

**Visions of Bizadi,**

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## Clarkes Landing Park

The moon had risen by the time I got down to the park. And Fu was already working on the new sign that the Park Authority had just replaced for the second time in three weeks. About my height, if a little wider. Two wooden thighs secured its place in the Oakton soil. Its new letters glistened so that I supposed the paint to still be wet. “NO MOTOR VEHICLES, NO ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES, PARK CLOSSES AT DARK”. Fu, seeing me, stripped down to his tank top. He jumped at the sign and began grunting himself into a sweaty frenzy as he rammed it with his chest, and then jerked himself, and the sign, backward in what seemed an impossible attempt to loosen the ground.

“Fu, you’re wasting your energy,” I explained. “They probably dug it deeper this time.” At this, Fu turned to me and kissed his flexed 23-inch arms. “Ain’t no sign too deep for Jack Fu.” Then he pointed a menacing finger at the new sign, and attacked it once again.

I turned left and trudged through the dewed grass barefoot. I passed the monkey bars, and the trashcan filled with the smashed glass and fusty cans. I passed the set of twin swings where I broke my collarbone at age six and then passed the rusted slide we’d all piss down before dawn. I trudged on, green blades pasted to my feet, though still too wet to itch, into the dark clearing.

My friends down at the park’s edge, stationed in two picnic tables, would be speculating on my identity. They’d watch my silhouette swelling toward them without the assuring red dot of a bouncing cigarette. I never smoked. Every time I walked down there they’d panic themselves into frenzy thinking I was the cops. Every time.

The canopy of trees choked off the August breeze and the moonlight as I stepped up to the picnic tables. “Hey, fellas,” I said, “isn’t it kinda early for Fu to be working on the new sign?” Someone lit a cigarette and I saw Brady’s skin glimmer against his fixed stare and dark goatee. He cupped a blistered hand over the light and then exhaled a cloud into the flame. It was dark again.

I sat down across from Brady and felt the smoke drift over my face and burn my eyes. “Wanna beer?” I turned to the voice and recognized Ringo next to me.

“Yeah.” I slid a cold long neck out of the box. “Thanks, Ringo.” I held it for a moment, then Brady reached over and popped the top with his key-chain. Cold foam dribbled onto my palms. I smelled Corona in the silence.

“Where is everyone?” I asked, thumbnail digging under the moist corner of the label.

“Pat will be here later,” Brady murmured. I took a long draught on my beer and set it down with a wet sigh. Goosebumps down my arms.

“Where the fuck have you been all day?” Ringo asked, his tone pinched by the cigarette in his mouth.

I didn’t understand what he meant. “Why,” I asked, peeling back the label. “What’s going on?”

“Are you fucking kidding me!” Brady declared.

“Naw, what the hell happened? Did someone leave Oakton?” I asked.

“All right, you know how—“

“Wait, Ringo,” Brady blurted, “tell him about how it started with—“



“Shut the fuck up, Brady, I’m telling a story.” Ringo dragged on his cigarette as I tried to settle into the warped park bench. “All right, you know how Fu almost killed Pat the other day?” I nodded. When Pat got angry, he did lots of crazy things, like calling Fu worthless white trash to his face. Pat openly referred to Kris, Fu’s elitist girlfriend, as a dirty Tijuana hooker. “Well apparently, last night Pat gets all tanked up and belligerent and goes to Fu’s pool party—”

“Last night?”

“Yes,” Ringo continued. “And everything is fine—tense but calm—until Pat begins shelling the audience with proclamations about how he is the perfect male, how his body is sculpted better than David’s, how Fu is one of the “gray” people—”

“So what? Pat does that shit all of the time.”

“Well Pat takes off his shirt,” Brady cut in, “stands next to Fu and starts telling him how he was a bitch for drinking wine coolers.”

“Brady,” Ringo said, and even in the dark I could tell he was cringing with a sideways squint that he always used to patronize Brady, “do you fucking mind? Where was I?”

“Jack Fu and Pat were about to throw down,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” Ringo continued. “Fu’s dad hears the commotion from upstairs and comes out on the deck to investigate. He sees a fight brewing and tells Jack to get inside and tells Pat to get the fuck off his property. Pat tosses his beer into the pool and announces—”

“Screams,” insisted Brady.

“Fine, screams all of these accusations about Fu’s dad being a degenerate wife beating alcoholic who traffics child pornography and stolen car batteries.”

“Are you kidding?” I laughed.

“No, not at all,” Ringo continued dead-on. “So Fu rips off *his* shirt and tries to get back in Pat’s face.” He puffed his cigarette. Brady stirred and then spoke:

“And if it weren’t for me . . . if it weren’t for me someone would have gotten killed because I held Pat back.”

“It was a mess,” Ringo confirmed. “Kris was crying for them to stop while Fu screams threats and Pat does exaggerated impersonations of Fu as a retard, Brady here barking out commands—it was a mess.”

“So then Pat left?” I asked, trying to place a bookend on the story.

“No, no. Fu’s dad goes inside, comes back out with a shotgun, points to the sky and fires.”

“BAM!” shouted Brady with a clapped hand down on the table that sent ripples through the darkness.

“Well, I guess that was some shit to miss,” I affirmed. “So who’s coming out tonight?”

“Oh but that’s not even it. This morning Fu calls me—”

“Ringo,” Brady strained in a meaty whisper, “there’s someone coming. Shut up!”

My eyes focused and refocused in the pulpy darkness trying to cut a silhouette out of the shifting black. I saw nothing. But we all trusted Brady’s senses and his instincts. So we remained quiet.

“Shit,” Ringo whispered, “I bet it’s the cops.”

“Shh!” Brady ordered, “listen.”

It was quiet again. Refracted echoes of Ringo’s story about Pat bumped in my head. Then I heard the voice I’d used to regurgitate the same melodrama that would never satisfy or offend anyone by being real. As Ringo whispered once more to Brady, another voice seemed to float out of the grass below: *They’ll burn you alive to see in the dark.*

“Never fear, your leader is here,” Jack Fu bellowed as walked under the inky tree canopy. “The park service put concrete in the ground.” Freckles of moonlight reflected from his teeth and fingernails. “They sunk the posts into concrete blocks.” We all sighed as Fu sat down next to me and took a swig from the jug of dark fluid clenched in his fist. “Fucking concrete!” I took the jug by the neck and gulped a splash of it, tasting the searing flavor of cheap southern whisky. Brady consoled Fu about the sign as I passed the bottle to Ringo.

“Fu,” Brady said, “There’s gotta be a way to get it out. I bet the four of us could do it.” For awhile no one spoke. We passed the handle of whisky around the table. After several gulps, the whisky burn stretched out of my stomach and into my throat and eyes. Brady asked where Pat was.

“Who knows where that badly behaved pill head is. Pat Percy is a jealous bitch,” Fu declared of his best friend, sweeping his arms in the programmed dramatics of his budding career as an amateur wrestler.

“Jealous of what?” I asked.

“He is beneath me,” Fu announced. Suddenly I think we all felt the whisky bubbling in our veins. I knew Ringo and Brady were smiling delighted faces in Jack Fu’s glory. For them, Pat was their necessary threat and Fu was their redeemer. Fu had sold out the local National Guard armory to perform the same theatrics that quelled our disgust, night after night, of sitting at the same picnic table in the park behind my house, drinking the same poison and telling the same lies. We all took long pulls on the bottle.

Ringo lit a cigarette, stared at me. “I don’t get you, James,” he said. “You follow rules like some goddamned monk and yet you’re constantly defending the biggest asshole in Oakton.”

The bottle in my hands was half full, splashing against the glass. I put it to my lips and swallowed until my throat was numb. I stared at the fiery dot in Ringo’s voice, melting and shifting and multiplying as he spoke.

“All right, ladies and germs, it’s time for a pose down,” Fu declared. Maybe he was too drunk to realize that we couldn’t see him in the pitch black. Or maybe he knew it didn’t matter.

“Fu! Fu! Fu!” Brady and Ringo chanted, banging their fists into the unforgiving table. Fu sprang out of the table into the grass. Brady cheered and Ringo clapped as we couldn’t help but imagine Fu ripping off his shirt, swinging his beefy arms, puffing out his chest, and thrusting his bucolic middle-class jaw. I was cheering too. I blinked and *They’ll burn you alive to see in the dark* printed across the black tin foil of the night around the table. I slammed my eyes shut only to see it closer.

“Ringo, get me a light,” I said. He passed me a cigarette and his zippo. The light exploded in a swollen bubble into the night. I saw Ringo’s gelled hair, usually neat as a

helmet, cracked and disheveled. Brady's face was sagging into his goatee, and I knew I was wasted too. We all stared at the flame, mesmerized by the pulsing light pressing out and disintegrating into the creamy black. Fu drifted toward it, forgetting his posing routine. I shut the lighter. We sat there in silence as the light evaporated and the night spilled back over us.

"Jack Fu needs a drink," Ringo insisted. "He can drink more than anyone I've ever seen." I took a sip and passed Fu the bottle. He chugged for a few seconds and then gagged. The sound of him vomiting and Ringo screaming blended with the noise of a car pulling up to the park.

"You fuck! You puked on my new fucking shirt! You fucking fuck!"

