said.

“The walls collapsed, the faithless citizens were massacred, and the city was turned to rubble.”

“Sounds like a craftsmanship issue to me,” Hawk said.

“You think this is funny, Mayor. But I assure you this is not. This is serious. Gravely serious. At best, you’ve won the hour.”

Having issued his vague threat, the reverend stormed out of the room. Jacobs finally looked up from his desk to meet the mayor’s eyes. “So no fire inspection today, then, right?”

Hawk left the funeral home with a smile on his face. And he dismissed each of the assembled volunteers with a hearty handshake. The men were disappointed at not being deployed for anything more than a show of force. The only means they could think of to console themselves was to let the air out of all of the tires on Burnside’s run-down Buick.

Of course, the funeral had taken place. And it only took a few well-placed calls from the reverend’s legal team. That is what made it all the more infuriating that the reverend wouldn’t simply take the goddamned briefcase from Monty. Surely, the attorneys could make some headway in no time at all. But the reverend had refused, and deferred the conversation until after his address – which seemed increasingly unlikely to actually take place – and Monty was left holding the bag, which is now acutely growing heavier in the pall of Shep’s trailer.

“Maybe everybody just darted off because it was so goddamned morose in here,” Monty says in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Maybe I could find something else in that garbage can just for you,” Sandra retorts.

Monty’s mom might make Monty munch . . . something. His mind whirs, iterating the alliterative fragment quickly, as though a consonant word for trash might fill itself in. The unsatisfying pause beats like the pulse of a comedian with no punchline. In terms of defense mechanisms, this little game is essentially his psyche’s nuclear option. These puzzles flash into being like jagged strikes of lightening to his frontal lobe, stimulated by unconsciously

perceived threats to his existence. Like while narrowly avoiding a catastrophic wreck on the interstate, he might become consumed by the need to convert five and five-sixteenth inches into centimeters the very same moment his brain tells his arm to jerk the steering wheel to the left. That's the other thing about these puzzles: they are all-consumptive. Usually, he can resolve them in less than a minute, at which point he is left a sapped husk, perspiring with a thudding heart, not unlike a man after a vigorous bout of sex.

It's strange that this partial sentence is still humming around in his head insistently, then, even after he's regained his bearings enough to formulate a plan to keep trash out of his digestive tract: shut the fuck up for a while and after that be nice. It's stranger yet that it has appeared when there is no tangible mortal danger. This little puzzle is a different pattern cut from the same cloth. This time the aggressor is internal, the accumulated stress of living in a world of absurdity for the last five days. He could be toeing the border of a psychotic break, or at least a stroke.

. . . *mom might make Monty* . . . The phrase is just a persistent buzz in the back of his mind now. Other than not eat garbage, he can't get his priorities and obligations straight. He hasn't told them about Bobby's scheme and doesn't know whether he should. He still has this stupid briefcase, the contents of which need to be read by him and very likely a lawyer. He has deliverables due to his employer. Audrey and Jen need to be mollified, and Monty needs to figure out his loyalties. Though he already feels his need to be with his wife, now that she's here and not outside the dense pull of Sleeper's gravity. Shep still needs help, a plan of some kind. Monty's fucking calf and eye hurt. He doesn't know where the reverend is. He doesn't know where his other cousin is, and he doesn't know whether the two of them need to have a serious conversation or a fist fight. No idea what's happening with Jen, whether she

feels something, what exactly he feels for her. And, fuck, the baby. He didn't know how grave his offenses last night were. They may have kept their pants on, but no love he had ever made had been more intimate. And something else.

“What did you want to tell me?” he asks his wife. He braces for the worst.

“Oh, fuck, we have to go!” she exclaims. “Bill Cosby slipped out of the house when I stopped in.”

“He'll be fine,” Shep grouses. “Just like every other time.”

Bill Cosby usually did have free reign at Sandra's since it was so secluded, but things are a little different at the moment.

“No,” Sandra says, “we'll be fine. You and your wife go get your dog.”

Even with the specter of a dead dog hanging over his head the entire time, the two hours he spent on the hunt with Audrey were the finest he'd passed in years. They felt like the last couple on the planet as they picked their way through the maze of abandoned cars, and then even more so on the trails that crisscrossed through the forest that surrounded Sandra's house. The woods were less meticulous in marking the passage of years than the calendars of men. So they lived in the time before stress, bills, jealousy, and miscarriages had worn away their lightheartedness. They touched each other with a blithe easiness that had been absent for years. They teased and chased each other. And every so often, each slowed

down to make the other the only other object in all of existence. They found Bill Cosby, who was quite happy to trot along with them back to the house. They had gloriously rediscovered their fondness for each other.

The glow of isolation fades as he pulls up to the edges of the labyrinth born of religious fervor and Detroit steel, but the fondness remained. For that Monty thanks every credible deity in the collective global pantheon. He parks the car and debates the idea of opening Audrey's door for her. Mercifully, she lets herself out before Monty can even switch off the ignition. She comes around the front to see him as he is retrieving his briefcase from the backseat.

"Couldn't say no, even with all of this going on. That's commitment."

Her sarcasm wounds Monty because he is oversensitive about these things. Her words are sardonic, not malicious. Audrey is unshakably sardonic.

"Not work," he says, doing a poor job of not sounding defensive. "Shep's bullshit."

"And since you're the only person in your family who will read anything longer than a caption, you get to be family secretary," she says. "I get it."

"More like 'family expert consultant,' but you are close."

Something of a commotion has arisen a few yards behind them, and Monty turns to see his Uncle Jules storming up to him.

"I found him out here by the cars, township side," he barks into a walkie-talkie. The words being barked back are indistinguishable.

"You little shit," Jules says to Monty. These little ejaculations are Jules's way of dealing with a world that just won't cooperate with him. Without this little pressure valve,

Jules's head would have detonated years ago. "Your uncle's been looking for you everywhere."

Then, to Audrey, "How you been, sweetie?"

Audrey waves him off. The rest of the commotion arrives. Hawk has a small posse of police officers in tow.

"Where's your brother?" he demands.

Monty starts to answer but he feels Audrey grab his forearm.

"Listen up, jackass," Jules says. "He's on his way right now."

"Good, because I've got a few words for him."

Hawk only now takes in Monty's presence. He regards Monty for a moment before addressing him.

"You know, son," he begins softly, "just because someone gives you a sinking ship, doesn't mean you need to board it."

"What the hell are you even talking about?" Jules asks.

Hawk shakes his head out of concern for Jules. The moment of empathy is destroyed when Bobby stalks up, hollering the whole way.

"Get away from my family," he yells at Hawk. "They have nothing to do with you."

"I disagree, Bobby. I think a certain nephew of yours is at the center of this disaster-in-progress."

Monty flushes, then realizes his brother is the certain nephew. He flushes again, this time from shame.

"Don't mind any of them," Bobby snarls. "Once the Sheriff takes over, it will be township business."

“You mean ‘if’ the Sheriff takes over,” Hawk retorts. “I’ve got my boys with me. Where are yours?”

“This guy’s a dumbass,” Jules says. “We’re right here.”

Hawk ignores Jules’s provocations. “Not that it matters. This might be above their pay-grade, too.”

“Bullshit. State always backs county. And there’s no way in hell you’d go federal.”

Hawk arches one of his well-trimmed eyebrows. As men age, they often let their eyebrow hair get a little bushy. Not Hawk. Not on your life.

“No. Not you. Not after how they fucked you with the flood clean-up.”

“Like a greased pig,” Jules interjects, oblivious to the damning implication of his insult.

“If you let them back in,” Bobby warns, “the people will kick you out of office lickety-split.”

“What if I didn’t have to let them in? What if they deputized me to detain him instead? I guess that would make me a federal agent. And if I were a federal agent, I could just go ahead and deputize my boys and your boys. Not you, of course. Because this wouldn’t be township business anymore.”

“You’ll never take me alive, *federale*,” Jules says.

“No,” Bobby says calmly, “if that were the case, he wouldn’t be here talking to me.”

“You’re right. For now. The magistrates leave early on Mondays, but they’ll be at the courthouse at eight sharp tomorrow. And all I need to is for one of them to stamp a piece of paper.”

“In the meantime, I’d recommend going and fucking yourself,” Bobby says.

“The wheel of the government grinds on slowly but inevitably,” Hawk says

When Hawk’s out of earshot, Bobby is finally ready to deal with his nephew.

“You need to tell me where the reverend is,” he says. “You heard Hawk. We strike now or never. Once he takes over, the game is finished.”

“I don’t know,” Monty says.

“Do you understand what’s going to happen if Hawk stays on top of this thing? They’re going to detain your brother. What do you think they’re detaining him for? A spanking?”

“And you think you’ll be able to stop him if the Sheriff takes over,” Monty says.

“Damn right. You can bet your ass I’ll be up at the courthouse tomorrow morning. I’ll show them that I’m four times the leader Hawk Woolley is. And in the meantime, I can keep your brother out of jail.”

“Hawk’s not stupid enough to take him in before he gets the badge. The feds are by the book like that.”

“You’re right,” his uncle muses. “But I’m guessing that if the police were to take a look around that trailer of your brother’s, they would find some party favors they could take him in on.”

His uncle is right, but Monty knows that the con is on. He just can’t spot it. He has no clue as to what he is supposed to do.

“Menthols,” he says.

“Speak sense, kid,” Bobby admonishes.

Jules pats his shirt pocket as if he would let Monty bum a cigarette if he had one.

“Don’t smoke menthols anyway,” he grumbled.

Monty's mom might make Monty munch menthols.

Bobby laughed. "You smoke those lady cigarettes like your old man?"

Menthols. Like his dad smoked. Like Shep smokes. Like the only cigarette Monty had ever smoked. He had been three years old, and he was an asshole, like any three year-old is. He grabbed anything he saw that looked vaguely interesting. For the last time, Titus had caught his three year-old fucking around with his cigarettes. He'd given the boy a talking to a few times, then resorted to spankings. Nothing could get through to this fucking kid. Except maybe smoking a whole pack of cigarettes. He had heard of parents doing that with their kids. This was a little kid, so maybe just a whole cigarette. It turned out the boy couldn't get through half of even one cigarette before vomiting and throwing a tantrum.

"Menthols are vile," Monty says.

Such is his conviction behind the statement that Uncle Bobby is startled out of attack mode. Montgomery men are like poorly socialized dogs. They make a hell of a racket when somebody gets too close, but they are more scared than angry.

"So what do you want to do, Monty?" his uncle asks, not so much for guidance as from resignation.

His mind no longer burdened with the puzzle, Monty seems to find clarity. He can hone in on the demands of the moment and address those despite the overarching absurdity.

"We're going to Shep's. As a family. We need to come together on this."

This feels right. His sentences don't crumple at the end from insincerity. *Families are illogical by nature*, he thinks, *and, thus, families are uniquely equipped to deal with problems rooted in illogic.*

Uncle Bobby doesn't quite buy in, but he's happy to head to Shep's to see if he can get some information.

"Lead on, young man," he says.

Lead he does. He plays the parts of shield and battering ram for his wife and uncles. He draws energy from the people as he pushes through. By the time he reaches the blackshirts, he has such a commanding presence that he doesn't even need to acknowledge the hired muscle as he passes. The bravado embarrasses Audrey, but it's better than his usually apologetic demeanor. Bobby apologizes for his nephew's antics with a wink and a shrug. Jules shrugs, too. It does stink like menthol inside the trailer. Now that Monty's identified it, he can't force himself to lose the scent. After all of this time, Sandra is still scrubbing Shep's kitchen, and the kitchen still looks like absolute shit. Shep is napping in his recliner, dozing and gurgling with his head thrown back and his mouth hanging open. Darry may or may not have moved in the time that Monty and Audrey were searching for Bill Cosby.

"Jen left," Darry says, unprompted.

"By herself?" Monty asks.

"She's a nice girl," Sandra said, "but I don't think she's all there."

"She went looking for Barney," Darry says.

Monty cannot let her derail his focus. He has to stick to the task at hand, put family first.

"Has Hawk been here?" he asks his brother, which leaves him feeling foolish when he's answered with just a wet snort.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Darry says. He says this as though his words could will her safety into existence.

“In case you can’t tell,” Sandra begins, finally putting down her steel wool, “I’ve been working hard to keep the number of jackasses in this place as low as possible. I’ve got one by default, and I wouldn’t feel right kicking you, my baby boy, out.”

She peels off her rubber gloves and lays them over the edge of the still-crusty sink.

“But bringing *him* here, and his little minion, is something only a complete jackass would do.”

“For Christ’s sake, Sandra,” Bobby cries, “I told you this morning: I didn’t shit in your woods.”

“I didn’t shit in your woods, either,” Jules says defiantly.

“And I told you this morning that you are a liar. And that’s what makes you a jackass. I know you’re cooking something up, Bobby. So I just have one question: at the end of the day, when you get whatever it is you want, will you have taken care of my boy?”

Bobby takes Sandra’s hands in his. “Sandra,” he says, “he’s my kin. Nothing comes above family.”

He’s looking her in the eyes, even after he’s finished his spiel, and Sandra’s looking right back at him. She regards him briefly.

“That’s the Bobby I know,” she says sweetly. She puts her rubber gloves back on and resumes her Sisyphean task. “Get whatever it is you need, and get the fuck out of here. We’ve already got enough animals sniffing around as it is.”