"Sorry," Fu responded. "I'll buy you another one. Here, have a drink." Ringo sighed in appeasement.

"What the fuck is that?" Brady asked himself out loud. I turned and saw a light beam sweeping over the park entrance and into the clearing.

"Goddamn cops!" Fu seethed. We watched as the owner of the flashlight marched toward us. I could hear a deep vaguely familiar voice:

"We've got a four twenty down hear . . . roger that . . . requesting backup . . . bring the dogs."

"Shit!" Fu yelled as he leapt off the bench and dove for the nearby bushes. I sat there too drunk to care as Ringo and Brady scampered after him.

"Sounds like underage drinking . . . roger, roger." The beam of light fixed on my back. "Yes, sir, sounds like the local inbreds got out of the barn again."

“Pat!” I said squinting into the beam, “you bastard, where did you steal a flashlight?”

“This flashlight?” he asked in his usual voice resonating with melody and deliberation, “I built this while I played for the Lakers, you know, back when I used to name all of the hurricanes for the weather people.” I handed him the near-empty bottle and he took a sip, cringed. Fu and the others returned from the bushes at the park’s edge and sat back down at the picnic table, now lit by Pat’s flashlight.

“Pat Percy, you fuck!” Ringo said. Fu mumbled agreement, to drunk to cogitate his anger with Pat’s antics.

“You’ll never believe who I just smoked with,” Pat said.

“Who?” Fu asked, his voice sensing something.

“Vich. No, I swear to God. He’s living in Oakton again with his parents.”

“I thought Vich moved to California this winter. Or it was someplace far away,” I said.

“Well, anyway, you guys should see him. His teeth have all fallen out.”

“Shut the fuck up, Pat.” Fu was pissed. He used to baby sit him years before Vich (rhymes with *bitch*) dropped out of school became a drug-dealer in Falls Church.

“You don’t need to make shit up, man. Vich has enough goddamned problems.”

“No, I swear to God. He had that thing . . . you know what’s that disease called when your gums rot and your teeth fall out?”

“Gingivitis,” I say.

“No,” Brady cut in, “you mean shingles.”

“No I don’t mean shingles, Brady. Jesus.” Pat sighed. The rest of us sighed back. It was quiet. The darkness tightened its ribs over our table.

The energy of our earlier conversations was dead, and now I stared at their faces in numb denial of my own presence there. Pat flicked his cigarette into the dark and began to speak. He spoke the way he breathed, with a freedom and originality that his lack of formal schooling allowed. The dehumanizing aspects of cell phones and the Internet. How the media existed *only to make people afraid. Fu, do you think you’ll be better off by creating a false series of memories for yourself?* The four of us listened. His blue eyes watered when he swallowed the rest of the whisky. His voice splattered bright rainbow paint on the dewed grass, on our faces. But after a few minutes, Pat’s voice trickled down as it always did. His energy waned with the battery in his flashlight. The darkness drifted in around us and I felt myself relax. “Ringo, give me a cigarette,” Pat said. He clicked off the flashlight and puffed on his smoke. The five of us sat there in the pitch black. My eyes felt comfortable again as they projected residual images onto the curtain that hid my four best friends. None of us had ever left Oakton. I had tried. So had Pat. We always ended up in the park, drinking to oblivion, seeing our younger faces talking to us through the darkness.

“Brady, pass me your Leatherman,” Fu mumbled. Brady passed the knife to Fu, who sparked his zippo and put the blade in the flame. “Five of us,” he said, pulling the knife out of the flame and jabbing into his left biceps. He burned two lines in his skin to form a V. He heated the blade again before burning the top and bottom lines of the Roman numeral five. His flesh smelled like peanut butter cookies. “Who’s next?”

Brady snatched the blade and repeated the process with more precision. I saw blood bubbling out of Fu's arm as Brady cursed his way through the pain. Ringo couldn't stomach doing it himself, so Brady turned the knife on him. Ringo clenched his teeth and endured it with a high pitched growl.

"Hey, Fu," the sobering voice of Pat Percy, "did you see the new sign? Why don't we go rip it out? Huh?" Brady closed the zippo. Darkness pressed on our faces.

"Fuck yes!" Fu exclaimed and swaggered heroically through the clearing to the park entrance. The four of us followed. The sign stood as strong and erect as it had earlier in the night. The dirt at the base of the posts had been excavated by Fu to reveal two concrete blocks supporting the sign. "C'mon, ladies and germs," he encouraged as he squatted under the frame's wooden crosspiece. He grunted as he pressed the frame vertically with his shoulders. It didn't budge. Ringo and I grabbed hold of the front side, Pat and Brady the rear. The four of us rattled it back and forth while Fu pushed up with his shoulders.

Miraculously, the ground began to creak and the sign swayed. "Jack Fu, you're a great man," Pat said with playful condescension and kissed Fu, his best friend and biggest rival since tenth grade, on the cheek. Fu was not distracted or amused. The four of us let go of the sign. The swollen earth belched as Fu lifted the sign out of the ground. Brady lit his zippo to see what we had uprooted. Dangling from marble sinews of Fu's right shoulder, the new Park Authority sign looked like a giant mousetrap, concrete cheese blocks dangling from its hooks. Fu seemed comforted by its weight, and paced around in circles with it mashing into his shoulder. I turned my face to the sky. For a brief moment, as the Milky Way unfolded in a glimmering sweep, I felt wasn't looking out



anymore, but in. Way out in the luscious rhapsody of black, there was warmth, harmony, and light. I sensed it.

We walked back to the picnic table with the night so dark it crept into our heads, our veins. We would stay out a little later than usual that night. We all rejoiced in Fu's triumph, his sacrifice. Brady waxed religious, calling Fu *Jesus of Oakton*, which got a few laughs. Pat tried to set my hair on fire. Ringo bitched about the pain blazing in his left arm. And Fu and I, we just sat there rehashing the drama that would keep us all in Clarke's Landing Park for at least another month.

## Pure Honest

“Wake up. I need some percodan. James, you slimy bastard, wake up it’s like noon.”

The voice took shape in my dream for a moment, then a sharp pinch on my ear dissolved the figures to white. I opened my eyes. Pat Percy’s face hovered over me.

“Pat,” I rasped, “why must you continue this ritual?”

“Out with your nonsense. What is ritual but hardening yourself for the inevitable? It’s a beautiful day. Let’s go carousing.”

“Five more minutes.” I wiped crust out of my eyes.

“You know you snore like a little bitch,” he said, more weary. “I had to come kick you around a few times to get you to stop.”

My head throbbed as I picked it up. I saw my basement’s worn blue carpet and walls crammed with frames of my high school artwork. I cleared my throat. Smell of musty polyester cushion. “Did you sleep on the recliner?” I asked.

“No, you dumbfuck, I slept with your mom,” Pat snorted. “You really make some goofy noises in your sleep.”

I rubbed my eyes, felt my brain bulging into them. “Sorry. I’m allergic to this place. I can’t breathe.”

“Well would you please either put a bullet in my eye or get us some damned painkillers. I feel like ass.” He clenched a tuft of his receding platinum hair.

“All right. Let’s go upstairs and get some water.” My stomach cringed at the thought of ingesting any more chemicals. Ice water sounded delicious.

“Yeah,” he affirmed. “I need a glass of water. And then some percodan. Or vicadin if you have any left. You know, this place is like a goddamned cave,” he

observed as we ascended the stairs out of the basement. Neither of us fully remembered last night. It was July. Who cared? My insides longed for a tall glass of crisp silver water. “Did you ask Fu about those muscle relaxers?”

I emerged into the yellow light of my father’s half-renovated kitchen. I mashed my eyes shut, and Pat bumped into me. “God it’s bright,” I complained.

“Hell you haven’t even been outside yet, boy,” my father quipped. My back straightened and eyes opened. My father stood between me and the stove, his flannel shirt untucked and his face scruffy, but his hazel eyes were as sharp as the lines now in his forehead. “You want sausage or bacon with your eggs?” he asked.

“I just want water,” I told him. “Ice water.”

“Here,” he said as he dropped into my hands an enormous plate steaming with piles of pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, and jellied toast. “You need to put some meat on those bones.” He cleared his throat. “Patrick, get your silly ass off the stairs and get some nourishment in your system.”

Pat chuckled and stumbled into the shining new kitchen. Food was the last thing he wanted, but even Pat Percy could never subvert my father’s orders. “Hell’s Bells!” my father announced, shoving a mound of food into Pat’s hands, “when’s the last time you ate a good meal?” Pat did look frail.

“Oh, I don’t know, Mr. Fischer,” he shrugged.

“Well you sit down and get some nourishment,” my father ordered. He sipped his pale coffee and returned to his cooking. God only knew for whom. Pat and I began our meals. The aromas on my plate lifted away my hangover. I prodded the bacon and nibbled on some toast. Pat doused his whole plate in maple syrup and made pancake

sandwiches. The act of eating made me hungrier, and I began shoveling bites. The grease felt warm in my stomach.

“Why don’t you boys go swimming at the pool today?” my father asked, spatula gone from his hand.

“I can’t swim to save my life,” Pat informed him.

“James will teach you.”

“Dad, there’s an air quality warning. It’s July,” I said.

“Well then go downtown,” he insisted. “The museums are open.” Whenever I was with Pat, my father wanted us to go out and explore the universe. Pat’s wasted gifts seemed to remind him that his three sons were failures. But he suspected that I was somehow a fluke. Maybe his middle child could still redeem the family. Save the whole damned universe.

My father cooked more food, which he set on the counter. Then he went out to the front porch. He sat there with a carton of cigarettes, rocking on the pine swing under July’s sweltering sunshine. Pat and I sat in my air-conditioned house.

“Hey, Pat,” I asked, “would you like any dessert?” He gave me a blank stare. I opened my palm and dropped assorted pills onto the table. They landed with sharp little clicks and spun like pennies. Pat smiled.

“So there is a God,” he joked.

“The big white ones are vicadin,” I explained, dividing the pills into two lines. “The small white ones are hydrocodone. The pink ones are endodan—”

“What the hell is endodan?”

“It’s like a generic percodan. Pretty good stuff. I also have one demoral that we can split.”

“You have demoral!” He was overjoyed.

“Yeah, you realize we’re going to be smacked out of our minds. Jesus.”

Pat glanced at me and looked away. His lips opened and his Adam’s apple did funny things. I knew he wanted to make some comment about why my mother had so many painkillers. He blinked. I could tell that he knew I’d read his mind. His eyes tried to apologize. Sore subject.

“Do you have any water?” he asked. I pushed him my glass of orange juice. He swallowed two pills and gulped back some juice. I put two pills on my tongue and tasted the awful bleach flavor. I washed them down.

“Well thank you for this little treat, James,” Pat said genuinely. I knew he was only here for pills. But I’d be at his place later for weed. It all worked out in the end.

“You’re welcome.” We both took drugs out of self-indulgence. But connecting with someone in the same wacked state was far better than walling out reality. Better than falling down inside our own skin. Sometimes anyway.

“Looks like it’s going to be hot out there today.” I wiped my dry brow.

“It must be hot already,” Pat replied, holding an endodan to his eye and trying to block out the throbbing sun. “Let’s go downstairs.”

The cool air of the house collected in the damp basement. Pat rested limp in the recliner where he’d slept. I flumped onto the couch opposite him.

“This is really good shit,” he said slowly, my glazed eyes more soaking him in than seeing him.

“Yeah, I’ll take another soon.” My face so warm.

“Let’s do it now,” he suggested. Neither of us would climb the stairs to get water. I pulled the water tray out of the dehumidifier and gulped two vicadins. Pat did the same, but spilled water down his lime colored shirt. “You know,” he said, “nothing puts you in the mood to take painkillers like taking painkillers. God this feels good.”

“I feel fantastic.” I did. And most of it hadn’t even kicked in yet. We split the demoral.

I lay back down on the couch. Gravity melted my flesh into the cushions. My thoughts retreated from human itches and worries. The walls drifted away from me. My torso floated as in pool water. The musty air caressed my skin. Everything in its right place. More relaxing than sleep and so hard to leave.

Time passed and time passed. My mind couldn’t pace with my lungs. Too much effort to breathe. So I stopped. Darkness closed like a funnel over my face.

“King James, James, James Joyce, James Stewart, James wake the fuck up you slimy bastard! Breathe you dumbfuck you’re blue!” Pat’s voice swelled in and out of my bubble. I tried to nod without opening my eyes. Pat began pinching my ears, slapping my cheeks, and cursing at me. It didn’t hurt, but I wanted to let him know that I was fine. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes.

“James, c’mon, James,” his voice calmer now, “sit up and drink this. Hey everything’s fine.” He pulled my shoulders upright and held the brown water tray like a conch shell to my lips. My mouth was slow and numb. Water dribbled into a dark stain on my shirt. I swallowed some water and breathed in the air.

“Sorry, Pat.” I hated to fuck up his smack session.

“It’s all right.”

“I took too much. That demoral was too much.”

“No, you’re just not used to it.” He saw me closing my eyes again. “Hey James, remember when I ate all that bad acid on Ringo’s birthday and lost my shit and you smoked cigarettes and threw darts with me until six in the morning?” And that was the thing about painkillers. They soothed the body and squashed the mind. But they made us remember. “Hey, man keep your eyes open for me.” Those pills calmed our blood and quieted our fears. They caressed away the barriers to the stuff we walled out. It was fine to talk about anything. The cornier the better. Secrecy was the larger rule for sharing narcotics. But for painkillers, it was honesty. For once, pure honesty.

“Yeah I remember,” I said. My limbs felt like warm jelly, but my sight was clearer. Pat looked at me. Then he looked at the walls around us. Walls not big enough for the oil paintings, pen and inks, charcoals, and pastels that adorned them. The crème of my life’s art was packed like bricks into four claustrophobic arrangements.

“When’s the last time you drew anything?” he asked, tone void of derision.

“High school.”

“I don’t get that, James. Didn’t you win some stupid art award?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you go somewhere and draw purple elephants for rich people or something?”

“I don’t know. When I was at college I didn’t need to paint anymore. When I came back I’d forgotten how.” I felt hot now. Sweat creeping out of my pores.

“But you can paint like a fucking maniac.” The dozens of pictures stared with glowing eyes at me. Pat was sharp enough to tell I had talent. I was pretty sure.

“Well fuck it,” he said. “Let’s take a vicadin.” I knew he was either coming down or wanted to get truly smacked in order to let me ask him questions. We each took a 500 mg pill. We relaxed for a few minutes as the effects began. I expected to lie there enjoying the feeling of my knees rubbing together for the rest of the afternoon. But as my vision softened, Pat stood up and began pacing the room. Amazing tolerance.

“Dude,” I asked, “are you tripping or something? Are you all right?” Pat climbed like a jaguar atop his green recliner and smiled at me. I smiled back my vague painkiller grin. My muscles wanted to dissolve into the couch. I could feel the pills eating the lining of my stomach. I swallowed.

Pat began laughing. At first I was too smacked to care why. Then he plucked my charcoal self-portrait from the wall and flung it at me. “Ha! You slimy bastard! Ha!” laughing like a madman. Then his long arms swept over the entire wall pulling down my art like he was scraping a frying pan. I sat there trying to take it all in. Had he lost his mind? Then he leapt off the recliner and darted into the bathroom. I heard my father’s footsteps upstairs.

Pat emerged with a roll of toilet paper. He stood in the center of the room and began to unroll it. The tube spun as he loosed a pile of white ribbon. “Dude, you’re teepeeing my floor,” I laughed. The last of the paper fell and he held the empty cardboard tube in his hand.

“C’mon, James, I can’t do this alone.” I had never been so relaxed and content to do nothing. The mound of toilet paper on my carpet made something inside me click. I



rolled off the couch and crawled over to the pile. "You can't let yourself have such a big nose," Pat said. "Look at what a mess your teeth are!" I stared into the white and my hands began to move over it.

"You're right," I said. And I fixed my nose. My fingers kneaded the toilet paper into a landscape that stirred some lost recollection of myself. I fixed my eyes too.

"Oh please, James, you're more sophisticated than that. Don't be such a cubist," Pat urged. The basement door opened and my father's deliberate footsteps clunked down the stairs.

"I've got burgers here, boys. Tomato, onion, swiss, mushroom burgers," he said. When he saw the pictures gone and the toilet paper and Pat standing over me like a JV basketball coach, his expression barely changed.

"James is doing a piece, Mr. Fischer," Pat explained. I thought he'd leave or yell, but he just sat down on the couch and set the two steaming plates on the cushion. My father sat there. My heart was beating and my armpits were sweating and my stomach was reeling. Pat traced lines across the blank wall with his toilet paper tube.

"Damned if I can breathe down here with my allergies," I said, rising to my feet. "It needs more blue." Pat gave me the tube. I stroked my colors all over the wall. My father watched me for a moment. I sat down. Had to.

"Clean up this shit," he said. I picked up while Pat ate a mushroom burger. "We've got work to do." He looked at me in disgust and then turned to Pat. "You know anything about fixin' cars, son?"

"Oh sure, Mr. Fischer. I used to work part time in an autobody when I was in L.A." I rolled my eyes and followed them upstairs.

The 1993 white Ford Tempo had been on blocks in our driveway for years. My father, Pat, and I stood on the driveway under a hot groggy sun. My father peeled his shirt off, sweat already glistening on his hairy arms.

“We’re fixing the Tempo?” I asked.

“Take it apart, see how it works,” my father responded.

Pat lay in the lawn like a clipped dandelion resting back in its grass.

My father opened the hood. With a creak, the blackened network of steel revealed its tangled, secret face to the sun. The engine glistened in the light like a pile of cold brains. My father’s hands moved over the rusted machinery. I could tell he knew it well. I’d watched this ritual enough times to know. He still hadn’t fixed the damned thing though. He should have known better than to ask Pat for help.

I stood there watching my father’s hands probe the engine. I remembered the time my father put on a shirt that had been sitting in the garden and got stung seventeen times by some hornets. Then mumbled as we drove to soccer practice. Tinkering now with knobs and checking tubes for holes.

“I think it’s the alternator,” he said.

“Alternator,” I say, scratching my elbow.

“Yep. Try and crank it. See how it goes.”