Animals sniffing around, a phrase Sandra had deployed many times, most deployments in reference to Montgomery men. She’d drop it literally after one of the

periodical Montgomery gatherings that she hosted on her secluded lot – not coincidentally, far from law enforcement or any members of the community predisposed to calling on them. Much like after the post-funeral shindig, once the last Montgomery male had roused himself and brushed the dirt from his face and the brambles and burrs from his hair, the woodland creatures would prowl to feast on the fast-food wrappers, puddles of skunked alcohol, and partially digested pub food that the men inevitably left as monuments to their hard-partying, devil-may-care lifestyles. Sandra did her best to clean up most of the mess before the younger generations had even woken to their inevitable and absolute disorientation, though she would leave the ill-formed piles of biohazards where they were. If a pack of mutated raccoons carrying a heretofore undiscovered supervirus were to suddenly begin terrorizing the region, the wooded fringes of Sandra’s property were the odds-on favorites for ground zero.

The ‘animals’ she referred to were not always literal, though they weren’t precisely figurative either. Any time the scent of dinner overwhelmed the house, be it chuck roast or a microwaved family-sized portion of ravioli, Shep would manage to find his way to the dinner table without so much as a beckon. The same went for Monty, if he were home.

Perhaps no man had been the animal in question more frequently than Bobby. And in his case, Sandra meant the term as a euphemism. Perhaps nobody had dropped in esteem, in her eyes, from the separation and divorce from Titus than Bobby, not even the degenerate soon-to-be ex-husband who had responded like a sulking child and had maintained that posture for the duration, right up until his death. But this Sandra had understood. Titus wasn’t Titus any more. The trauma to his brain had changed him for the worse. And it wasn’t like he exactly needed some type of catalyst to become a world-class asshole. He had been doing

just fine with little more than his god-given gifts. Bobby had no excuse for his behavior, though, other than those same god-given gifts. In most circles, even those circles that drank themselves stupid in Sleeper's pubs night after night, Sandra's decision to leave had been regarded as brave, empowering, and The Right Thing To Do. In the eyes of the certain factions within Montgomery clan, it had been a betrayal, not a betrayal along the order of, say, being born a Piggott, but serious enough that Bobby and like-minded kin determined some type of reprisal was called for. There was no hope of taking the kids, and even if there were, Bobby wasn't that callous. He knew his brother had been a nightmare – hell, he didn't even care for his own brother that much – but what the hell was the point of marriage if one could just up and abandon the other when times were at their worst? So he would not abide her taking the house. He wouldn't let her put a sick man on the street. And he sure as hell wouldn't saddle his parents or brothers with Titus's daily presence. And, it's safe to say that if Titus had come to live with him, the police would have been called out to the house every night until one of them ended up in jail, not a good look for a man who had finally attained the civic status he had sought for so long. Nope, Titus needed to stay in that house. The kids would be better off in a home that was dilapidating less aggressively, anyway.

It had been easy enough to get his perpetual accomplice, Clayton Shortz, to send a formal letter to Sandra detailing the consequences of contesting possession of the house. The gist was that if Sandra contested Titus's right to remain in the house – of which he was the sole owner according to the deed, Shortz noted – then Titus would contest every other issue from the gavel rap to open the separation hearing to the same rap that would punctuate the divorce decree. They would fight for custody, alimony, vehicles, and savings, even those of her own personal effects that might have become joint property by common law. Every

single thing. Or she could let him convalesce in the house that he'd lived in for almost twenty years and breeze right on through the separation.

Titus, hurt and sulking and pitying himself and malevolently silent, knew nothing of this but probably wouldn't have cared either way. Thoughts of legal bills, fighting, and dragging out this disgusting mess she simply wanted to walk away from, the thoughts overwhelmed her. Other than the ugliness Bobby had revealed by simply making the threat, the consequences didn't seem so bad. She could bring the boys with her to stay at her mother's home until she found a place that they could call their own, somewhere that would allow them to escape Sleeper's malicious tedium. And, though it shamed her to think this, Titus wouldn't be long for this world, especially without an ersatz nursemaid to tend to his every need. And when he passed, the house would go to her boys, anyway. Most important of all, though, she could keep this conflict from boiling over by simply acquiescing to the coercion. Sure, she would never forget Bobby's transgressions, but time would temper her ill will. Surrendering the house would let Bobby and whoever else he had riled up walk away satisfied that they had exacted their pound of flesh. Fighting would turn the rest of the clan against her. And if that happened, she could foresee no scenario in which her children could have a healthy relationship with their Montgomery kin.

Sandra, in her almost inhuman grace, managed to convince herself to see this as her final sacrifice, the one that would set her children up with the best possible chance of growing up to be well-rounded, decent young men. So she rolled over willingly at the separation hearing and left the courthouse without a house but with full custody of her two boys. Things will be fine, she thought, if we can just get through the divorce intact.

In the scheme of things, this had been Sandra's greatest achievement, her life's purpose if one were to subscribe to such a concept. She had remained sane in the face of insanity. Reason had prevailed in a matter that was so personal. And she had thrown off the yokes that had been breaking the spirits of her and her children. In a just world, this would be the part just before Happily Ever After.

In the world, she lived in, though, such fates are doled out arbitrarily, when they are doled out at all. Shep, whether out of blind loyalty or immaturity or his nascent drug use or a few words of propaganda from an uncle, could not see the gift his mother had presented to him. He followed through on the threats Shortz had made in his letter: he entrenched himself against her along every step of the way. First, he would not move with Sandra to her mother's house. He wouldn't abandon his dad, for one. And for another, his grandmother lived in a different school district, and he would be damned if he was going to change schools during his second go-round of his sophomore year. So with Titus's grudging approval, Shep remained, though Sandra insisted that she would be the one would take him to and from school every day. Titus couldn't even make it through the first weekend. When the police showed up at his door at four in the morning on that Sunday, Titus kicked the boy out. First, though, he showered the boy with an unprecedented torrent of verbal abuse before even letting him out of the foyer, before the police officer had even backed out of the driveway.

"You're stealing my pills. You're eating my food. You're bringing your shithead friends over every night to get fucked up, except for the nights you disappear entirely. You haven't cleaned up a damn thing since you've been here. Your mom is up my ass all the time. Now you're waking me up in the middle of the night, bringing the cops to my door. Those

cops ever make it inside, they'll have about twenty reasons to haul me to jail. Then I'll die.

You'll have killed me.”

Shep's eyes were glassy and he was choking down a sob that seemed to absolutely rip at his throat.

“You leave me no choice.”

“Please, Dad, don't do it,” Shep wailed. Speaking had broken the seal on his distress, and it immediately reduced him to a convulsing mess.

“When you moved in, what did I tell you?”

Shep tried to answer but couldn't do anything more than gasp.

“Answer me, dammit.”

Shep's eyes widened in desperation, but he still couldn't choke out a decipherable word.

“I told you that if you were going to live here with me that you were going to have to start acting like a man. Is this acting like a man?”

Shep had grown up in a world of men who stole pills, caroused, and scrapped with the police all the time. But they didn't sob. Shep shook his head.

“No, it's not,” Titus said. “Instead, you're lying on the floor crying just like your damned mother.”

“She was right. For once. You should be living with her. Two peas in a pod.”

“Please, Dad,” Shep finally managed.

“Pack up your shit. And don't try taking any of your drug bullshit with you. I'm going to have your mom search your bag.”

After a few hours of isolation in his room, all of the sadness and desperation had drained away. In its place: steely anger. This was exactly what his mom had wanted, and now the bitch was going to get it. In line with the basest of Montgomery instincts, he racked his mind for ways to make her pay. It didn't take long; he had cooked up his scheme by the time his mother had arrived to pick him up.

In the car, after he had been sullen long enough to get his message across, he broke the news, "I'm not changing schools."

"I know you don't want to, Shep. I wish you didn't have to do it, but those are the rules. I've talked to everybody about it: the principal, the superintendent, most of the school board. There's simply no wiggle room here."

Especially given his academic and disciplinary record, as she had repeatedly been told.

"I don't care about any of those people. I'm not changing schools. I don't give a damn what the rules are."

"Kiddo, the rules suck, and sometimes they're unfair. But they apply to everyone."

"Not me."

Sandra had to resist the urge to resort to sarcasm, as she so often did with her young pupils. Sometimes, it was the only language they understood.

"Why not you, Shep?"

"Because I'm not going back to that school either," Shep said.

Sandra had cultivated a vast reserve of patience in anticipation of what she knew would be a very delicate situation. In a blink, it had been tapped dry.

"Like hell," she said.

“I’m done with school.”

“Not if you’re going to live in my house,” Sandra snapped.

“You mean grandma’s house.”

“I mean any house with me.”

“Great,” Shep said with the insolence only a teenager can muster. “Two birds with one stone.”

Shep didn’t go to school the next day or any other day that week. Sandra simply couldn’t make. Even if she hauled him straight to his desk with a steel grip on his upper arm, he would have just taken off after the first period, if not before. She couldn’t just toss him out either. Her most primal maternal instincts wouldn’t allow it, but that didn’t mean it had been an empty threat. She let him try to find somebody to take him in, but his reputation had already squashed his welcome as a houseguest, and he didn’t have enough money to even take out a room at The Pit. She also had her trump card yet to play, a completed and signed application to military school. She might not be able to keep him in a desk for more than one period, but she had faith that it wouldn’t be a problem for the sergeants a hundred miles down the road.

She should have felt confident, assured that she had played her hand perfectly, but she wasn’t at ease. She had already sensed the animals sniffing around.

In the many years since, her keen extra-sensory perception had only been honed further. Not that it requires any particular sensitivity to understand that many beasts were encircling her son this very moment. The federal government, silent though it may be; Bobby and the kin; Hawk and his civic assholes; the reverend, though what he stood to gain she had yet to piece together; all of these strangers in pursuit of righteousness; the townsfolk and

their militia; and probably dozens of other actors that she could not yet identify. All of these and more becoming an ever-tightening noose around this half-trailer. She could not keep them all at bay, but she could get rid of at least two assholes.

“Spit it out, Bobby. What do you want?”

“I want to resolve this situation without anybody getting hurt. That’s what I want,”

Bobby said.

“From us, I mean,” Sandra said. “What do you want from us?”

She looks like she is about to vomit on the freshly-scrubbed counter, like she had just eaten something from Bubba’s next door. Bobby is spared the need to dissemble further by a harsh rattle from the front door that just wanted to remain closed. Monty is spared making the decision of whether to out his uncle. The reverend, finally victorious against the substandard door, rushed in. Light and fresh air followed him, like the aura of Jesus Christ himself. Handcuffs and another blackshirt followed him, too, like the stooges of a crime lord. And behind both of them trails Barney.

“The man of the hour,” Bobby exclaims genially, offering his hand to the reverend.

The reverend responds in kind, not even wincing at Bobby’s over-firm grip.

“Technically, the man of the hour is sitting in the corner drooling on himself,” the reverend jokes.

Through preternatural instinct alerting him to being the butt of the joke, Shep snorts himself awake. He blinks stupidly, wipes his chin by pulling up his shirt collar, and asks, “Where the hell have you been?”

It’s unclear who he’s addressing, as he’s already focused on extracting another menthol from a crumpled pack.

The reverend answers. "We've been helping one of your neighbors. The gentleman who lives in the Innkeeper Suite."

"Fuckin' Joe Balotelli," Shep grumbles. "Thinks he's better than the rest of us."

He lights his cigarette and looks up, his eyes more clear now.

"You'd like him," he says to Bobby.

"I think his mind is a bit too occupied to delineate the amount of esteem he holds for each of you. He's preoccupied with his cancer."

"You heal him, just like you healed my brother?" Jules asks.

"I doubt it," Bobby says. "We'd have heard if he was dead already."

"No, he's not dead yet," the reverend says gravely, "but it won't be long now."

"I see," says Bobby. "Your miracle-working powers don't extend to cancer."

"He didn't seek me out for healing," the reverend says.

"Probably saw what you done to Bobby," Jules says.

Monty speaks up. "Far as I can tell, Uncle Bobby's doing pretty damn well, all things considered, and I don't think you can prove that the reverend didn't have a hand in his recovery."

"You're smarter than that, son," Bobby says. He turns back to the reverend. "So did he want for you to read him Bible stories, then?"

"No. He wanted me to help him get his house in order before he goes. He wanted to make sure he was squared away with God, his family, his friends, and, above all else, himself. He wanted to go with a clean conscience. And your cousin, here, wanted to help."

"What a fucking waste," Shep scoffs. "If that was me, I'd be having them pump me full of chemo until I popped."

The reverend levels his gaze on Shep and lets it linger for a moment.

“That *is* you, young man. You just haven’t figured it out yet.”

Any frivolity has rushed from the trailer. The place is somber, the world’s most cramped catacomb.

“It’s not too late,” the reverend says. He claps Barney on the shoulder, “And I know you’ve got one good man to help you through this.”

Barney beams from the compliment. It’s entirely possible that this is the first time that he has ever been called a Good Man in public.

“But I didn’t come here to chastise you. I have something for you, for your family.”

The reverend reaches into one of the hidden pockets in his robe and pulls out a worn envelope, folded in half. Out of habit, Monty touches his back pocket. Empty.

“One of my men found this while keeping a watch over Bubba’s place.”

Here, Handcuffs makes eye contact with Monty and winks.

“I took the liberty of reading it,” the reverend says. “It’s to you, Shep.”

“Add it to the stack,” Shep says, unimpressed.