“All right.” I did crank the key. The Tempo groaned, vibrated, then died. Old bag of Cheetos in the passenger seat.

“Alternator,” he said. He mumbled and yanked on some levers.

My father believed that the Tempo would run again.

Pat was still sprawled in the grass, his body meshed in the green, catatonic and numb. I stood by my father and leaned in under the hood. I didn't know what anything was called. Not sure he did either. When my mom made me work in her garden as a child, I learned the names before we ever saw the flowers. Then it was tulips and daffodils and rhododendrons in rows and clusters just like she planned. We knew the words and created the picture just like we wanted. It smelled good too.

"Goddamn it!" my father shouted and jerked his wrist to his mouth. A white line reddened and then purple began to seep from his forearm.

"I'll go get a Band-Aid, or something," I said, moving to the door.

When I got back to the driveway with a sloppy icepack and gauze pads, the July sun had ignited behind the mist of clouds and the sky sharpened from yellow to crystal blue. The grass, the air looked clearer. Pat was awake now, standing bright-eyed and gazing into the engine of the Tempo. My father had wrapped his forearm in Pat's lime-colored shirt.

"First thing, Mr. Fischer, is you've got to get your battery cables in order," Pat said, my father bleeding into his shirt.

"Battery cables. Humph. Well take a look at the alternator, Percy." And from now he would always call Pat by his last name, his father's name.

"No, sir," Pat explained, poking his fingers into the engine, "what we've here are some warped old battery cables. I say rip 'em on outta there. Start anew."

It was weird standing there. Ice pack melting in my wet hands. My father's face glowed with faint recognition as his arm bled into my best friend's shirt.

My father always believed the Tempo would one day run again.

Dad wiped an oil streak across his brow and plunged his hands into the engine. He twisted and grunted and out came the old battery cables.

Did he see me standing there?

“Percy, fetch me the Allen wrench.” A silver glint passed between Pat’s hands and my father’s. And just like that. Dad lowered the wrench like a scalpel and reached into the skull of the Tempo. Sun glistening like magic on his shoulders, he didn’t hesitate to make his opening cut.

Three hours later, Pat and I were curled in recliners down in the basement. Painkillers were the ultimate drugs. Vital. Not the most potent. Barely mind-expanding. But crashing down from anything else was fine if I had them. Two vicadin would get me through the most wicked hangover imaginable. No irony that the thing that sucked about painkillers was coming down from them. Top of the food-chain. Nothing can save you. Pat started scratching first, then I felt an itch too. Next, the softened corners of the basement crystallized into stabbing edges. Placated consciousness dissolving into infernal worry and blasphemous self-doubt. No way out. I told Pat I hated him for what he did. And now beginning to itch—really truly itch as though carpenter ants chomped on my pores. Alcohol, marijuana would make me puke. *How could you?* Crawled in a ball and hated the goddamned July sun. The goddamned Tempo. That’s just fine. Feel myself spinning in a whirlpool of sweat. Don’t care. Turning me like a screw into the furniture I hate. I wondered if my stomach was bleeding.

## Don't Look Back

Pat, Brady, and I all shit-canned so Pat drove my car, me shotgun, Brady behind. Gliding through the darkness, rum melting me into the seat. I played with the loose bone fragment in my jaw. Numb. My father hit me once when I was a kid. We were lost in the tobacco flats of Kentucky at dusk and an old man with a harelip told us the way. I giggled at the man with the funny face as we drove away. My father cracked his knuckles against my jaw. Too shocked to cry. Don't you dare judge people, he said. Judge yourself. Then a long quiet. Chipped bone still shifting, numb, as I played with it fourteen years later.

By the time we got to 66, we all had to piss again. I killed the last inch or so of Captain Morgan's so we could piss in the bottle. Me first, then Brady, then Pat (while I steered)—unspoken rule of STD prevention. God only knew what bugs Pat was carrying. *What did he say?* "I'm fine to steer," I answered, "just don't piss on my seat."

"I said your fly's still down, you dumbfuck. When are you going to learn how to drink?"

"Pat," Brady cut in, wrestling with his own fly, "how do you manage to drive drunk so fucking well?"

"You know, I just don't get you weak-minded people," Pat answered. "Is your problem with steering or speed? Cause if you can't do either drunk then you don't deserve a license in the first place." He was a remarkable drunk driver. I think his father gave him lessons.

"Do you think we will make it by 11?" Brady asked. Worried about being late for his girlfriend?

“Brady, if that lazy-eyed hooker complains just give her a good shaking.” Pat’s cruel laugh. “Shake the bitch!” Haha.

“Fuck you, Pat.” He passed me the bottle. I rolled down the window. Cold spring air ripped at our faces, caught the bottle as I flung it. Didn’t hear it shatter. Wiped a mist of piss from my hands onto my jeans.

“You know, you guys should come up to my cabin in a few weeks,” Brady said. “It will be warm enough but there won’t really be any bugs yet.”

“Where’s your cabin?” Pat asked.

“It’s in the Shenandoah—Big Bastard Mountain. It’s only like ninety minutes away but it’s the most amazing place.” No running water. No electricity. I knew more than Pat.

“Well what is there to do?” Pat asked.

“Everything, man. We’ll take a bottle of whisky up and get bombed. I built this rope swing and there is this hot spring right there and at night you can see stars like you wouldn’t believe. Wait to you breathe the air there oh and the fucking night is so goddamned quiet it’s like a dream or something.”

“Really.”

“A lot of times I’ll just sit on the porch and watch the moon.”

“Watch it do what?”

“Oh, James, it’s amazing. You can totally see why the ancients worshipped it. It floats up over the horizon like a fucking orb and just glides through the night. I like to trace its path with my thumb and watch the valley barely change color from the moonlight and then go dark again.”

“Jesus, Brady, you’re really deep.”

“James, of all people you would get so much out of it. It will make you feel so alive and I’m not even smart enough to really get it. Next weekend, man.”

I cleared my throat. “Brady, shit, you should write books or something.”

“Oh actually have you ever read—wait, James . . . are you . . .” his voice revealing slow recognition of the sarcasm.

“Clowning you for the past ten minutes?” Pat finished. “Yes, he has been.”

Brady rustled around in the backseat. “Chill out, Brady, I was just fucking with you, man. Relax.”

“That’s fucked up, man.” And I turned just soon enough to see his fist barrel toward me in a right hook but miss completely and bash Pat in the ear. “Shit, Pat, I’m sorry. I meant to hit James.”

Pat checked his ear for blood. Started laughing because he realized Brady really was aiming for me.

When we started over Key Bridge, the incandescent lights lining the bridge and the cumulative electric glow of DC created a strange daylight effect. 11:20. Like a warm tunnel of light suspended over the black waters of the Potomac below. Brady broke a long silence and started telling a story about driving to the cabin by himself. At the foot of Big Bastard: Brady finds a man in the driver’s seat of a pickup. Missing his clothes and the back of his head. As in a trance, we floated over the bridge. Blood everywhere. Bit of brain. When was this? Twelve gauge dangling from his mouth. Sorry, Brady.

We parked in a four-dollar lot on Wisconsin. We splashed through the puddles of M street toward our destination: *Sports Fans*. A basement bar that sits below M-street

two blocks from the Key Bridge. Sports Fans was infamous (and loved by us) for two reasons:

- 1) Admittance of anyone over 18, with faulty hand stamps for the underage.
- 2) Marvelous drink specials that included such gems as “Dime Draft Night.”

I never thought about why the drinks were so cheap. Could have been club soda and strychnine, but it was a fun place so nobody asked. Sports Fans boasted a strange variety of crowd. Torn jeans wearing/ Rolex toting Georgetown students. M Street winos. Cautious Northern VA teens. Gamblers who watched three screens at once and never took their coats off. Even a smattering of District yuppies who came for the *non-generic* atmosphere. And strange things happened there. For instance: our friend Ringo passing out in the women’s toilet one night or Fu (our other friend) body-slammng Ringo onto a table without spilling his drink.

Through the green glass door, show ID’s and down the steps into a swollen neon abyss. Anonymous drinking is the easiest kind. Brady off to talk to Laura. Pat and I straight to the bar. Sports Fans!

*Two rounds later:*

“Is that who I think it is?”

“Who?” Pat nodded toward the women’s bathroom. I saw him. Blaze Culpepper. Pat noted the recognition spreading over my face.

“You wanna kick his ass?”

I shook my head. “Are you sure it’s him? Didn’t he go to Dartmouth or something? I mean what are the chances?”—straw hat, high cheekbones, hitting on cutest girl here—“Well, maybe it is. Brady’ll know.”



*And two more rounds:*

“Guys, you remember Laura.” Clutching a bundle of her fingers. Cute girl for Brady—slender wrists and long white teeth.

“Yeah, sure,” I say. “How are you, Laura?” She smiled and blushed.

“Brady,” Pat said, “do you happen to remember—”

“Pat I’m actually sorry about the thing in the car. I really did mean to hit James so if you want to hit me I won’t hit you back and we’ll be even.” Wrinkling around Laura’s gray eyes.

*Then, after a few shots and three more Dixie cups:*

Brady had been stomping in circles for ten minutes. A beer in each hand splashing as he bumped into every conceivable object—flimsy barstools, sturdy waitresses—and grunted muffled apologies.