A fascinating geometrical idiosyncrasy emerges when a line segment is divided in just the right place. Take a single spaghetti noodle. Push the edge of a fork through it anywhere except the dead center, and now there are two noodles, one short and one long. This is decidedly not fascinating. This is just eating spaghetti like a small child. But if that child pushes his fork through the spaghetti at exactly the right point, the smaller piece will be the exact same proportion of the bigger as the bigger is of the original noodle. Pretty neat, for people who like that kind of thing, but the type of thing that makes the kids in high school lament their mathematics requirement for being pointless. And perhaps it would have been

relegated to a simple useless fact were it not for the tendency of that ratio to show up in the strangest places, be it in describing the arrangement of seeds at the core of an apple or the way a mollusk's shell spirals out from center. There is something special about that number, hence its name: the Golden Ratio. Monty doesn't give a damn about how special the number is. All he cares about is figuring out what that number is. He pictures chopping up lines in his head and comparing the various measurements without success. It is infuriating, and it seems like Monty's own defense mechanism might be the thing to finally push him over the edge. But he is jerked back from the precipice by the reverend.

"I was going to do just that actually. It's Monty's letter to give, anyway."

Now Shep is interested. He follows the handoff between Monty and the reverend with greedy eyes.

"Now, I must finally go and address my people."

The reverend walks back toward the entrance, followed by his lackeys.

"Hold your horses there, Rev. We need to talk," Bobby says.

He rushes out behind the reverend with Jules in tow.

With the circus gone, everybody focuses on Monty, who is standing with the heavy briefcase dangling from one hand and the bent envelope held up in the other as though it were the last poker card in the hands of a man who has just wagered the family farm.

Whatever greatness the reverend had seen in Barney must have gotten lost on the way to the trailer. Because in this trailer, Barney is being a pretty big dick. In his defense, he'd been provoked. As much as Monty liked to pretend that he had his thumb on top of the world – or at least on top of those not blessed with as much intelligence – he was shit for temporal reasoning, and even worse for empathy.

“Where’s Jen?” he had asked.

Barney wanted to know why the fuck Monty cared. Audrey gave him a look that meant the same thing. Shep didn’t necessarily know what was going on, but he was enjoying

seeing his little brother squirm. And Monty doesn't know what to do. Darry swoops in to the rescue.

"She was here. Then she went looking for you," he says.

"When was she here?" Barney asks with the deliberation of an intelligence officer on the scent of a mole.

"I don't know, she came with Monty," Darry says.

Shep is blatantly grinning with each development. Barney pauses, stunned until his mind can process the various facts coming and going, then he asks Monty, "Why was she with you?"

"We met out front."

"She wanted to meet with you," Barney says.

"No," Monty says.

"She hadn't talked to me since she brought my truck back, but she'll meet up with you."

Monty could attest to the innocence of their meeting, but he knows that he'll somehow belie his overarching guiltiness. But this time, his wife comes to his rescue.

"They didn't 'meet up,'" Audrey said. "When I ran into her, she didn't know where Monty was."

Barney doesn't quite believe it. But he resigns, anyway.

"I don't guess she would lie for you just so you could put it to my girl," he says.

"Ha," Audrey cracks, "no, I wouldn't. I would just poison him slowly until, after a few years . . ."

She finishes the sentence by snapping her fingers. The pop that emanates strikes Monty as a little too loud.

“So when did you get here? When did she leave?” Barney asks.

Darry answers the second question. “She left a couple of hours ago.”

Barney processes this information, too.

“Well, we need to go find her now,” he says. “Be dark in a couple hours.”

Some part inside of Monty doesn't want to go look for her. The part that deals only in terms of wants, raw unthinking wants. Some higher order sense of duty compels Monty to go look for her anyway.

“Monty can't go,” Shep declares. He will brook no debate. “He and I need to talk.”

Monty still can't find the right lengths for those spaghetti noodles. Purely through visualization, he knows that the ratio comes out somewhere between one and two. The shorter noodle would have to be non-existent for the ratio to be one. It would have to be the same length as the longer one if it were to be two. Somewhere between one and two. With the infinitude of numbers out there, one might think that this has been a fine job of narrowing it down. But that perspective brings no relief.

“Fuck you both,” Barney says matter-of-factly. “Darry?”

“Someone should stay here with the women,” he says.

“Excuse me,” Sandra says sharply, getting it out just a split second before Audrey can. “First of all, us womenfolk don't need your protection. Second, we aren't staying anywhere. We're going to help, too.”

Darry still looks concerned.

“We’ll stick together, if it makes you feel any better, you big baby,” Audrey teases. She’s being nice because Darry is family. She could not care less if it made him feel better.

“Great,” Barney says. “Three teams. I go across the lot to the neighbors. Darry goes checks out the back lot and the neighbors on this side. The ladies head toward the front. And the two dildos go and get fucked.”

Everybody except for Monty and Shep file out the front. When they finally wrangle the door open, a loud din whooshes in. Now even the brothers head out to see what’s going on. To their right, the reverend is heading toward the raised platform in the courtyard, followed by most of his muscle. Two are absent, busy dragging a screaming Bobby backward toward the back lot. Bobby is convulsing with rage like a panicked hyena. Jules shuffles along behind the commotion, keeping his head down.

Monty breathes a sigh of relief when the blackshirts push Bobby to the ground roughly and walk away. He had been afraid that they might exact some retribution for what Bobby’s boy had done to their leader. Bobby scrambles off to the neighbors, dragging Jules behind him. He does not acknowledge the rest of the family. Barney heads out in the same direction as the reverend. Sandra and Jen push toward the front of the property. Darry heads off after his uncles.

Just as he closes the door, it dawns on Monty that his uncle’s loss is Hawk’s win. Which he thinks is Shep’s loss.

“Shit,” he says, expressing it more eloquently. “We need to go, like now.”

Shep was already back in his seat, fishing yet another smoke from his pack.

“We’re not going anywhere. You and me need to have a talk.”

“No. We need to leave now. The mayor’s trying to get you arrested so he can turn you in to the feds.”

“Bullshit,” Shep laughs. He lights his smoke, inhales, inadvertently laughs some more, which makes him cough for a spell. “Hawk hates those bastards.”

“No,” Monty says. He can’t even begin to unwind the story for his brother without wasting a ton of time. “I’m telling you. He is coming for you. Soon.”

Shep draws from his cigarette again, holds it, and exhales. “Then let them,” he says.

“Is this like a joke? A test? Are you just fucking around with me?”

“No joke. Why do you think we’ve been sitting around here all day? In my home. In the first place they’d come looking for me,” Shep says.

“Not with all these people here, there’s an army out there.”

“Ha,” Shep scoffs. “That’s not an army. Dad served in the army. Out there are just a bunch of people who are angry, scared, or confused. Half of them would clear out with the first warning shot. Besides, if an asshole like Uncle Bobby can slip in here, what’s to keep some professional slip-inner from doing the same?”

“Sure, okay. But why stay here then?”

“It’s my time,” Shep said.

“That’s bullshit. Since when has a government letter meant a damn thing to you?”

“Well, that’s true,” Shep says. He takes a draw. “But it’s not just that. Did you know that Dad died when he was thirty-eight? I’m thirty-eight.”

“That only means something because you want it to,” Monty says.

“You might be right, but what’s wrong with wanting a little meaning in my death?”

“Your death can still be meaningful, even if it doesn’t happen right here, right now. Don’t you want to go out on your own terms?” Monty asks.

Shep is still as placid as ever as he takes one last pull from his cigarette before extinguishing the butt in an empty lite-beer can. “These are my terms.”

“You think Hawk’s going to take you out for a lobster dinner at the Holiday Inn?” Monty asks. “You’re going to jail. And where do you think the feds are going to put you? I know you’ve been to lock-up, but you’ve never done federal time.”

Monty doesn’t have a clue whether federal prison is any worse than county lock-up or the local drunk tank. But it sounds more oppressive, and that’s good enough. And he’s clearly thrown Shep off balance. Shep nearly gets to his feet, but instead sits back and shoots Monty a suspicious look.

“Why are you pretending to care all of a sudden? Nobody else is here for you to pretend for.”

“Of course, I care, you enormous ass,” Monty says. “You’re my brother.”

“And what makes that so special?”

Shep is angry. He has been wanting to say this for a long time. His point in having Monty hang back wasn’t to dress down his brother, but he is glad to have the opportunity. That Monty doesn’t have a response queued up says all he needs to know. But one of the rules of being an inveterate asshole is pressing any advantage, no matter how gratuitous. So he presses.

“I bet if we read that little love letter of yours, we’ll get a sense of how much you care about keeping me alive. How about we read it together and see if I can find the inspiration to carry on.”

Now that the win is decisive, Shep relents, “But I’ll be damned if I’m going to spend my last hours in a cell. Let’s go to the bar.”

Shep has had run-ins with the law for his entire life, mostly misdemeanor stuff that saw him spend a night or a weekend in a holding cell. But then, just after he had turned twenty-two, he got in some big trouble and decided to change his ways. It had been only a couple of years since his accident, a really rough time by even his standards, so he was still on probation from it. His license was still suspended, but that mattered less considering that he would never bother renewing it. Even Shep would admit that he wasn’t doing too great at that time, but he was a fucking sober saint compared to some of the people he ran around with. He wasn’t going out and partying so much anymore. He was staying in, getting really fucked up with anyone he could convince to come over to his old Airstream trailer. Sadly, the once-proud silver bullet had fallen into disrepair. All of the love that he and Lanny had poured into its restoration was covered in too many layers of stale-beer grime and ash to shine through. Two years prior, when he and his uncle had finally finished their project, when he had finally paid his uncle for the cost of the old clunker that they had worked on, when he moved it out from the boonies to his mother’s property, which was merely boonie-adjacent, business had been booming. He proudly showed off his trailer to anyone just to see the impressed looks on their faces when they stepped inside to find an actual home. But in these days, good friends had been hard to come by. Anyone willing to endure the shut-in’s stench also had to deal with his ungrateful bitching that they didn’t come over more often, always had to rush off to somewhere more important, and on and on. God forbid anyone sit and listen to his pain. So understandably, he had fewer guests than he would have preferred. He didn’t work anymore. Didn’t need to. Every day was the same: getting fucked up and

waiting for someone, anyone, to show up and hang out. The first few days each month, he knew he could count on a handful of visitors. He wasn't naïve enough to think that the pattern was coincidental. But hey, what was money good for if you couldn't enjoy it? And what was so bad about taking a roll in the hay with a girl while her dealer "friend" ("more like a brother") sat in the other room not six feet away, a girl who was there because she knew he had a nice wad of cash and was looking to get fucked up. He had met some pretty interesting people that way. Like the meth-dealing boyfriend who casually mentioned that making the shit was damn near as easy baking a loaf of bread. The other days of the month were pretty lonely, especially since he wasn't in the market for anything other than pot, cigarettes, and liquor. Not even looking to toss a few bucks toward some pussy. He had to find other ways to pass the time, and he was always on the lookout for interesting hobbies that didn't involve leaving the trailer or being sober. Because of this, he pounced on the dealer and grilled him until he had weaseled out a list of ingredients and a promise to come back the first of the month with the rest of the details. That had only been a few days ago, so he'd only managed to grab a dozen packs of sinus medicine when this same girl came rushing back into his trailer. Alone. He already felt the blood rushing to his penis.

"Fuck, thank god you're home," she said.

"Just barely caught me," Shep joked.

She didn't laugh. She was sweaty and crackling with anxious energy. Shep had the answer for that.

"Share a J?" he asked, presenting her with a tightly rolled joint (he wouldn't be reduced to smoking roaches until the end of the month).

“Fuck yes. I need it,” she said. She put the doobie in her mouth and let him spark it. She took a long pull from it and let the smoke linger in her lungs before exhaling. She hit it twice more before passing it back to Shep.

“I just about got locked up. Like locked up for real,” she said.

Shep leaned forward, holding off on hitting the joint.

“Yeah, I haven’t slept for a few days,” she said.

She had continued the party without him. Pretty shitty.

“So anyway, I was just coming out of the liquor store with a fucking case of beer in my hand, and out of nowhere my P.O. pulls up and starts heading into the store when he sees me.”

“I got a P.O.” Shep says, “Sucks. What did he do?”

“He just kind of stopped and looked at me. Just looked at me, Shep. Looked at me kind of crazy. Not like I wasn’t there. Like *he* wasn’t there.”

“That’s fucked up. What did you do?”

“I got in my car and drove here. I figured I’d lose him in the woods.”

“You need to get the fuck out of here,” Shep said. He immediately began setting his pieces and his joints into a shoebox along with the rest of his bud.

“No. I lost him. Forever ago. I just need to pass a few hours. I figured you could figure out how to help me with that.”

He would have loved to.

“You didn’t lose him,” he said. “There’s only one place you’d be heading out this far. He’s just taking his time because he knows all roads end here.”

“Fuck,” she said for the thousandth time this binge. “What should we do?”

“I don’t know about you, but I need to get all these bottles cleaned up. I got a probation officer, too. And he’s probably buddies with yours.”

“I doubt it,” she said. “I have a P.O.: a parole officer. I’m going back to prison if he finds this.”

She handed him a small bag with a few shards of pale yellow rock.

“You are fucking kidding me,” he said, even while putting her baggie into his shoebox, which he then made sure to stash in the back of his bedroom closet. They’d need a warrant to look there. Which meant they’d also need a warrant to find the garbage bag full of empty bottles and cans he stashed next to it.

The girl was still trembling.

“You’re fine,” he said, sidling up to her on the bench. “You don’t have anything on you. I’ll bet he can’t even tell that you’re fucked up.”

Shep wanted to find a way to make this not a lie.

“I know what to do. Go hop in the shower. It’ll calm you down, wash away any incriminating odors, sober you up a bit.”

The moment he heard the shower creak on, he sprouted a massive erection. That the parole officer chose just that moment to bang on his door was just cruel fate. He couldn’t keep the man out for long, not nearly for long enough, so he tucked his dick up into his waistband and answered the door. The parole officer looked like a pretty big asshole, even more than his own state-mandated babysitter. Two county deputies stood behind him.

“That’s Lindy Kane’s car,” the parole officer said, pointing at the beat-to-shit Grand Am. “We know she’s in there so we’d like to come inside.”

“I don’t know, bud,” Shep said. He really loved fucking with the authorities, especially when he had the upper hand. “I’m not sure I’m interested in having any guests at the moment.”

“If she’s not here, she must be in that big house right there. I guess we could head over there first.”

Shep reluctantly let them in, ceding the battle but not the war. They crowded Shep into the booth.

“Guys, there is a couch over there.” Shep said. “I’m not that into handjobs.”

“He’s funny,” a deputy said.

“Look, I’m glad we’ve gotten to know each other so well, but I don’t like his tone. And since we’re not breaking any laws here, I think I’d like to politely request that you get the fuck out.”

“See, I’m not going to be able to do that. Not until I give Lindy the bracelets I brought for her.”

“Because you think she’d only come here if she was getting fucked up,” Shep said.

“No. Not that I don’t doubt that’s true. But it’s because of the case of beer sitting on the front passenger seat of that piece-of-shit out there.”

“Well, as you can tell, she’s indisposed at the moment,” Shep said, pausing to let them hear the shower run. “So I think I’d rather you wait outside. This is a private residence. Mine. And I know I haven’t broken any laws.”

“Your reckon yourself pretty sharp, son?” the parole officer asked. “Hard to stay sharp when you’re sick, isn’t it?”

Shep didn’t follow.

“I mean, a fella would have to be pretty sick to need so much medicine, unless . . .”

The packs of sinus meds were just sitting out on the counter. There wasn't anything illegal about sinus medication so it hadn't even crossed his mind to hide it.

“You know this is crazy,” the officer continued, “but I've heard of some dipshit rednecks who use that crap to make their own drugs.”

It still hadn't dawned on Shep that he was already in a lot of trouble so he wasn't in shock and could hear the officer lay out the rest of his snare.

“Of course, you wouldn't do that. You're a sharp guy. Damn.”

The officer pretended to mutter to himself.

“Unless,” he began, “you aren't very sharp at all. In that case, you might be the kind of guy dumb enough to buy an illegal quantity of materials used in the manufacturing of methamphetamine.”

He clapped his hands to applaud himself.

“I think we've cracked the case. I'll let the boys in uniform handle the cuffing.”

They cuffed him and took him away from his trailer, and he wouldn't be back for thirty-four days, in which time his friends will have picked the place clean. Even his car, which a female cousin will have sprung from impound, will have been sold for scrap when it died on the ride home and nobody sprang for the towing bill. And that was the really the crux of the matter: everything that he had accumulated in life, everything that he had thought mattered, had been not just taken away, it had been nullified. Even the guts of his trailer were ravaged. A careless friend must have spilled a drink during the looting party and not bothered to clean it up. The floor was irreparably warped. The plumbing was fucked. And he wasn't an expert on insects or anything, but he was pretty sure he had several infestations going on

at the same time. The day he arrived home straight from the courthouse, freshly guilty after only thirty-four days of incarceration, he stepped into his trailer, observed the toll taken, and said, “Fuckin right ‘Time Served.’” The day that he returned to his trailer in the same ratty sweatsuit he had been arrested in was the last day that he ever step foot in the trailer. It may have been worse before he and Lanny had started in on it. It may have been a little bit better. About the same, in any case. But he couldn’t bring himself to take on both his and Lanny’s share of the work knowing that it was arrogant to put any amount of time into a thing, a physical object. It took two years of working his ass off for that trailer, for his uncle, who for those two years was as close to a good father as Shep would ever get, and every trace of it could be obliterated in the span of a month. It took even less time for Lanny to be obliterated by that car that was really fucking moving at the moment of impact. There was no point in rebuilding. The very idea was offensive, and anybody who brought it up would be made to understand that. He just left the trailer there and rarely gave it so much as a thought. He had other things on his mind, like the results of the full medical work-up his mother had forced him to endure. Classic good news, bad news situation. It could have played out like a lame sitcom:

“Well, Mr. Montgomery, the good news is that you have several positive results, which brings us to the bad news . . .”

The bad news was Type II Diabetes, Hep B, and Hep B’s shitty little cousin, C, Liver Disease. Still, the doctor hadn’t known shit. Said he most likely had them before going to jail. Said the combination would kill him within five years. Said it’d take a miracle for him for him to ever recover normal liver function without a transplant, for which he was not

eligible given the nature of his recent conviction. Well, fuck their transplant and their prognosis. Time, if nothing else, had proven the doctor wrong.

But recovery had been painful, and his hard time had certainly taken its toll. He knew that if he didn't want to go back he would have to change his ways. No more of this mostly misdemeanor stuff. From that point on, his stuff would be strictly misdemeanor.

And now, Shep seems to be strictly legitimate, other than the whole breaching of the death contract ordeal. He's gone legit because he knows that even one night in the tank will without question turn to at least another thirty at the county, if not someplace worse. That doesn't mean that he can't have a good time, not by any stretch. He can still get pretty fucking hammered without getting arrested, just needs to remember to hit the head before leaving the bar. And at this early hour, it's almost impossible to get arrested. Daylight drunks are meant to be pitied and scorned from afar, not locked in a cell. It's cruel to drag a man to jail in the middle of the day. Nobody should have to watch both a sunset and a sunrise through that ridiculously tiny pane of chicken-wire plexi just on account of getting knocked out a little too early.

They pick their way through the car wasteland. For Monty, the trip is somewhat less romantic than it had been with Audrey, but it is still kind of cool. They are fraternizing for maybe the first time.

When they get to their mother's car, Monty reflexively gets behind the wheel and Shep relaxes riding shotgun.

"I really don't think you should give up," Monty says.

He hasn't started the engine yet.

“There’s no point in fighting it, Monty. The wheels are already in motion. Even if it weren’t my time, it would be way too late to stop whatever we’ve started here with the reverend, with the people, with the police. One of the reverend’s dickheads even told me that there were a bunch of news crews headed out here, from Atlanta and Charlotte and Dallas. Even St. Louis and Chicago maybe. Maybe even New York. Our home town, on living room screens in the Big Apple.”

“Nobody really calls it the Big Apple,” Monty says.

“You’re an expert on what people call things now? Your list of specialties is getting pretty long these days.”

“I know what you’re saying. It doesn’t seem possible. It doesn’t seem possible that New York can exist *and* Sleeper can exist. Like two suns, burning too brightly, too close.”

“Or like two black holes that are sucking themselves into themselves.”

Shep has it right.

“What I was trying to say before you had to shoot off at the mouth was that even if it hadn’t gotten too big already, it’s still my time. Dad died when he was thirty-eight. So I’m going to die when I’m thirty-eight.”

Shep believes that there is a divinely ordained trajectory for the life and death for a few chosen Montgomery men. The signs aren’t always clear to him, but there had been too much synchronicity in his life not to feel connected to something bigger. The car accident had converted him to a True Believer. His firmament was his belief that his life was connected to his father’s. He had wanted to believe it for a while, but then the car accident gave him indisputable truth. Not the wreck itself, but the collateral damage: the pieces of broken glass that buried themselves in his right eyeball. Then the surgeries that had to be

repeated in order to get all of the glass. It was all the same. A freak accident. A head injury. Multiple surgeries. No prognosis of complete recovery extant.

The only repeating pattern that meant anything was the woman who sat worrying and not-crying in those hospital waiting rooms. How it wore her down unfairly. How she bounced back so quickly but wasn't quite the same, wasn't quite as vulnerable.

Shep honed in on the fact that both he and his father had suffered the trauma when they were twenty-one. Like a freshly baptized evangelist, Shep was happy to share his belief with the world. He was happy to debate it, happy to because he couldn't lose.

It's not a head trauma.

The eye is in the head.

It wasn't a freak accident; you were drunk.

Shep could not stress hard enough the fact that he was not actually intoxicated the morning that he smashed his car into the telephone poll next to the football field and was cited for Driving While Intoxicated. He had been intoxicated the night before. Quite intoxicated. He had been partying for a few days before, but he had crashed hard the night before. Before he crashed, he did two smart things. He made sure to get home before it got too bad, and he also managed to take an easy-money bet for one hundred dollars. One of the guys at the bar had been staying with one of the girls Shep grew up with. That guy had been an asshole. The guy said that it was his birthday the next day and that if Shep remembered that, he'd give him a hundred bucks. He went home at close and got three and a half hours of solid sacktime before getting up at five-thirty in the morning and driving over to that girl's place and wish the shithead a happy birthday by pissing on his shoes and taking his hundred bucks. He had been dead sober. Wickedly hung-over, but dead sober. He did fine on the field

sobriety test. City dickhead couldn't tell him in so many words, but he had obviously been impressed by Shep's performance. It was the damn breath test, where he put up a pretty admirable number, all things considered. But having alcohol in your system and being drunk were two different things. Shep would bet anyone a hundred dollars over the truth of that.

That meant it was a freak accident that he spun out by the football field, maybe a hundred yards in the other direction was his destination. It was a freak accident that the telephone pole hadn't been moved since the road had been slightly widened a few years back – thanks again, Bobby – and was just close enough to the road to catch just enough of the driver's side of the front end to stick.

Granted, he had undergone fewer surgeries than his old man and had ended up with perfect eyesight thanks to the first of his miraculous recoveries. But he'd still had three surgeries, which was a lot of surgery to have had, and his prognosis had been that he would never recover full-vision and would be lucky to see anything more than blurry spots of varying colors from that eye. It was all close enough to be noted. The whole vibe of the thing was that it wasn't meant to be a meticulous piece-for-piece recreation, it was just a set of themes that unfolded similarly.

“I get what you're trying to say, but Dad died a couple months before his birthday,”
Monty says.

“What is your point?”

“He wasn't thirty-eight. He would have turned thirty-eight on his birthday.”

“And I just subtracted the years to guess his age,” Shep finished.

“So you see now, right? There's no reason to get yourself killed.”

“I see. I see that I didn’t even know how old my father was when he died and now I’ve missed my chance.

Monty was good with dates and simple math. Always had been.

“Now, Lanny, on the other hand, died just eight days after his thirty-eighth birthday. So if you’re looking for an implausible coincidence on which to laud imagined significance, that’s right on the nose.”

“No, you’re right,” Shep says. “It’s all bullshit. It always was. Can we just get to the bar already?”

Monty starts the engine. He is glad to have been helpful. Shep understands that people like Monty probably will never get it because they always approach everything as a problem to be solved. For there to be a problem, he had to find something wrong. And so people like him come into every conversation eager to amass the list of things that will be wrong with whatever the other person is saying.

That shouldn’t discount the fact that Monty truly has been helpful. He has opened Shep’s eyes to the fact that going out like a punk is an unacceptable end. He doesn’t need to die today or tomorrow or even next year. What he needs is to make sure he’s got more points than the other guy when it’s game over, more points than all of those “other guys.”

And conventional wisdom states that there is no better way to put up a few points than to put down a few pints.

Bobby has been possessed by some sort of frenetic mania ever since the blackshirt pushed him to the ground. The mania allows him to push through the pain that has started bleeding through the analgesia of good strong pills and adrenaline. Darry has been following Bobby, in part because of the good fortune that Bobby’s episode has been taking place inside

of Darry's search parameters, in larger part because his uncle looks like an over-clocked robot running on bad code. He beelines from person to person seemingly at random, stopping only to scream or blurt or wave his hands dramatically before moving on to his next target. Even in such an uncharacteristically unbalanced state, Bobby is still effective by drawing on his residual goodwill and his immutable chutzpah. His energy is contagious, even when it's erratic, even when it's terrifying. Not contagious enough to pull Darry all the way in, though. Enough to keep him interested from a safe distance. Bobby manages to convince two deputies to follow him from Pickerington's property line into The Pit's now-crowded back lot where a few blackshirts surge through the crowd to corral them back through the narrow pavilion into the courtyard for the reverend's speech. They won't allow him to be completely surrounded by the rabble. Bobby heads straight for the Innkeeper's Suite, and Darry decides he'd rather not know exactly how things play out inside than to risk being sucked into Bobby's orbit for the rest of his quest to save face. Perhaps even Uncle Jules's instinct for self-preservation has finally outpaced his blind loyalty to his big brother. He, too, seems unwilling to enter, instead slouching against the rough exterior wall to enjoy a smoke. He looks like every indolent old man ever, leaning against a wall that is not his, smoking a bummed cigarette, watching the people pass by, every once in a while indulging his fixation on curvy women by staring after them and wolf-whistling to himself.

Darry watches Bobby and the deputies disappear into the building without knocking and turns his attention back to his own directives of finding Jen and making sure his aunt and cousin-in-law are all right.

Within moments, his decision is vindicated, when Hawk stomps up to the very same doorway and barges through, also without knocking, trailed by a few of his local fuzz

lackeys. Seems a dying man might appreciate a little courtesy in his dying days, but these men of the people, these public servants, have bigger fish to fry. At least when the deputies' field commander ambles up to the entrance, he delivers a few sharp raps to the door frame before letting himself in. None of the late-comers have given Jules even scant attention, despite his perch directly adjacent to the door. The old man is curious now and is glancing between his hardly smoked cigarette and the seemingly irresistible door. He's a man torn, but then settles back against the wall to finish his smoke and see if he can't scope out a few more nice big sets of milkers.

Jules is exactly the kind of man that Darry is worried about the women in his family coming across. Some guys like Jules only need a little encouragement or booze to turn gawking into stalking. Some guys like Jules will never transgress beyond words, looks, and thoughts. Guys like Jules are everywhere. They are the family men in the herds being driven back to the courtyard. They are the righteous soldiers toting guns from behind the safety of their property lines or badges. They are definitely among the men Sandra and Audrey cross paths with on their search for Jen. But some of those saw Sandra slap the piss out of three of their handsy brethren and the spread word quickly.