“What the hell is he doing?” I asked. “Where’s Laura?”

Pat lit his nineteenth cigarette of the night. “Look, James, if he has some incident, it’s on you.” He twisted his cigarette like a kaleidoscope. Stared through it at the drunken revelry bristling around us.

“On me?”

“He’s *your* friend.” But Brady must not have heard. He swerved into Pat and dropped his beers. Grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Listen to me, Pat,” leaning in, heavy gusts of sour beer breath. He motioned toward his girlfriend, who was consumed in conversation with Blaze Culpepper. The emerald-eyed, martini-toting asshole wearing a straw hat at a sports bar. Worst man in

Oakton. Probably not even his real name. But here he was at our bar—reeling in Laura with hypnotic glances and semantics that Brady wouldn't get.

Pat cleared his throat and tried to ease out of Brady's clutches. Brady let go for a moment and tried to collect his spilled beer. I just couldn't stop staring at it. Blaze Culpepper. He parked across from me senior year. Only he bought two adjacent spots so he could diagonally park his metallic blue Porsche 911. What a fucker. He sold T-shirts with his name designed as a fire across the front. What fucking nerve. But kids bought them. Twenty bucks. Blaze. Staring at her cleavage. Bastard.

"Patrick! Do you know what love is?" Brady shouted just loud enough that people peeked at us. Pat Percy smiling in vain and Brady looking like he has no idea that he's on the verge of tears. Brady squeezed him. "I said DO YOU KNOW WHAT LOVE IS!"

"I guess."

Brady clenched his jaw and released Pat's shoulders. "Then you know it's the only thing worth fighting for!" and marched like a mad caveman—arms swinging, sweaty hair looking like a pair of horns—the two dozen paces to Laura. She was against the wall stirring a highball, Blaze leaning in over her. Breathing on her pearls.

Pat was laughing out loud. "Just when you think that kid can't get any more worthless . . . Jesus."

Brady didn't do much swing at Blaze as he did jump on him and wrestle him to the ground like an elk—a wiry green-eyed elk with Versachi fur. It didn't happen in slow motion or even in sequence but all at once, like gulping a toast:

—Martini glass shattered.

—Laura gasped and grasped for the asshole she'd *never* get to talk to again.

—Pat excreted one long shrill laugh.

—I stumbled through a bemused crowd to stop him: “Brady!”

“Brady,” Pat echoed.

Blaze was no match for him. When I reached them, Brady was in between spinning Blaze on his face and dislocating his shoulder through a chokehold that utilized Blaze's own forearm. Dominance.

“Brady. Hey, c'mon now, Brady.” I touched his shoulder and tried to ease him off the gasping, drooling Blaze Culpepper. He was oblivious. Bouncers coming.

“Brady. John Brady, it's James listen everything's gonna be all right just let him go. Stand up and talk to me. That's right just stand him up and let him go.” He did stand up. Left Blaze shivering, shaking—curled on his side like a broken martini glass in a puddle of vodka. Carnation red bubbling from his lips. While Pat was convincing the bouncers to let us stay (something about Blaze being a Brazilian male prostitute looking for smack?), Laura was slapping Brady, punching his swollen chest, and trying not to become hysterical. Twin amber trails down her powdered cheeks. Pearls shaking.

“John!” she shrieked, a hand over her upper lip. “Why do you always do this stupid shit? Whywhy why!”

Brady didn't really have a verbal answer. He tried to calm her with a bear hug and a sincere look of contrition. But Laura wasn't like us—Pat and I—or like his other friends—Fu and Ringo—she just didn't *get* it. She did get angrier though. Blaze was being carried out (*Buy more drinks or leave*, so I stepped up to the bar) and Pat couldn't help taunting him.

“Hey, Blaze. Blaze Culpepper! You think I could get one of those T-shirts, man? No, I’m serious—those were really neat. The ivy with the teal flame! Wow.”

Laura lost control of her tears and collapsed into her boyfriend. Half-embracing him/ half-pounding his chest like a kettle drum.

“Bit of a daze, Blaze? Oh, no! You forgot your hat!” And proceeded to deposit the mashed lump of straw on his own head. “Blaze, does it look okay on me? Seriously, farmer hats are the shit!” Then Blaze disappeared up the stairway—feet fumbling and head crooked—two bouncers carrying him by the belt. I almost felt sorry for him. Then I remembered. High school cafeteria. A soon to be devirginized cheerleader on either of his knees. Him waving to me. Wave back? Then his expression: *no not you, idiot*. Then the same shit with the poor bastard behind me. Asshole. From Oakton.

I came back from the bar with a tray of eight-ounce Dixie cups full of premium fifty-cent draft. Brady looked calm. Probably no idea why she was weeping in his arms, softer now. “Hey,” I asked, mostly to Pat, “you guys want to get out of here?”

“Let’s finish these beers,” he said as Laura, with a wipe of her nose and straightening of her blouse, turned from Brady and marched up the stairs. Gone.

“All right.” Brady just stood there beside me. Like he expected it.

We stood against the wall of Sports Fans and endured the discreet little glances everyone couldn’t help but make. I remembered the day I met John Brady. September of kindergarten (the first time, public school), the bus stop, Clarkes Landing Drive. He had a shiny new book bag and a shiny red apple—devouring it with excruciating crunches. Did I know any good places in the woods? No answer.

I scanned for a place at the bar. There weren't three adjacent stools open, but I had to sit down. Brady mounted the stool to my right. Searched his pockets for a cigarette. To my left, a rosy-cheeked Dupont Circle-looking middle manager sipped a bottle of Rolling Rock. Pat sat to his left and ordered a shot. People staring.

I downed three more of the Dixie cups. Brady was mumbling, not really even drinking, but calm, so I stopped worrying about him. Wash away the embarrassment with gulps of frosty beer. People staring. And I relaxed into the common noise of meshed voices and throbbing music vibrating through the bar. Blaze's sister had Cerebral Palsy. Forgot when he drove me home too. I looked over to Brady, lost in his own world. Rocking like an ice cube in a screwdriver. *James, you fucking spectator.* Ignored him. Threw back two more and realized it is impossible to get drunker from eight ounce Dixie cups, no matter how many I had.

"Brady, everything will be fine," I consoled myself. "Just call her tomorrow and it will be all right. Just be honest with her."

Brady stopped his rocking, disagreed: "We're all under siege here," he spurted in a country accent. "This whole fucking world, man!" staring at his knuckles "life is—I mean—you've gotta be fucking kidding me—it's like we're all under a goddamned siege and nobody knows it."

Good friend, I passed him a beer. October of kindergarten I went to his house to build a fort. Cavernous boxes piled in the hallways. Still moving in. Then in the backyard: a seven point buck dead on its side. Eyes glistening, hind legs poised, antlers rigid. Did I want to touch the eye? His empty belly. His belly just two limp fur flaps, warm in the golden sun.

“Brady, it’s really not a big deal. Blaze deserved it. Tomorrow just call—”

“I mean it’s like—don’t you see? It’s like who’s gonna submit? We’re all starving here,” sweeping his knuckles at the crowd—bloated, intoxicated, gulping more, all. “Life is a fucking siege! James, do you at least see what . . .”

*Meanwhile, to my left:*

Ruby-faced man sipping Rolling Rock hears that drunken wrestler yell about siege or war or something. Puts scarf in lap. Leans left toward attractive male wearing ruffled hair and a Japanese baseball jersey. So rough these youth!

“Hi I’m Peter.”

“Huh?” Pat glancing up from his warm shot of Stole.

“I’m Peter.” Turning his scarf in his lap. “Can believe the music people play on the jukebox? I swear if I hear one more—”

“Peter, I say to die would be an awfully big adventure!” and downed the Stole.

“Excuse me?”

The bartender clamped his fists down in front of my drinks. “Look, you’ve got to calm your friend down if you want to stay. Where does he get off calling me a spectator?”

“It’s fine,” I assured him. “He’s just had a lot to drink but he’s fine now.”

Nope. Brady was not fine. He was pouring beer in his hair and pulling his ears. “There’s nothing here!” Cigarette ashes growing long as people stared. “There’s nothing to be gained here!” Bartender’s hands now flat against the sticky oak finish. Dozens of glazed eyes on me. Time to go. “The dark is so polluted that we can’t even see the stars!” Get him out of here.

“Strange bird, eh?” Peter said, leaning a shoulder toward Pat, crumpling his face in Brady’s direction.

“Who?”

“The obnoxious inbred over there. Fool.” Peter swirled his beer. “Haha. Bibulous jackass. Haha. At Villanova I swear my roommate—”

“What did you call him?” Pat replied, rising.

I could see it coming and so I put my hand on Brady’s neck. “C’mon, John, let’s dip out of this joint. Oakton calls.” Bouncers coming.

“I mean, James, would you just acknowledge how fucked up this is? This is so fucked up—”

“—THAT’S FUCKED UP YOU YUPPIE ASS-CLOWN!” Pat’s voice? And a mass of hot flesh crashed into my side. Slid to the floor below. “DON’T YOU EVER CALL HIM THAT! YOU MOTHER FUCKER!” Gagging. Moaning as Pat stomped a soft torso with his Prussian commando boots. Bouncers startled, turning from Brady. Pat screamed obscenities, his face redder than Peter’s.