The women are able to make it through the crowd unmolested. A disappointment, kind of. Sandra had a few backhands dialed up to ten and ready to go. She would be glad to knock loose a few wisdom teeth. She curses Barney and his paternalistic plan. They were heading toward the road en route to brave the car cemetery. If Jen were trying to leave, she could get hung up there for a while. But their beat necessarily takes them along only the fringes of the mob until it falls away altogether as they get out of earshot of the speaking platform.

After spending so long listening to the ruckus of the mob, the silence is bracing. Sandra and Audrey have yet to speak, not just during this manhunt, but since she'd arrived. Usually the two women wait until they are alone, perhaps sequestering themselves after dinner, to have the types of forthright discussions they couldn't have in front of the men. Normally, it's something both women look forward, too. Finally, a chance to get the lay of the land, without interference from the jocularity, evasion, and defensiveness the men alternately used to avoid honest opening their behavior up for honest criticism. This time, though, neither woman is anxious to kick off the conversation. Monty and Audrey had been having "trouble" for a couple of years, but it had always been the normal young couple problems with coming to terms with the fact life randomly throws hardship at people because nobody is special nor chosen nor immune to the gritty underbelly of life. Life's not a fairy tale unless the fairy's passed out against the wall with a needle in his arm and a telephone cord pulled tightly across his bicep to help pop a vein so he can just get some of this goddamn horse into his bloodstream and come down from the worst bender in fairy history so he can go into work tomorrow to see if he even still has a job after admittedly going off the fucking reservation for the past five days.

Something is different on this trip, and it's not entirely because of Shep and all of his bullshit. Sandra's youngest son had behaved uncharacteristically, as though his wife didn't exist, right up until she showed up at the Pit today. Audrey is tough but not invincible. She may not cry, tremble, or sulk when something is wrong, but she couldn't hide her disgust altogether. In a few unprotected moments, Audrey let her loathing of her husband burble to the surface. And that's not even taking into account the other girl. Jen had been a nice girl when she was five, but by the time she had reached high school, Sandra could not get past the

fact that all of her boyfriends were the scummiest men Sleeper High had to offer. She didn't think Jen and Barney were any good for each other, and she didn't want to think about her son getting tangled up in that some way or the other.

Sandra doesn't know if she has enough information to share her suspicions with Audrey, but she thinks something is happening or about to happen between Monty and his cousin's girlfriend. She's still deciding. Since she's still figuring out how much to share, she's not anxious to start the conversation. She is anxious to find Jen, though. For the girl's safety, of course, but also to ask her some very pointed questions, Audrey's presence be damned. Audrey's anxious to find Jen, too. She'd like to get to know more about this "friend" of Monty's that she's never heard him talk about before. She has believed him every time he told her that he couldn't get it up because he was tired or depressed or sick. She has believed this even though she would be a fool not to consider that a man still in his twenties should need a place to get his release. She has believed his adamant denials of the possibility of homosexuality being a factor in the deterioration of their physical relationship. She still believes that Monty is a good enough man not to go out and do something dangerous, something that might put her at risk. Beyond that, though, she has some serious questions about her husband's character. And she'd love to see if a chat with Jen could point her in the direction of some answers.

As the women get toward the edge of the automobile wasteland, they spot Jen sitting in Barney's truck with the driver-side door open.

"I sure as shit hope Jen's okay," Monty says, slapping the bottom of another shot glass against the bar. "But I hope even more that it's not Mom and Audrey who find her."

Shep holds up two fingers to let the bartender know that they are ready for more. The bar isn't nearly as crowded as it had been the night before. Probably because the food they fry up behind the bar for dinner tastes like shit. Bad enough that Shep vows that this will not be his last meal. Smarter people than Shep get dinner somewhere else before making their way to the bar for the evening. More ambitious people, at least.

"Why the fuck do you care?" Shep asks. "Are you scared that you'll get in trouble with your wife just because you have an obvious crush?"

"I don't have a crush on her," Monty says. That's definitely true. There is nothing frivolous about the nature of their attraction, even if it amounts to nothing more than one tepid affair in the back his mother's car.

"It's so obvious. It's kind of gay."

"That is too stupid, even for you."

"So what do you think Audrey will do? Claw out Jen's eyes? Snap her neck? Whatever it takes to keep her man?"

There is no reason for Monty to confide in his brother other than for the fact that the shots have loosened him up a little and that his brother could be about to die.

"This stays between us," Monty says.

"I'll take it to the grave," Shep replies.

Monty takes a second before loosing a few, and only a few, whoops of laughter. Laughing does feel really good, but enough is enough. He's feeling a little braver now that he's got a couple of battle scars, but he's not looking to call any attention to himself.

"I fooled around with Jen last night," Monty confesses.

Shep doesn't appear to be shocked at all. If he seems incredulous, it's only because he would like to know when. The gang broke up after Monty's bedtime, after all.

"She called me," Monty says as a pre-emptive defense.

"So you fucked her and since you undoubtedly left her unsatisfied, she's going to rat you out. Makes sense."

"I didn't fuck her," Monty said.

"Why the hell not?" He rubs his potbelly meaningfully. "Natural birth control."

"I don't know. I just didn't. I barely got her top off."

"Then you came in your pants. You saw a nice pair of cans and you blew your load too soon," Shep joked.

Monty would love to deny the charge. But he really can't so he just shrugs and waits for the next shot.

Jules, on the other hand, would gladly ruin three pairs of pants if it meant he could see a truly fantastic set of cans up close, in real life, for free. He has had no luck with that standing outside of the suite waiting on Bobby, but it turns out that Jules may yet have made the right decision. Because inside, Bobby's plan is falling apart. The interior is caustic. Not in the same way as Shep's, though. This isn't a man unable or uninterested in keeping on top of the waste that inevitably piles up from the process of living. This isn't cigarette smoke and spoiled food, though there are a few traces of each. This is a case of a man not in complete control of his bodily fluids. The dying man can mostly get to the toilet all right, but occasionally he shits, pees, or vomits in his bed. And even when he's able to strip the bed quickly, the air still stinks for hours afterward. The stink has accumulated over time, and now the cramped suite's odor gives the distinct impression of having entered the barracks in a

concentration camp, of being imprisoned with no hope for mercy. The reverend no longer balks at such things, nor do the uniformed men, all of whom have seen worse. Hawk and Bobby, though, are ill-equipped for being so fully submerged in the world of a man whose life has long run off the rails. But Bobby would wear a jacket made from the spoiled carcass of any of his dead brothers if it would give him a shot at coming out ahead of Hawk. So it's Bobby who ignites the jurisdictional firestorm by demanding that the deputies arrest the reverend immediately.

The reverend, who has one hand cradling the back of his infirm charge's skull, addresses Bobby's demand without losing an ounce of the gentle compassion he had been administering.

"I've broken no laws," he says quietly.

"You're about to incite a riot," Bobby charges. "You told these people to come here, you've made them wait on you for hours, and you are about to give your marching orders. And all of it is for an illegal cause."

"Peaceful demonstration is not a crime."

Bobby snorts. "Peaceful." He spits on the floor to show his contempt. "Peaceful enough to give my nephew a black eye, to shove an old man to the ground."

"Peaceful compared to the people pointing guns at them," the reverend retorts.

"Those are good folks behind those guns," Bobby says. "They're just protecting what's theirs, and they have every right to do it."

"And I'm just protecting what is the Lord's: your nephew's life. The question isn't whether I have the right to do that, it's whether I have the obligation. I do. So do you. Death isn't something that can be purchased with government largesse."

Hawk steps in, more to get Bobby to stop arguing than anything. Once Bobby starts debating a topic, any topic, he uniformly disagrees with every other opinion offered out of principle. And Hawk's already seen this argument play out once.

"Reverend, we may not see eye to eye about . . . well, almost everything. But I know that we agree on one thing: we don't want anybody to get hurt, not your people, not my people."

"And my people, you cocksucker," Bobby says.

Hawk checks his instinct to point out all of the ways Bobby is being an ass right now. He's in a rare place where it's not him being the asshole, so he wants to milk it for all it's worth.

"There's a saying, Reverend. I'm sure you've heard it," Hawk says. "This town's not big enough for the both of us."

The reverend nods along. Bobby feigns understanding, too. The deputies try to puzzle out where Hawk is going with this, but the city cops are already there.

"Well, it may be big enough for just you and me, Reverend. But it's not big enough for all of your people, and all of my people. Surely, you can see that. Their cars have almost completely cut off access to the western edge of the township. If a fire were to pop up out there, there'd be nothing left but ashes and grief by the time we could arrive."

"Damn straight," Bobby says. "That's exactly what I'm trying to say. You're a danger, man."

"You're right," the reverend says to Hawk, though Bobby imagines the concession was made to him. "There are too many people in too small a space. Much like where we find ourselves at this very moment."

The field commander agrees, and his two deputies are fidgeting through their own realization of the same.

“Well put, Reverend. Now, I know this sounds like playground reasoning, but the fact of the matter is that we were here first. This is our home. It’s unfair to ask our people to leave their homes, and it’s unconscionable to let everybody stay. Write this down: people will get hurt and people will die if we don’t work together.”

“That’s what he wants,” Bobby says. “He might not even know it, but that’s what he wants. A body count will make him the top story on the six o’clock news.”

“You speak based on your fear, not on the truth,” the reverend says.

“So you were just going to head on up there and tell all these folks to move along peacefully?” Bobby asks sarcastically.

“Not in those words, but, yes, I was going to encourage my flock to continue the fight from their homes. They aren’t here to fight the authorities in Sleeper. They are here to fight the authorities in the Capitol. And they don’t need to do the former in order to do the latter.”

“And who was going to fight Mr. Mayor here when he got his federal deputization?”

This is news to the reverend.

“They are deputizing executioners now?” he asks Hawk.

“Stop dodging the real issue,” Bobby challenges. “What do you intend to tell those people out there?”

“I’ve given you my answer.”

“And since we’re just local government yokels, we’ll simply believe that yesterday you went on the radio and summoned all of these people here from wherever they were listening, but today you want all of them to go home.”

“Sadly, that’s the truth. I’m guilty of poor judgment. But that is all. Fact of the matter is, I was planning on leaving myself, but I stayed to make sure these people make it out safely. Since I arrived, I’ve been beaten, cursed at, spit on, and mocked. And all of the people who should care the most about Shep’s fate – his family, his friends, his neighbors, his leaders, and most of all himself – they can’t be bothered to do anything about it. They can’t be moved to put aside their petty concerns: their drinks, dollars, women, grudges, ignorance, or selfishness. So yes, I am telling them to leave and I had planned on leaving myself.”

“Bullshit,” Bobby said, frothing at the mouth. “Arrest him,” he commanded the deputies.

“That’s my call,” the field commander says, piping up for the first time. “And I say no.”

Bobby stands with his mouth gaping. He is stunned.

“Actually, I’m going to change my mind,” the commander says. “This isn’t my call at all. I think the city has this under control. It’s Hawk’s call.”

“Unbelievable,” Bobby sputters. Realizing he is behind enemy lines, he storms outside to collect his brother and figure out the next move. In leaving in a huff, he misses Hawk’s exchange with the reverend.

“I’m not going to arrest you,” Hawk says.

“I’m glad to hear you speaking sense, Mayor.”

“I believe that you’re going to go out there and tell those people to leave my home. And I believe that you will be right behind them. Either way, if you’re still here at sundown, then I’ll arrest you.”

“You sure you wouldn’t rather duel at noon, Marshall?”

“I’d say you’ve got about an hour.”

It seems like an hour has passed while Monty and Shep wait on this obscenely slow freighter to chug through town. Monty would have given his calf a break and put the car into ‘Park’ if he didn’t feel so goddamned intimidated by the train. Something about being trapped in a car behind a moving train has the feeling of a trap being set. Monty feels ripe for ambush. It must be precognition.

“Let’s talk about that letter,” Shep says.

“It was never made for you to read,” Monty says. “I was just pissed off.”

“You were mad at me?” Shep asks.

Even though he just said so, it’s impossible for him to truthfully answer such a direct question.

“Things were pretty fucked up,” Monty says.

“Let me get this straight. You were mad at me because I would sit alone in my trailer and get fucked up?”

It is becoming so clear to Monty that all anybody has to do to fuck with his head is ask him the right questions. He’s so goddamned worried about giving a wrong answer that he’ll clam up when confused, qualify everything in an attempt to be sophisticated, perpetually equivocate to avoid being pinned to any one position. He wants to stake out a position that will be not-wrong for many years to come. Now he’s trapped in Shep’s web. The wrong place to be at any time.

“You did it for so many years,” Monty offers in support of a hypothetical anger one could have held onto in theory.

“No. You’re wrong,” Shep says.

“Many’ might have been hyperbole.”

“No, you’re wrong about why you were mad. You weren’t mad that I got fucked up in my trailer. You were mad that you couldn’t stop yourself from worrying about me getting fucked up in my trailer.”

“Of course we worried,” he can speak for his mother here, as well.

“Of course you did. And you think it’s my fault. You think that I should have to bend over backwards to make it so you don’t have to worry. The world should change right in front of you because you can’t control your feelings.”

Again, what Shep says is true, even if he’s wrong. But at least by now Monty doesn’t feel trapped. He does have one other, rarely used, alternative strategy in answering an uncomfortable question. It’s actually a family trait. He can get pissed off and convince himself to thrive on disagreement.

“You are such an asshole,” he says.

“Well, there’s some honesty,” Shep marvels. “Keep going.”

“You are an ingrate. And you’re an embarrassment. Not just to me, to everyone who has to share the name. You do whatever you want no matter what anybody says, and then you get pissed off when they aren’t there to grant your every wish. Have you ever thought about thanking mom for making your dinner every night? Or for cleaning your shit-hole? Or for buying your cigarettes? That might be nicer than berating her for not remembering to get your extra goddamn pickles and an extra-large order of fries.”

Shep takes it in. He’s not mocking Monty anymore. He’s also not going out like a bitch.

“So that’s basically what you wrote in your note, then,” he says.

That puts out the fire behind Monty's eyes. That characteristic sheepishness has worked its way back into his posture.

"That's about right," Monty admits.

"Anything else in that note?"

Monty nods.

"Anything in that note about all of this bullshit?" he asks, gesturing at the passing train and the world outside of the car.

"About the contract?"

"About me dying," Shep clarified.

"There's a lot of stuff in there about a lot of stuff."

"So the stuff that's about me dying, was it about how you were worried about it?"

Monty allows a non-committal nod.

"Let me ask you a different question. Was any of that stuff about how you hoped I wouldn't die?"

The train finally passes and Monty is glad to punch the gas pedal.

"I already know the answer to that," Shep says, "which is why I need your help."

"That's why I'm still here," Monty says.

"I need your help to go out on my own terms."

"I know. That's why I'm here."

"Stop knowing things and start listening instead. I'm telling you what the terms are. I am asking you to be a part of them."

Monty very nearly drives his mother's car into a tree, which would have made that the second of her cars that he put into a tree.

“If you’re talking about having me kill you, you can fuck right off. You’re crazy.”

“I know you couldn’t handle that,” Shep says. “What I really need is for you to help me figure out what the terms are going to be.”

“Done. The terms are you either choke on your own vomit or die of natural causes in forty years. Either way, you die in bed.”

“It’s going to be much sooner than that. Though I wouldn’t mind going while I was in the sack, under the right circumstances and so long as I wasn’t alone.”

“You can’t still believe that dad’s death has anything to do with yours. We already talked about it. You’re too late.”

“It still feels like my time. I’ve been picturing for this day for twenty years. Never pictured too many tomorrows to come after it, though.”

“I’m not going to help you kill yourself.”

“I just need your brain. With your brain, we might even be able to find a way to do it that won’t send Mom over the edge.”

Monty realizes now what’s really eating at him. In the back of his, he’s been trying to plug in numbers to find that damned golden ratio. But he’ll never find it. It’s impossible to find it that way. The number, whatever the fuck it may be, is irrational; it can’t be expressed in simple terms. That’s why they give it a Greek letter and say close enough. Since the number exists, there must be another way to arrive at it, but he’ll be damned if he knows how. He’s pretty good at solving equations, but when it comes to the real essence of mathematics, Monty is clueless. He has other things to deal with.

He pulls up to park and walk back to the Pit with his brother. Well, with or without his brother. It’s still light enough for him to see Barney’s truck thirty yards ahead and to see

his nightmare unfolding, with his mother, wife, sort-of mistress, and his sort-of mistress's boyfriend to boot. Even worse, they see him. Shep is trying very hard not to smile at Monty's shitty luck.

"Do they look angry to you?" Monty asks.

"They are pretty far away, but I'm going to say yes."

"Well, I guess I have to go do this. I'm sure you'll want to see the carnage, too."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Monty stands outside of the car with the door still open. He's just stretching after sitting and waiting for that interminable train to move along, but having an open escape hatch feels reassuring.

"Hey, young man!" Monty hears from the side. His uncles are clambering through the mess of cars toward them.

"Do you just wait for me here?" Monty asks.

"In this case, yes," Bobby says.

"But we had just got here," Jules adds helpfully.

"Jules, Christ. Not right now," Bobby says.

"Ten, maybe thirteen minutes."

"We got problems, gang," Bobby says. "Hawk took over, and the reverend is planning to skedaddle."

"Bullshit," Shep says. "Rev doesn't give a fuck about Hawk."

Bobby smiles. He's pleased to deliver the news.

"That may be right, but it seems like skedaddling was his plan all along."

"Bullshit."

“No sir. Said you cared too much about your drinking and whoring to be helped. He wanted to wash his hands of it.”

“It does seem like a lot of whoring if you’re not accustomed to it,” Shep muses.

“So we’re pretty much fucked,” Monty says.

“We’ve still got the hearing tomorrow morning, young man. You keep him out of Hawk’s hands until then and we’ll be just fine. He’s going to be my star character witness, going to show the judge he’ll listen to me, that I’m the right guy for the job. Not Hawk. But you need to keep him out of the pokey until then.”

“What makes you the right guy for the job?” Shep challenges.

“Look, young man, as someone who deals in things like courthouses and police officers, let me tell you a little secret. These things are always just a pissing contest, and I’ve got the biggest dick in competition.”

“So which is it: a pissing contest or a big dick contest?” Shep asks.

“Biggest dick wins any contest,” Bobby tells him.

“I don’t know,” Jules muses aloud, “sometimes I think a woman would really prefer a medium-sized penis.”

“Well, I’ll give you credit for that, Bobby,” Shep says. “When it comes to biggest dick, you’re way up there.”

“Exactly my point,” Bobby says. “Meet me at my place at six tomorrow. We’ll get a head start for the courthouse. Bring a big dick, if you have one.”

“I’ll be there regardless,” Jules says.

Bobby looks like he wanted to punch his little brother’s face right on through the back of his head. To his credit, he just starts limping away from them and the mob. He’s no

longer interested in what the reverend has to say. Jules follows, even though he had been a little curious about what the message would be, seemed like preachers didn't do much talking unless they had A Message.

Shep spits on the ground. "He's fucking nuts if he thinks I'm gonna say a kind word about him under oath."

Monty starts creeping over to face his comeuppance. "But if Hawk's serious about this, then we need to make sure he doesn't get deputized. He's as much as said that he's going to lock you up first thing."

"Let's worry about tonight," Shep says. "Let's start by keeping my ass out of jail tonight. Tomorrow we can talk about my terms."

Shep was right back in the car. The women do look pissed. Or at least some combination of pissed and sad and disappointed. He looks to Audrey first, without even thinking. Her reaction is the most important. She's tough to read, outside of "not happy."

"I'm not sure what to say," she says.

"You're a snake, Montgomery," his mom says. "I raised you better."

Jen won't even look at him.

"In your pants, motherfucker?" Barney asks, before bursting into laughter.

Barney's laughter disturbs Monty specifically because there is no trace of it being unhinged. There is not enough anger. There's not enough anger from any of them.

Except for Sandra, who is plenty angry for the whole lot of them.

Even though Barney has every reason to be mad at his cousin and his girlfriend, he isn't. After getting no leads from his friends keeping watch at Sluggo's, he wandered around the property looking for his girl. His only real thought process was to find his girl and apologize to her for being such a dick to her this morning. He was so mad about his stolen truck that he wouldn't even listen to her try to explain why she did it. He had just been so mad, felt so disrespected and embarrassed. That was why he couldn't blame her when she shuddered at the sight of him approaching the truck, when he saw that she had pulled off the ignition panel and cut some of the wires beneath in what she had thought was an attempt to

hot-wire a truck, when he realized that she had just tried to steal his truck for the second time in two days and this time had actually managed to do some damage. But he wasn't really angry. It wasn't that he was a better person than he had been that morning, he knew better than that. He had learned something from the reverend though. He would sound like an idiot trying to explain it to someone else, something he would never try to do for exactly that reason, but he had witnessed something profound in the way the reverend just held the man who had accepted his death but not his fate. He didn't know what he had expected when the reverend offered to let him tag along, but he imagined it would have been something like a healing session or a therapy session. Something where the reverend would try to solve the problem of death or of a heavy conscious. But the reverend didn't do any of that. He didn't try to reshape what had been presented to him, to change the man's mind, or to imprint himself on the world in any way. He simply received the world for what it was. He listened, instead. He didn't listen to gather information or to make his case for the man. When the dying man had said his piece, Barney had thought, *Here comes the sermon*. But he had been wrong. Nothing came after that. The act of listening hadn't been means to an end; it had been the point from the very start.

So this sort of touched Barney, who was so used to hammering the world into the mold he thought it should fit in. He learned that he could let other people do their own hammering, if he would just shut his mouth for a minute. Like he would admit, it wasn't like he was a changed man or anything; he was just a little more savvy in the business of living. He didn't need to constantly intimidate and bully his way to get what he wanted. He would get some of what he wanted, he wouldn't get the rest, and just like with death, he would have

to accept that the only constant in life was that one would never quite have enough. And he could get a heck of a lot more of the things he wanted, if he would just listen more.

So he didn't get angry when he walked up to his truck with the newly severed ignition and found himself walking in on the end of a conversation about how his girl had not only been unfaithful to him the night before, but how she was upset not for cheating but because Monty had hurt her feelings, because he had dropped her when his wife arrived, because he had left her alone in the middle of his family's crisis without so much as a farewell so that he could be with his wife, because he not only didn't bother looking for her but because it sounded like he hadn't even put up much of a fight. Even Barney found it a little ridiculous that he wasn't intensely jealous. He had to give credit to this listening thing; it really kept his stress levels down. Instead of berating Jen, which is clearly what the women had expected – Sandra was already stepping in between the two of them – he just listened some more. And boy was he glad he had. It would have been hugely wasteful to have directed any rage at Jen. He was going to get all pissy at Jen, get Jen all pissy at him, and start another round of fighting just because some asshole took advantage of his distraught girlfriend, got her to pop his top, and then came in his pants? Not likely.

All of this has pleasantly surprised Barney. It was almost as if he could see an alternate world overlaying this one like an onion skin, where a fictitious version of himself blew a gasket upon find Jen, and all that ended up coming from it was one or both of them storming away once again. Because of his patience and his listening skills, he has a front seat to see Monty eat a big old spoonful of the shit stew he'd whipped up. The real surprise is that even seeing the true rogue in the situation, his cousin Monty, couldn't set him off. But again,

Barney isn't claiming to be a changed man. He still has every intention of knocking loose a few of his cousin's teeth; he has just learned that it pays to listen first.

"Can we talk?" Monty asks Audrey.

"You can talk if you need to. I already told you that I don't know what to say."

"Can I talk to you alone?"

"No, if you're talking to me, you're talking to Jen, too."

Jen finally speaks. "Actually, I don't care to hear what he has to say, but I do have some words for him."

The men's eyes are the eyes of wolves around a spit. They smell blood. Sandra ruins their fun.

"The rest of us will head back to see if that reverend's finally going to do some of that sweet talking of his," Sandra says. "You three come when you're ready."

"I'm staying," Barney says. "My girl. I get to listen."

"You won't be hearing a damn thing for a week if I have to drag you back there by your ears."

She looks completely game to follow through on her threat.

"He won't be talking either," Jen says, "because I'll be happy to kick his nuts up into his throat."

"These nuts pay the bills, baby," Barney says. Sometimes he just can't resist. After all, he's not a changed man.

"Yeah, I bet those nuts get a lot of use down at the jailhouse," Shep says.

"We're leaving," Sandra says. And she's right.

Monty feels like a small child. He always feels like a small child in situations where he feels like he might get In Trouble. His brain doesn't even offer him a puzzle at this point. He is just standing in front of his cousin's truck in the dying light of day and facing down two women he has wronged. He is at a complete impasse. He can't even figure out what outcome he should be hoping for in this situation. He can only brace for impact.

"Montgomery," Jen says, "you are a creep."

Audrey is nodding along. Monty can already tell that Jen's words have branded him. He'll never be able to fully shake the idea of himself as a creep.

"I know that something profound happened last night. I know that you were right there with me feeling the same thing. I knew that we weren't going to run off and get married. I didn't want that. All I wanted was for us that share that moment, even if only secretly, for the rest of our lives. But to pretend that I'm not a person that you had an actual experience with is not okay. Especially when you're only pretending because you think staying with your wife is the Right Thing to Do. I won't pretend to forget the moment we had, but you are not the person I shared it with. We don't share that experience. And you should spend some time figuring out what you are besides a slave to imaginary expectations."

"Dude, we've barely talked all day, and this is how you greet someone?"

His joke falls flat onto the pavement and disappears into the cracks.

"You are the densest smart person I've ever met," Jen says, knowing that even that won't get through to him. She says to Audrey, "I'm sorry for my part in this. I'm sorry for what you are left with."

Even Monty's not dense enough to miss that barb. Jen takes that for the modest victory it is and heads off to catch up with Barney, though she is not particularly in a hurry to reach him. Just Monty and Audrey, once again. This time they are not frolicking in the burned out wasteland; they are a part of it.

"I'm so sorry," Monty says because that needs to be said before he can say anything else.

"I know," she says because she does. Of course he is sorry. Apologetic is his natural disposition.

"I'll do anything," Monty says because he will. He will do anything she says.

"What you do has nothing to do with anything," Audrey says. "I am the one who has to decide whether I am really in love with a man who would treat another person the way you have."

"I know," Monty says. "It was so selfish of me to hurt you."

For the second time that day, someone tells Monty, "Stop knowing and start listening."

Audrey hasn't asked him a question but she has stopped talking like she expects an answer. And she just told him to be quiet and start listening. He is a gravely injured dog just wishing someone would put him out of his misery. He does not know what to do. He digs deeper, trying to remember her words to look for clues.

"I was talking about Jen," she says. "That you didn't know that is basically every one of your problems all in one package."