*After we escaped the ensuing brawl, me with only minor injuries. No arrests:*

Brady puked all over the sidewalk. “What if there was a world without mirrors,” Brady asked, wiping his mouth with his shoulder, “and no one knew what they looked like except by how people reacted to them? Could we still be beautiful without mirrors?” Pat smirked with a split lip and swollen cheekbone. He rolled his eyes and lit cigarette number twenty-five.

“Beautiful,” I answered. We stepped out of the light. My jaw throbbed in what would surely bruise into an unmistakable row of bouncer’s knuckles. We crossed M

Street and splashed through the gray puddles of spring rain, looking for my car in the  
black-out four-dollar parking lot.



## Dreaming of Bizadi

“Where’s Ringo?” Fu asked for the second time tonight, rolling up a sleeve while mashing the steering wheel in his other palm. Fu didn’t care really, but the question eased the cramped silence.

“I dunno,” said Brady, riding shotgun. Maybe Brady did know, but he never admitted to much in this group.

Fu adjusted his mirror: crumpled behind were James and Pat, limbs and egos crammed into the shelf-like backseat of *Fu’s Goddamn Jap car*. The car carried them somewhere between Fu’s house and DC. The triangular windows were too small and tinted for the two in the back seat to sense their location.

“Coodja please open a goddamn window, Fu,” Pat demanded. “It’s like a fucking oven.” He pressed a knee into Brady’s seat.

Fu cracked his window. Waves of February air knifed in. The car glided like a space ship through the abyss of Oakton night. And as though steering for asteroids, it swayed with the rolls and curves of Vale road. Vienna yuppies deemed Vale a treacherous artery for traffic. But Fu had navigated the passage so many times that sometimes he wondered if he was still the one driving.

“Pat, you’re *not* smoking in here,” Fu ordered in a voice that implied *please*. Brady grunted in agreement as Pat lit up and exhaled a curtain of smoke at Fu’s twitching head.

“Well then open the fucking window so I can breath.”

Brady looked around and then opened his window. He rolled up his sleeves. "I wonder where Ringo is," he said. John Brady had long ago traded his duck boots for their Dock Martins, his shaggy flannels for ribbed sweaters, his passionate talk of turkey hunting for cryptic, ever-changing discussions on cops, the Redskins, drugs, and Howard Stern. He still didn't have it, he still didn't quite fit in, and he knew it. *A half step away.* Hanging out with Fu's group was a constant struggle to shed an identity that his mother had raised. *These guys have so many fucking rules*, he thought, playing with his new zippo. Right now Brady just tried to be quiet. Not fuck up any more.

The February air exploded over their faces and burned their eyes. "God, Pat, you crack head it's freezing!" Fu shivered. Pat put his face to the window and let the wind rip at his face. Pat pulled back when Fu clicked the window button and choked off the rush of wind. Brady eased back in his bucket seat. Pat and James, both taller and more outspoken than Brady, had opted for the back without explanation.

Pat and James shared so much in common that it was eerie and awkward to think about. So no one ever did. Both stood at 6'4", scored 1390 on SATs. Both were talented enough to leave Oakton for good—Pat for modeling, James for painting (though they came back for very different reasons). Both loved storms (Pat for the wind, James for the lightning, both for the rain). Both had almost died of appendicitis and were fascinated with cats. The list went on.

"Dude, I said you're *not* smoking," Fu asserted.

"Oh, fine, if you're going to be a whiny little bitch." Pat stubbed it out.

"Pat, it's like twenty degrees *without* the wind chill." Fu's knuckles whitened as he turned onto Hunter Mill road. He sighed, "Where's Ringo?"

Good question. Michael Samuel Ringer, normally the fifth passenger, was MIA tonight. This evening he had driven to a place very different to liberate, or perhaps exorcise, his lust through sticky, painful acts that still scared him. His friends should have suspected, but instead, the power of denial worked its quiet magic. In any case, Ringo would be back tomorrow with his loose tongue and superb fashion sense. He'd chug beer and curse in a veiled effort to deny the impossible facts of his matrix.

"Dude, you know Vichy can take like forty-five gravity hits now," Fu said, mostly to himself. A combined effort of the car couldn't approach that.

"Jesus," Pat said.

As the red Celica cruised into Falls Church, the city lamps filled the car with white light and anxiety to stretch hamstrings and get high. "It's bright as shit," James complained.

"You know," Brady said, "it must cost a fortune for the city to keep it lit like this. But it probably reduces crime." Everyone stared at him, squinting harder.

"Well, Fu," Pat said as though Brady hadn't spoken, "What did you tell Vich we want?"

"Buds, buds, buds,"

"I thought we were doing more than getting high," Pat said evenly.

"Pat, dude, I'm just fucking with you." Jack Fu, to outsiders, emerged the Alpha Male. Ringleader. He was thirty pounds heavier than his friends and chiseled. "Man, you think I drive twenty minutes for pot?" His voice carried a natural, deep boom. Pat rolled his eyes. Up in the chambers of Fu's skull things happened slowly (760 SAT, LD, ADD). He had impeccable taste in movies and music, but that was all. Fu's confidence

didn't matter to Pat, who knew he was flat out stupid. He still loved him though. "I told Vich we wanted to *candyflip*," Fu said.

Candyflipping? Yes, that brain scorching activity that combines Ecstasy and acid (or shrooms if you had the money, and they did). A rolling trip or a tripping roll: *candyflippin'*. Vich was the right guy to ask.

Vich lived in the basement of a Pakistani carpet cleaning business in Falls Church. The money he made as Northern Virginia's premier dope salesman could have financed a better place. His basement was tucked in the rear of the building. His front-yard was the employee parking lot. The legions of incandescent street lamps that guarded Falls Church did not shine here. The lot was surrounded by ranks of muscular trees that blocked the city's effort to pierce the darkness. The night was very dark soft and smooth at this hour. Vich opened his door and walked over to Fu's car. He sat down on the hood and lit a cigarette.

Vich, a high school dropout, was four years younger than the Oakton guys now pulling each other out of the car to greet him. Vich's appearance, and something else that James never could place, defied his age. His teeth were rotting out of his gray gums (an unfortunate side effect of crystal meth). His wispy black ponytail snaked down his back like a trail of grease. Vich's blue eyes had long ago retreated from the quotidian fabric of school and television for the diaphanous silks of cocaine, meth, and Ecstasy. James thought he looked like an anemic Hell's Angel or something.

"Hey, guys. Hey, Fu. What's goin' on guys?" he said and wiped his nose (which was perpetually running) with his sleeve. Fu slapped his palm into Vich's other hand.

Brady wondered if Fu could do biceps curls with Vich clinging to his forearm as a flimsy dumbbell. James wondered if Vich recognized him.

“Well, Vich,” Fu answered, trying to mask his disgust for Vich’s eroding face, “only one reason four Oaktoners come all the way out to Fall’s Church.” They both chuckled. Vich coughed.

“Well, gentlemen,” Vich said in a trembling, playfully aristocratic voice, “Step into my quarters and see if there’s anything I can help you with.” Wiped his nose with the other hand.

“Didn’t Fu already tell you what we wanted over the phone?” Brady blurted. Did Vich remember? Maybe, maybe not. Fu glared at Brady and would belittle him (*dumb inbred!*) later for the remark. The last thing Vich needed was to feel stupid. Fu knew. He’d been Vich’s babysitter back when the drug dealer wore blanket sleepers and collected basketball cards. Back when Vich would sit in Fu’s basement nursing Capri Suns, admiring the posters of Hulk Hogan. The Hulkster could silence his mother’s screaming. The Hulkster could tell him where his brother went, why his father stood in his work suit holding the fridge door open for hours, staring.

They followed Vich into his pad. Vich began snapping the six bolts into place. “So, you guys want buds?” *click*. “Take some G’s?” *click*.

“Yeah, Vich,” Pat affirmed. He trusted his own pretty face and warm voice over Fu. “Yes.”

“Das cool,” Vich replied. He talked like he always needed to spit. His four visitors had no such flaws. Pat loathed finger licking; James couldn’t tolerate sighing,

and so on until their group had refined away such peeves. They were a remarkably well-mannered group of drunks and law flouters.

As Fu tried to hint at the drugs he'd ordered, James looked around the basement: concrete floors, cracks like black lightning down the wall, stale furniture scattered around the one large space. "Oh, das right," Vich said, nodding, "you guys was gonna candyflip, yeah." He opened one of many pockets on his jacket, extracted an orange pill container that probably once held omoxacillin. He went to the fridge and brought back a Glad lock bag full of shrooms. Vich, like he'd been waiting to do this all day, doled out an Ecstasy pill and handful of shrooms to each of his four visitors. "Hey das my treat, man," spit still gurgling in his throat. No one protested; everyone thanked him. The four stood by the locked door and ate their drugs (tasted like straw peanuts). Sixty bucks apiece and he wouldn't take money. Not so much to look noble as to *be* noble.