Audrey just told him that his problem was not knowing something he should have known, but just a few seconds before that she told him to stop being a know-it-all. Still he

does not know what to do. He thinks that might be what she wants, but he thinks that if he asks that she'll think he wants to know, and wanting to know might still be a bad thing. Maybe the idea is for him to not know while wanting to know, like a kind of penance.

“So when I figure it out, I'll let you know. Until then, just be a decent person.”

Finally, some direction. He will try to be a decent person. He will not ask what she means by “decent” because he knows that this is not the time for questions. He never asks himself why.

“Let's go help keep your brother alive.”

They walk back together almost in the dark. The sun is gone but every so often a pair of car headlights flicks on to light the path. All he wants to do is take his wife's hand and feel her touch, but he knows this isn't the time for touch. The crowd has thinned noticeably, but hundreds of people still remain. In the midst of them moves the reverend, holding each of their hands and giving them his thanks and his blessing for them to continue to fight their war from their homes. He is not telling them to fight Shep's war, hoping that some may infer from his choice of words that he is referring to the larger conflict. As distasteful as it is, he has a duty to ensure that Shep's soul is not rendered unto Caesar, but he does not have the duty to instruct his flock to do the same. So he goes to them as individuals. The sun has set before his work is done, as the reverend knew it would. Hawk is hopping mad. He cannot find any fault in the reverend's method except that it has taken longer than the arbitrary deadline Hawk had set. He is mostly mad at himself. The only thing keeping him from rushing into the crowd to slap a pair of cuffs on the reverend was knowing that a Montgomery would have done exactly that, and he must hold himself to a higher standard.

He will let the reverend do the work of getting the people away peacefully. Once enough of them are gone, then he'll see to it that the reverend gets pinched.

This turn of events disturbs Sandra to no end. She resumes her endless task of scrubbing Shep's kitchen, but now she is only doing it to keep from panicking. And she doesn't get spooked easily. Which makes this all the more alarming. She never understood why he wanted to send the people away in the first place. She couldn't see how that helped her son. Then he disappears for most of the day, and now he has gone and changed the plan at the last minute without bothering to tell anybody. It stinks and no one else seems to notice. Every part of her is itching to get out of this trailer, but she can't because if her baby boy shows up and nobody's there, he'll just wait around trying really hard to figure out where everybody went from his seat on the couch. Now it's her and her family doing the waiting around, all because Monty couldn't figure out that maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea fool around with his cousin's pregnant girlfriend. Couldn't figure out that every idea that occurs to him isn't a good one simply by virtue of its occurrence.

And, of course the girl is pregnant. Of course she is. She has been dating a Montgomery for more than six months. If it weren't for the laws of nature, each of the Montgomerys' gals would pump out two a year. Mountains crumble, trees fall over, rivers run to the sea, and Montgomery men have a latex allergy. Maybe Barney would marry her. Maybe not. If history was any guide, it probably wouldn't much matter. He would get another one pregnant sooner or later.

Finally, Monty and Audrey arrive, and they haven't seemed to resolve much given how long it took them to get there. Darry hasn't resurfaced yet, but Sandra's more comfortable with his instincts.

“Let’s go,” she says, taking off the rubber gloves for what may well be the last time.

Monty looks around to determine whether or not he agrees with her plan.

“Darry’s not here,” he says.

“He’ll figure it out. He’s smarter than you give him credit for,” Sandra says.

“I disagree,” Monty says.

“I disagree, too,” Barney says.

“May as well toss my disagreement in the pot, too,” Shep says.

These idiots’ shtick has grown thin for Monty. “If it were me that showed up to an empty trailer, I’d wait.”

“Darry has a different way of seeing things,” Sandra says.

“That’s true,” Monty says. “But he’s a good person, and that’s what counts.”

Sandra has to wait for another time to disabuse her son of his fantastic image of himself because Darry manages to wrestle the trailer door open at that exact moment. He takes a mental headcount.

“Good, everybody is here,” he says. “Now let’s go get the fuck out of here.”

“Right behind you,” Sandra says. They shouldn’t spend one more minute in this place than they absolutely have to.

“Wait a minute,” Monty says. “Where are we going? We need a plan, and I need to talk to the reverend before we go.”

It is just like his family to rush headlong into a disaster without a plan.

“We’ll go to my house,” Sandra says.

“No,” Darry says, correcting her. “That’s what I found out while you all were grabbing in here. Sheriff’s department is waiting for you there. Sheriff Vandenburg is going to make Hawk look like an asshole by taking Shep out from under his nose.”

“I am going to kill your Uncle Bobby,” she mutters.

“I don’t think he knows about any of it,” Darry says.

“Of course he doesn’t. But he’s the one who’s been trying to get the sheriff’s attention this whole time. He got it, just not how he wanted it. He never could see more than one step ahead at a time.”

“It’s one more step than the rest of them,” Jen says.

She doesn’t except Monty because he isn’t worth excepting.

“I wonder where we should go,” Monty actually says. Out loud.

“We go to my place,” Darry says. “It’s perfect. Nobody can find it in the dark if they don’t know exactly where they are going.”

“Which means not even Bobby can be duped into giving up our location,” Sandra says, finishing his thought.

“That’s settled,” she continues. “Now, if the plan is adequate for the mastermind, let’s kick rocks.”

“Not yet,” Monty says. He holds up the briefcase that by now is more of an extension of his arm than an inanimate object. “Rev won’t talk to me until he talks to the people.”

“Fuck him,” Shep says. “How is it that you don’t understand yet that he isn’t going to help us? He can’t just magically look into your little suitcase and make the problem go away. And even if he could, he wouldn’t. You heard Bobby. He planned on abandoning us the whole time.”

“He planned to what?” Sandra asks. Then she snaps out of it. “Later. Now, we have to go. Monty, quit mewling and decide how to deal with the damn briefcase yourself.”

“I don’t believe it,” Barney says. “I don’t believe the reverend said that. I know he wouldn’t actually do it. We have to let him know where we’re going. He can still help us.”

“If you want to keep in touch with the reverend, then do it,” Sandra says. “But you will not let him know where we are. And you will not for one more moment keep us sitting here like fat sows for the slaughter. If anybody has any more arguments, shove them. I’m leaving right now, and I’m taking Shep with me.”

Monty is undecided. If Barney could keep in touch with the reverend, then why couldn’t Monty just have a chat with him about the briefcase, just to get his take on the matter? But maybe that was this “problem” of his that everybody kept alluding to, that he worried too much about what other people thought. Then, it finally dawns on him what he is supposed to do, and it’s so obvious that he’s disappointed in himself for not thinking of it right away. He is going to stay right here in this trailer. He’s going to park his ass as the still-disgusting counter that his mother has been scrubbing all day. And he’s going to read every document in that briefcase over and over again until he understands just what the hell is going on.

Monty hurries them out the door, laughing at the thought of all of his family members in that cramped travel trailer.

“Sleep tight,” Monty says. “I know you will, though. That’s the only way all of you will fit inside.”

“At least it’s not half of a travel trailer,” Darry says.

“This here’s a double-wide,” Shep says. “Half a double wide is the same thing as a full trailer. Bigger than a pop-up, in any case.”

Monty is pretty proud of his plan. He’s got the place to himself so he can work. He’s giving his wife some space. And he’s put some space between himself and Jen, whom he doesn’t want to hurt any more, and himself and Barney, whom he doesn’t want to be hurt by. After he has them swear to pick him up by six, he locks the door behind them. After only an hour has passed, Monty can tell just by listening that most of the mob is gone. He’s tempted to go see if the reverend is still hanging around. He listens to hear if the reverend ever decided to go back inside Bubba’s half of the trailer. Somebody is over there banging around, but he doubts it is the reverend. Probably just Bubba tweaking out opening and closing his cupboards in hopes of finding that hot dogs he had left out for later. Monty turns back his attention to the papers, but he’s startled by someone wrestling with the trailer door.

“It’s locked,” he yells.

The jangling doesn’t stop.

“I said it’s locked,” he yells again.

The cheap tin latch finally gives and the door is now the type that flaps in a wind storm. Lots of footsteps pound through the door frame. It’s Hawk and a couple of his police lackeys.

“Where is he?” Hawk asks.

Monty knows a little something about the law after working with lawyers for so long. He couldn’t help but pick up a few tips.

“You got a warrant?”

Hawk smiles. “I got better. I got permission from the trailer’s owner.”

“I don’t think that counts,” Monty says.

“Do you think that what you think counts?” Hawk asks. “Do you have a better understanding of the law than these trained peace officers?”

Monty doesn’t answer.

“Good,” Hawk says. “You’ll want to be careful. You don’t want to offend these fellas. They can make life pretty difficult.”

One of the officer starts rifling through the kitchen drawers while the other heads back to the bedroom. It takes less than a minute for him to come back with a clear baggie filled with weed.

“In a shoebox, back of the closet,” the officer chuckles. “These assholes are all the same.”

“Now that’s contraband, kid,” Hawk says. “That’s enough for us to lock you up for a couple of days. Would you like to take a little vacation with my friends?”

“You know damn well that’s not mine.”

“If I were a police officer, I might want to hear that under oath before taking your word for it. Could take a while before we can set a hearing. So let’s try again: where is he?”

Monty feels a little steel in his gut that he’s not used to. Courage feels pretty damn good.

“My brother’s not here. That’s all I know.”

“Who gives a damn about your brother?”

“I do, for one,” Monty says. “Or I wouldn’t be sitting here all night getting ready for your bullshit court appearance. Obviously, my Uncle Bobby does or else he wouldn’t go up

there to beat your ass tomorrow. And obviously you do, too, or else you wouldn't be trying to become a marshal or whatever."

"You nailed me," Hawk says.

"You can't just fool me like you do the rest of them," Monty says. "You were looking for someone else. Who is it?"

"Oh, that. I'm looking for the reverend. But if he's not here, and he's not next door, it looks like he might have skipped town."

"Tough shit, I guess," Monty says.

"I told you before, kid. I'm not coming for your brother until I get the federal go-ahead. They are by the book that way. And I'll tell you what: I admire your dedication to the cause. I'm going to give you a break on the pot, but only because I want to see what you come up with by tomorrow."

Hawk extends his hand. "May the best man win."

Monty gives him an over-firm shake. "The biggest dick always wins."

It should be obvious to Monty by now that there is no hearing and there is no federal deputization. It should be even more obvious in the morning when Darry arrives alone to take Monty over to his Uncle Bobby's.

Even Uncle Bobby is suspicious enough to ask, "Where's the other nephew? The even bigger wastrel?"

"He's running late. I'm going back to pick him up now. We'll meet you there?"

"Well, why'd you waste time bringing over this one, then?"

"I knew you'd shit a brick if we just blew you off."

Bobby's satisfied, and he and Monty make the long ride to the federal courthouse in uncomfortable silence. Monty's uncomfortable because he doesn't fully understand all of the government's positions, because he has a lot of stuff to remember, because he's nervous, because he's not as big of a fan of his Uncle Bobby as he used to be. He's uncomfortable because his Uncle Jules had already been sitting shotgun and cursed Monty for interrupting his snooze. Bobby's uncomfortable because he finds his nephew weird and unlikeable. They're not uncomfortable because they know they're about to be had, though. They are clueless until they arrive, go inside, and ask the information desk lady where the federal deputization hearings were being held. Bobby knows immediately from her expression. Monty has to be told, and even then doesn't believe it. He can understand why Hawk might have lied in the first place, but he can't make sense of Hawk's continued commitment to the con after having already won the day.

Bobby bounces back quickly and is already plotting out the first step of a revenge scheme. Monty feels stupid. Feeling stupid makes him feel ashamed. He just can't make sense of it. His pain is immediately dwarfed when he finally makes it back out to Darry's wilderness retreat and learns that everybody else knew it was fake from the beginning.

“So why let me go all the way up there? Why let me kill myself staying up all night?” he asks his mother later on.

“Because it was easier than telling you the truth,” Sandra says.

“What is the truth?”

“I've got it on unimpeachable authority that some of the local law enforcement have been hired to murder your brother.”

“You don't believe that. None of you believe that, right?”

Sandra looks game and so do the cousins. Shep never cared to guess, he just cared about staying out of jail. Still does. And Monty believing Hawk and Bobby's bullshit helped keep him out of jail. Shep's sorry Monty ever had to find out.

It strikes Monty that nothing that has happened in the past few days has happened for the reasons he thought. He has been wrong about everything. Literally. Even worse, the family he thought so much dumber than him, played him by appealing to his pride. Every ordeal that he has suffered was unwittingly self-inflicted, completely absurd but only because it was so completely avoidable.

They could have told him. Or he could have paid more attention to the people around him, they would probably argue. And they would have a point. He hadn't listened to them. He couldn't possibly have listened with all of the thinking he was doing. The whole thing about being an empty cup comes to mind. It seems pretty clear that the only way to avoid future catastrophes is to avoid thinking. Once again, he's wrong. Once again, it doesn't matter.

Audrey will live a full life without complaining once that her sincerely attentive husband had been listening for all of the wrong reasons when she made a spot decision to give him another chance right in the middle of delivering the break-up speech she had been practicing in her head all morning while he was on his fool's errand. And Shep will not give a rip that his brother is being less of a dick due only to the misinterpretation of a life lesson. All that matters is that his brother is being less of a dick. Like all of those freight trains that took forever to get through town: knowing why they were so many or why they were so slow wouldn't make them any fewer or any faster.

Without harping on why, Monty immediately sets himself to the task of not thinking and he goes back to living a life that is frankly not that much different from before. He is every bit the fool he ever was, but now, at least, he has his reasons.

AFTERWARD

Expiration Date has evolved dramatically between its inception in the summer of 2011 and this ninth draft submitted to the thesis committee. At its earliest stages, this story was huge, digressive, and intentionally fragmented. The first four drafts were drafts of ideas rather than of narrative. The kernel at the center of this story – the idea of a man on the eve of submitting himself willfully to the government in order to carry out his own execution – was the genesis of this project, and it has remained more or less constant throughout its many iterations. But in these first four drafts, that idea was buried under an avalanche of other ideas.

A nine-film series of pop-action flicks seemingly took center-stage. The *John Gundam* films were an elaborate string of prequels, sequels, and interquels inspired by Bruce Willis's John McClane in the *Die Hard* series. These films surfaced in the story as movies

with release dates that coincided with dramatic events that shaped the main characters and the town in which they lived. But at this early stage, I became more consumed with the production history of the film series than the project's actual narrative. My compulsion showed up in the form of script fragments and a series of film reviews from a critic whose professional and personal life was in a downward spiral. In the several workshops in which portions of this project were presented, these sections were universally panned for not being particularly connected to the rest of the narrative. After the eighth draft, I finally agreed.

The longevity of this idea in my drafts is representative of my ongoing struggle between stubbornness and common sense, personal and public, and above all else, ego and story. The films were the extreme case, though not by a necessarily wide margin. Other ideas persisted despite repeated urgings to either find a way to better integrate them into the story or drop them altogether. A plot-line based on micro-terroristic campaigns waged by Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang province of China remained in place for seven drafts. The second half of the project introduced the idea of an unknown party or parties pricking local residents with needles in public places to incite paranoia. It was a fun idea that similarly did not quite square with the story's core. The idea of Shep not only facing down potential death at the hands of the government but also at the hands of disease contracted from his own irresponsible lifestyle lasted just as long thanks to pretentious ideas about dualities in life and death.

The cumulative effect of the presence of these and other ideas was to present a project with an interesting, albeit confusing, first few chapters and an increasingly incomprehensible narrative as the story progressed. This most recent draft is a concerted effort to cleanse the

project of these types of ideas and to put the story ahead of my own ego. I think the evolution of this story's literary and personal influences reflects this.

I. LITERARY INFLUENCES

The heaviest influence on this story's form and style was David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* ("BS"). This is problematic because I only grudgingly admitted in the course of writing the most recent draft that I'm not half as smart now as Wallace was in undergrad. Even if I were half as smart, it wouldn't necessarily follow that a story aping so much from his would be a compelling read. But while the latest draft of this project also attempted to expunge as much of his patent influence as possible, the mark from his heavy role in the earlier drafts is indelible.

His novel contains ninety-five separate sections, spread among twenty-one chapters, meaning many chapters have multiple sections, for which DFW uses letters (a through i) to label. The distinctive quality of this novel, as regards structure, is that the narrative perspective typically shifts (often drastically) from section to section. Not only are the perspectives constantly shifting, but they are also very different from each other.

Though BS uses several narrative stances regularly, Omniscient Free Indirect is the most commonly used -- the stance of choice for thirty-three sections -- and it's the one I'll discuss here because, even in the most recent draft of my project, I am using a much simplified version of it. The perspective itself is not all that unique, but the ways it combines with Wallace's creativity and style are singular. He combines jargon and high-handed language and concepts with thoughts from multiple characters' heads (sometimes verbatim,

sometimes paraphrased into the default heightened language). The most common voice for the narrator to inflect with is Lenore's, though the narrator uses the freedom to enter other minds liberally. The narrator has his own voice, a voice that is willing to issue proclamations, to address the reader directly, and to offer commentary on the thoughts and actions of others.

As I progressed through drafts, I found that I began to borrow more from the structure of BS and less from the style of its author. Even in my penultimate draft, I had retained multiple narrative stances – the movie reviews, some found documents, and other idiosyncratic perspectives – but I had managed to ape the numbering/lettering system of BS in an attempt to mitigate the confusion caused by my narrative decisions. By and large, though, the narrative still unfolded through the free indirect style. The vast majority of sections took place in the close third person, but within each section, I would typically inflect with the voice only one character. Only taken in the aggregate, could the narrative fairly be described as *omniscient* free indirect.

In the end, this systematic sectioning served to make it easier to eliminate the more experimental sections than any other purpose. The removal of intra-chapter sections also necessitated the resolution of an emerging narrative issue: how to deal with the fact that the narrator bobbed in and out of the consciousnesses of a number of characters. Seeking to get rid of detrimental experimentalism, I narrowed down my options to two choices. Either I could limit the narrator to a more traditional close third-person perspective, inflecting exclusively with Monty's voice, or I could adopt a true omniscient position, where I would have to manage the modulation between several voices. With some hesitation, I opted for the latter. Ultimately, I decided that it would be a more difficult technical task to maintain the

breadth of story I wanted to tell while staying true to Monty's intentionally limited worldview than it would be to simply manage the multitude of voices with an eye toward keeping the story moving forward without causing undue confusion for the reader.

In this way, the decision to write from the omniscient perspective was actually a less ambitious choice. At least, that's how I justified using it. And while this decision brought the perspective closer in line with Wallace's, I made a number of other decisions in how I would use the perspective that I hope separated this story from BS more than I had been able to in prior attempts. First, I decided to avoid strange, obscure, or heightened language altogether. Inevitably, some slipped through, but by and large the various voices are all from people who speak plainly, and I strove to make the writing reflect this. Second, I narrowed down the possible pool of voices and consciousnesses available to those characters who were truly central to the narrative for the majority of the project: Monty, his mother, and his brother, cousins, and two surviving uncles. For this draft, I moved firmly away from Wallace's style and more toward something more reader and young-writer friendly.

Wallace's influence persists mostly out of legacy, but Ben Fountain's *The Long Halftime Walk of Billy Lynn* emerged as a narrative beacon immediately prior to this latest rewrite. Upon Alex Parsons's suggestion, I read Fountain's book before undertaking work on this version of the project. As promised, Fountain showed me a way of navigating between several timelines without breaking up the flow of the narrative. He also provided an example of an omniscient narrator who could step back from the events to reflect on the state of the story, locales, and characters free of the limitation of faculties of his primary character, Billy Lynn.

Halftime Walk's main narrative thread takes place over the course of a Dallas Cowboys football game. The bulk of the action takes place along this compact timeline, as Billy Lynn and his squad-mates navigate the conflicts arising from the soldiers' (temporary) reintegration into civilian society, from socializing with the upper crust, from trying to get their share of that Hollywood money from a potential film adaptation of their story. Interspersed within this larger framework, though, are several other timelines that help dramatize past anecdotes and even full, nested stories. Outside of the main narrative, the most time is devoted to the story of a particularly heroic battle between the squad and an insurgent uprising. But Fountain also gives us anecdotes the rest from Billy Lynn's brief return to his homeland, as well as some from his and his squad-mates' pre-war lives. The key to keeping the story digestible in the face of several timelines is Fountain's steady grasp on narrative flow. The shape of his flow is like the pattern of the tides: high and low, high and low, ad infinitum. At high tide, Fountain is in the story present, which is conveniently marked with the use of the present tense, closely tracking the timeline of the Cowboys game. He recedes from this timeline in steady intervals to relate either an earlier anecdote or to investigate some other interesting phenomenon that relates directly to the present. Always, he returns back to the present timeline. He manages the transitions deftly, always clearly indicating where the next passage is heading.

For my latest draft, I tried to maintain a similar sense of flow. I compacted the present timeline to two days – the eve and day of Shep's euthanization – and I continually forced myself to return to this narrative strand to keep the story moving forward. I attempted to make the vacillation between various timelines clear and organic, though there is still work to

be done on this front. Fountain's sense of narrative rhythm is the largest surviving literary influence of this project.

The last influence that plays a large enough role in the project as currently constituted to merit much discussion is Richard Russo's *Nobody's Fool*. Whereas the previous works influenced decisions of style and technique, Russo with this book – and really any book among his earlier catalogue – helped to inform my story's sensibility, particularly in terms of place and character. Russo's stories tend to deal with characters whom society has passed on by, who live in towns that have been similarly overtaken by the march of progress. *Nobody's Fool* does this as well as any other of Russo's works. David Sullivan, "Sully," is a good-natured derelict who gets by in the dying blue-collar town of North Bath by taking on odd jobs as needed. Russo celebrates these people and places despite their inability to keep pace with the outside world, and he does it even while poking fun at them and their foibles. Russo's greatest gift may be in treating potentially tragic subjects and circumstances with wry humor.

John McNally first recommended Richard Russo to me because of my expressed interest in exploring the worlds of small towns and blue-collar lifestyles. In Russo, I found something of a kindred spirit, and I immediately set out to take on the same types of themes and issues. This is very much the case with *Expiration Date*. The nature of Shep's defection from society is more far-fetched than anything from Russo's body of work, but the ways this defection have played out on his life aren't nearly so distinct. Similarly, despite the slightly surreal circumstances Sleeper finds himself in during the story present, the small town finds itself in a convalescent state similar to North Bath or Empire Falls. Russo's humor has also been a positive influence on this latest draft. Earlier drafts were marked by a meanness

directed toward the town and its denizens, something that I have tried to rectify in this latest draft.

Many other stories have informed my approach to this project, from the defamiliarization in *The Trial* or *Stranger in a Strange Land* to the joy and humor Pynchon takes language in *The Crying of Lot 49*. But these stories have influenced me in the same way that everything I've read has influenced me. The things I've liked, I have tried to integrate into my toolbox, and the things I've disliked I have sought to avoid. In addition to the generic nature of their influence, I don't think these works merit very much discussion in the afterward to this particular story because this draft has been largely an exercise in eliminating these extraneous tools when they weren't working in particular service to the story.

II. PERSONAL INFLUENCES

Two other factors heavily influenced the shape of this project. The first was my older brother. His escalating drug abuse had been a source of tension in my family for years. Then, in the summer of 2011, he got in a major car accident that nearly cost him an eye, he got arrested and convicted for the manufacturing of methamphetamine, and upon his release he learned that he had contracted both Hepatitis B and C. Of all of these issues, it was the last that led directly to this story. His liver and kidneys started to shut down completely and he was transferred from a local hospital to the finest system in Michigan to receive treatment and even they were at a loss. They predicted that he would die within the month. After much internal debate, I decided to fly up and say goodbye. Once in the hospital, I was thrust in an uncomfortable leadership position. My brother was at a crossroads. The hospital suggested

that he choose between hospice and palliative care. They also told us that if he somehow managed to survive this episode, that he could attempt to live cleanly and after six months become eligible for a liver transplant. It boiled down to the decision between a painful life and a comfortable death.

That was when my brother put me on the spot.

“What would you do?” he asked.

My selfish instinct was to tell him to be done with it all, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to say that. I hemmed and hawed.

“I have a wife and a kid. It’s not the same.”

He got angry.

“What would you do if you were me? If you didn’t have anything?”

I couldn’t bring myself to speak harshly, but I also couldn’t bite my tongue entirely.

This moment inspired the character of Monty. He was a guy who had a fractured relationship with his brother, a brother who was staring down the barrel of a certain death. The problem was, that he couldn’t bring himself to feel the sense of sorrow or loss that he knew he was supposed to. That was what I wanted to explore in this story.

As for what I said: “I would make my peace on this earth and move on.”

I lied. I would cling to life with everything I had. I’d clench down like a hungry dog on a juicy pair of genitals. But I knew what he wanted to hear, and I took the easy out of packaging it nicely for him.

He chose hospice. He was discharged two days later, his prognosis even worse than when I had arrived. The doctors set an outside date of two weeks for his survival. Ironically, my brother turned out to be some sort of medical miracle. Not only is he alive today, but his

body has managed to clear out both strains of hepatitis. Perhaps even more ironically, he learned nothing from any of it. At least I learned something about myself, though I wasn't exactly thrilled with what I had learned.

This leads into the second personal influence: my ego. Specifically, the latest draft of this story reflects my battle with my own ego. This story has changed dramatically from iteration to iteration. It has vacillated from farce to dark (and unfunny) comedy. But the thing that had remained constant was the character of Monty. His name and some of the specifics had changed, sure, but his nature hadn't been touched by the process of rewriting and revising. He was a null character, a vacuum, an empty space into which I inserted my own consciousness. He was me, and he was me in the worst way possible. I'm a goofy person. I walk funny, I stress out over stupid details, and I hold opinions ferociously (until I decide that I disagree with that opinion).

The problem was that my consciousness was also filling the space of the narrator. The narrator had my voice and my opinions. He was bitter toward his brother and his hometown. He lacked the necessary perspective to be an effective narrator. And because the narrator and character shared the same void, the narrator went easy on Monty. He withheld judgment. He refused to call Monty out on his bullshit. The story was worse for it. Not only was Monty uninteresting, but the narrator gave the sense that he was eliding crucial details.

It wasn't until halfway through the draft that this dawned on me. I realized I was reading a narrator who was so callous with the well-meaning people that populated the story and refused to levy any type of judgment on the character who formed the story's focal point. From there, I immediately set to the task of treating Monty like just another character, even though he and I shared some characteristics. In fact, one of his defining traits is the exact trait

that hampered this story for so long: he judges the world so harshly without thoroughly interrogating his own behavior. He believes without a shred of reservation that he is the smartest person in the room, when it's clear to room that he's missing the point entirely. He acts out of a desire to avoid discomfort rather than from a place of personal conviction.

I still hold this to be the turning point of the story. Not only did characterization of Monty begin to flow more freely, but I found that the narrator also became more empathetic toward the rest of the cast. He began to see the story as one filled with people who misunderstand and who are misunderstood. They all act toward their own self-interests when it comes down to it, but they also do their best to do right by those they hold dear. This became a story that was less about being right and more about present. That may not be the most compelling center of a story, but it's a step in the right direction.

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