They sat in a flattened circle. Jack Fu and Vich were fastened to the couch, James teetered on a stack of dusty books, Pat rocked to his left on a crate, Brady hunched over Indian style between them. Vich cradled a red Nike shoebox in his lap. In the center of the circle was Julius, Vich's crude contraption for the imbibing of unfiltered marijuana. Julius was a dual faceted entity. He consisted of:

—One Tropicana three quart jug, bottom severed off, its cap covered in tin foil and pieced by a one centimeter hole for the screen dish.

—One green car wash-like bucket, plastered with stickers and two-thirds filled with water, fresh if possible.

Vich removed a bud the size of a large marble from the shoe box and dropped it

like beetle into the screen dish. He dunked the jug into the bucket so the cap hovered just over the waterline. Then, with a fluidity and exactness that divided Vich from the gravity bong charlatans, he burned the bud and carefully lifted the jug out of the water, creating a three-quart chamber of THC laden fumes within. Vich removed the silver cap and put his lips over the smoking aperture. His eyes looked up for a moment, shining as Bob Dylan's must have on smoking up John Lennon, only Vich was guiding himself. And with a sucking noise the seemed like a duct releasing pressure from the room, he inhaled the smoke and guided the cap down to the waterline.

The other four exhaled with him. Vich's scalp began tingling against his greasy hair as he burned a hit for Fu, then Pat, then James, then Brady. Vich loved to burn G's. To escape in the synchronized beauty of his motion; he was doing what was happening. He loved that. The four others—Pat, Fu, James, and Brady—were getting high now too. Vich could tell. He saw James had stopped looking all over, seemed to be looking at himself. Pat was rocking on his crate for more hits. He'd get more. But not Fu—he looked like the basement air was pulling his skin. *Can't give Fu too much cuz' he'll kirk his shit* Vich knew. The weed was scraping away Fu's routine voice, and yanking memories up before his eyes. He stared at Julius but kept seeing Vich out of the corner of his left eye. *He's gonna be fucked up.* And candyflipping too. Brady scratched his leg and thought *where the hell is Ringo?*

Thirty minutes later, Fu's brain felt like warm honeycomb gushing in his skull. Neurologists would say his neo-cortex was stimulated, that Serotonin was dripping out its reservoir. Fu didn't know those words. He never considered that candyflipping was

anything other than transcending the neurons and chemicals embedded in his quiet reptile brain and ape instincts that breathed behind his every thought. But in Fu's language: *orgasmic unraveling of vision*. Fu always assumed that candyflipping was the real way of seeing and thinking, an escape from the animal stupidity in his DNA. Did Fu glimpse as an animal once more, staring and absorbing his friends like fellow beasts hunting the savannah and not know it? Or did he jump off his human brain entirely? Plunging down in inky water, letting go of his breath, opening eyes . . .

**Stage Center:** four talented twenty-somethings (with the 17-year old Vich babysitting) wasting away in the murky basement of an even murkier carpet cleaning establishment, tucked in the shadiest corner of a city obsessed with street -lamps. Laughing and staring like they'd never smoked up before. Goofy and kittenish and hysterical and brazenly innocent. Audience giggles. [Film and stage, especially when you're candyflipping, are a different breed of cat. There's energy on stage—an energy like a translucent soup hanging from the balcony. Like a glistening, smiling mirage that knows only the five boys.] Audience sees (and hears) it as invisible watchers (but not spectators). Each of the five is a palely burning flame.

As it hits him, Brady at first is sick and shaking and trembling. He feels his identity leaking through the seams of his skin, his carapace dissolving in the air. The deer slayer, the thick-kneed citizen, protector of his sister's virginity, the believer—seep out of Brady into a hologram of himself. He sees it all before him and wonders if that's him or if he's it. Brady's mind lacks the voltage of James' or Pat's—but even so his



brain climbs hard and fast—pushing out as through mesh. *I want to get out.* He wants out of his past, out so far that memories won't cling to his hands like glaze on antlers or foam in dead deer eyes. *Out past the point where I wouldn't even notice blood had been there* as he puts his head in his hands. *Out of this whole fucking hunt* as he scratches his hot, flaky scalp.

James sits perched like a dove on a stack of old books. He smiles. To his left sits Brady, still Indian style, scratching and mumbling at no one at all. To his right sits Pat, cherry faced, eyes squeezed shut, breathing the air out loud. Across from him sit Fu and Vich, one probing his fluffy muscles and the other packing another G. James smiles because his eyes feel loose and strong. They squash the room, hold it, let it back out. His eyes grab the couch, twist it shut and wring it like a bath towel. Sucking out the brown and pouring in a neon rainbows. His eyes move on their own. He feels them creep out of his face and peek back in (like the dream where he becomes conscious of dreaming and consciously tries to push himself back into unconsciousness to keep dreaming, teetering on the edge of recognition). For a moment, language leaves him. Words melt into woven color. Then back: *I'm setting the room free. It's coming free because I can see it.* Then he can't. Then he can. *We're bouncing exoskeletons! My arms clamp my torso in space, because it juts out and fills the void (like these words?).* And then James looks startled and glances around. *Someone must have seen me look startled . . .*

*Patrick Coutland Percy! That's my name! My beautiful fucking name! God I am so beautiful!* Pat: (James' adjacent candyflipper/ best friend) still with his eyes shut, but looking like he'd run the 110 meter hurdles and *then* woken up. His hands feel full. Pat moves his hands through the empty air and sees spindles of wheat rise up to meet them.

He sees hard buds all over the basement unfolding and blossoming (*oh me!*) and the very air bristling with his energy and his hands move through it like a drunken ninja's.

Wings—*If only I could fly!* Filtering himself through the room and making it glow—

**Brady:** Ringo's a fag.

**James:** Huh?

**Fu:** Sheeet! What now?

**Brady:** No, no. I think he's gay. Ringo's really gay.

(**stage center:** Vich chuckles and takes another bong hit, smoke billows through his skinny teeth. Others seem surprised they are still sitting in a room, then lean back)

Fu has stopped probing his muscles. Now he hugs his chest, his knees to make sure he's still there. Vich would worry, but he knows Jack Fu, his former babysitter, needs this. Sweat runs down Fu's chin. Vich goes to the fridge and begins lugging a gallon of spring water for Fu. *Das da moderfuckin Bizadi guy* he realizes in mid stride. Fu gulps his water and Vich stares at James: *Das da muderfuckin Bizadi guy.*

Purple beanstalks climb out of Pat's landscape. Neon blue jays build their nests. *Oh my God, I knew this is how it had to be* (Pat thought in words for a moment). The air milks his limbs and glistens as though sprinkled with fairy glitter.

James feels the darkness smeared like zebra stripes across his face. The emerald darkness so beautiful he could rinse himself away in it.

Brady kept fighting it. *Ringo's gay* was the single arbitrary phrase his mind had latched onto. His tongue repeated it behind closed lips. Again and again like the trees on the trail where—*oh my God two more hours of this*—and the crickets at the cabin—*Ringo's gay*.

Fu's mind had expanded into something that he couldn't fill. His fledgling free will, opaque to language. Sweat fell like tears from his cheeks. He floated back and forth waiting for the revelation that would make him as smart as the others. Void of the details that defined him.

**Brady:** *Ringo's gay*.

(**Stage center:** Fu looks like a shadow, peeking out between his knees with huge black eyes. James grabs his stack of books like the room has begun to spin. Pat is red and breathing to the ceiling. Vich chuckles, content with getting these suburban preppies too fucked up to quip at Brady's blunders. Vich waits for a moment.)

**Vich:** Hey man. Hey, didn't you paint that ill shit in high school?

**James:** Oh, uh . . . (trying very hard to speak straight)

**Vich:** Hey, what was that shit called again?

**James:** Dreaming of Bizadi (automatically)

**Vich:** Yeah, man. That was some ill shit!

Vich began packing a hit. He remembered the huge painting that hung in the foyer of Madison High School for at least a month. It looked like a rainbow gushing from a snowstorm in a wood frame. Behind glass that reflected a jungle of walking blizzards.

—Brady paces the woods. Steps over deer carcasses looking for his gun.  
Wearing Fu's clothes, wading through a stream. His toes are numb.

—The conversation had rattled Pat. His plants were dying. His heart trembling.  
He rubbed his hot skin. His sister on the floor of the cafeteria having a seizure. Trying to  
get a fork in her mouth. *Barbara, hey everything's fine. It's Pat, everything will be okay.*  
Her white eyes shake harder.

—James runs to the ball with blood red shorts that say "Rebels." Cuts his knees.  
Sprinting to the sideline in his red—*arterial* red—shorts, he is dismayed plum purple all  
over his knees, running down his calves.

**Brady:** Ringo's gay.

**Vich:** You think so? (putting the lid on his shoebox)

Zachary Ferguson Marilovich checked his watch: 3:14 am. "Dreaming of Bizadi"  
had a sailing ship made of two praying hands, reaching out in a vital rainbow of color  
from an urban arctic wasteland. He'd seen it a hundred times, never knew what to make  
of it. He loved that shit. Vich buttoned his jacket. *They'll be fine*, he told himself and  
unlocked the door for the second time that night. Those four guys would probably pass  
out after they came down. Vich stepped into the pitch-black cold of February. He  
unlocked his bike and began pedaling for the first time in a long time. He rode out  
around the front of the Pakistani carpet cleaners who charged him so little rent. He

glided down the drive into the rows of glowing street lamps. As he pedaled through the empty illuminated streets, the cold burned his face. *Damn*, he thought, *I can see for miles.*

## Christmas Story

It's Christmas Eve and there are two forecasts. Snow and Pat Percy. The forecast is for inches and inches of snow from the belly of a storm barreling out of the Carolinas into the mid-Atlantic states. On the television, Bob Ryan points to Northern Virginia, the darkest contoured area of the fluorescent precipitation visual.

"Oh, eight inches," my mother announces over the buzz of mixing cookie batter. "Wouldn't it be wonderful?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't had a Christmas snow storm since I lived in Albany." Though Christmas isn't until tomorrow. I ponder the second forecast, which came while I was still asleep.

"Pat said on the phone that he was back in town for the holidays," my mother says in a voice that can't mask her total hatred of the kid, "and would be around today to pick up the jacket you borrowed because *he's goin' back to LA like the day after Christmas* is what he said."

Snow forecasts make me pace and so I walk laps by the kitchen windows. A small scarlet stocking hangs in the center of each the three windows. On the reverse side of each is a McDonald's logo and picture of Fivel the mouse. Free is free with Happy Meals. I feel the cold outside breathe through the glass. The yard receding in sickly purple and it seems so small. The trees poking like tangled, rusted veins into the white still sky.

"So," she says over the clang of a spoon onto the cookie sheet, "have you and Pat kept in touch since he went off doing whatever it is that he does?"

“Nope.” *Where’s this snow?*

“Well it’s good he’s getting his jacket before the storm hits.” She opens the oven.  
*Jacket?*

The house smells like shortbread when I hear the doorbell. My mother and I both go to open the door. Pat Fischer steps inside with the thud of East German army boots and a hint of snow on his Exxon shirt that says “Bela” on the nametag. My mother shuts the door. Pat’s tan is startling for December—it spreads like a wreath over the bones and wrinkles of his face. And what the hell happened to his hair.

“Hi, Pat,” my mother says. He smiles back the devilish smile he knows she hates. “James has your jacket upstairs.” Pat and I do half-nods at each other. “James, go get his jacket. It starting to snow and Pat doesn’t want to get caught in the storm.” Pat squints and I frown back. “Channel 4 said eleven inches.”

“So what’s with the Goth look, man?” I ask him. “I thought models got free clothes?”

“Oh, well see I am now reinventing my look *each week*. Last week it was hip, next week it *could* be punk.” And he puts his hand through a faded tangle of his worst looking haircut since he got hazed in JV basketball. I notice he is trying to hide the fact that he is shivering (must still have a hard time ringing doorbells). “So how are ya, James?”

“Well, I’ll go check on the cookies,” my mother says. Pat and I slip into the family room—I sit in the rocking chair my grandfather built and Pat collapses onto the couch. The wind rattles the windowpanes. Outside the chalky sky turns gray. A dash of snowflakes flitters on the wind, then disappears. Pat rubs his hands and holds his ears.

"It's cold out there," he says. "Damn it's cold."

"Yeah, and it'll be dark before dinner." Pat eases himself into the cushions. The red in his cheeks begins to recede.

"You know, your mom still thinks I'm the Antichrist."

"Still? But she used to be so fond of you . . ." I laugh.

"Didja like the bit about the jacket? Your mother *is* a stupid woman, isn't she?"

"Not so clever as you, asshole! So how's Barbara?" I retort (which I wish I hadn't said. Pat's sister got the backwash of the Percy gene pool—epilepsy, Dyslexia, buckteeth, and an embarrassed older brother.)

"Well if I had sons like your mother I'd be a pill head too—though that doesn't explain her outright stupidity," (which I can tell he regrets, though if we could rewind he'd say it again, probably meaner).

"Pat, you are a worthless individual. I hope you die," I respond.

"James, I hate you.

"I hate you more, Pat."

"Fine." *Fine.*

I sit there content to glare at my best friend and wait for him to make amends, which in Oakton can only be done through honesty (no apologies). Outside, lone snowflakes begin to pirouette into the frozen grass. Handfuls of impossibly small flakes dance in the air and flirt with the ground. Disappear behind others. Then the thick gray sky seems to exhale. Legions of white balls burst from cavities embedded in the air. Hundreds streak down like goose droppings and others glide in as tiny parachutes. I put



my hand to the cold glass. The yard still looks tangled and worn, but softer now in a coat of white. Even the sky looms gentler. Still. White as the hands of angels.

I glance back at Pat and notice for the first time that our Christmas tree is listing badly. I try to adjust it. The plastic needles, wrapped like DNA around the wire branches, tickle my hand. The olive-colored limbs reach out like claws hooked into the freshly vacuumed air, not sagging under the weight of several dozen ornaments.

“No wonder it’s crooked,” Pat snorts. “I’ve never seen so much gaudy shit on a tree before.”

I shrug, still mesmerized by the falling snow. “You know, if it keeps on like this, we may actually get twelve inches.”

“Ah now that would be tight.” Pat smiles. “We should have Fu bring over a bottle or something.”

“Is he back for the holidays?”

“For the holidays?” still smiling, “Fu told me that he was telling his parents tonight.”

I frown. “Telling them . . .”

“Oh I don’t know—maybe that he’s never attended the classes they’d paid for over at Annandale. Community College too much of a strain. Needs the extra time in the gym. Lifting some and sometimes just sitting there. Waiting.” Jack Fu is something of an Oakton legend, though people discuss his exploits as far away as Arlington. He body-slammed the vicious “Shorty Smalls” from the top of a stepladder at his public debut as an amateur wrestler (then nearly blinded himself in celebration with a fire extinguisher).

“Shit. I wonder how his dad will take it?” I ask. Fu also shattered every known record one summer night at John Brady’s house, where he took a two minute keg stand.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure Fu will be over here later.” More than one ten-year-old has paid six bucks to get a picture with Fu ringside—clad in purple tights and wearing an impossibly confident smile. The snow swirls outside and the yard disappears beneath a glimmering white blanket.

Pat rolls up his sleeves. “So what’s it like out in L.A.?” I ask him. A dozen scars—pink and brown dots the size of a pinky nail—trail down his forearm. Then he lights a cigarette knowing full well that my mother in the kitchen equates smoking with people who do cocaine and don’t pay taxes.

“Pat . . .” And he takes a slow drag and his eyes digest the smoke. Grabs my wrist and presses our forearms together, his scabs digging in my skin.

“Pat . . .” He turns the cigarette like a pencil and drops it into the ridge between our forearms. He clenches his jaw and then I begin to feel it. A searing pinpoint of burning a circle of my skin into a wrinkled white patch. Making my ribs tremble. Pat and I stare at each other. I fight the urge to pull my hair out.

(I remember when we were drunk at the Carolinian down in Nags Head waiting outside for a Fishbone show and that gay townie grabbed my wrist and swore he’d met Kurt Cobain—swore it—and tried to make it true by squeezing my wrist and Fu walked away all flustered and Ringo and Pat eased the guy off and I felt too sorry to hit him. My arm burning then just like now.)

“Boys! What is going on in here! James, your arm!” She stands there with a plate of Russian Tea Cakes and short bread squares. I turn and the cigarette tumbles into the Oriental rug my great-uncle Andy brought back from China.

I stamp out the cigarette and Pat rolls down his sleeves.

“It’s different,” he answers and finally exhales his smoke.

“Pat,” she says, gripping the Christmas Spode with knuckles white as teeth, “what are you still doing here? You’ll be snowed in. It’s really sticking to the roads.”

Pat picks up his cigarette, tucks it in his “Bela” pocket. “Oh back when I lived in Montana we’d drive in this kind of thing *all the time*.”

She frowns but her dimples show and I can’t tell if she’s more terrified or bewildered by the small burn hardening on my forearm, which hurts less than I expected. But what could any mother *really* say, other than: “Well I’m calling Linda Brady. She’ll send John down with his truck and tow you out because I’m sure you’re stuck. John can tow you to Vale road,” and walk out of the room still holding her plate of Russian tea cakes white as the veils of falling snow?

“Brady,” Pat sighs. The corners of his eyes turn, reluctantly telling me *valium*, which we both know my mother is about to take.

“Didn’t his dad send him out on some fishing ship out West after his DUI?” I ask, knowing damn well exactly where John had been. Alaskan halibut waters.

“Someone told me it was some weird religious thing, that his dad wanted him away from the perils of modern civilization.” Didn’t all parents?

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I say. If an anthropologist had studied our group dynamics on any given night drinking down in Clarkes Landing Park, he would puzzle

over John Brady. In high school, the kid just did not belong—he was a plump country boy content to feast on pizza and Budweiser and reminisce about the good old times *when we all used to sit in the park and get drunk together. Oh, man, good times!* His mind void of the machinations and self-righteousness of his friends. Yet the chemistry was never quite right without him there.

Maybe a minute later Pat and I hear a crescendo of low-pitched grinding coming down the road. “Brady,” I say.

“Brady,” Pat moans, and we both go to the porch to greet him.

Plowing down the cul-de-sac is indeed Brady, in his father’s blood red F-250, thundering like a herd of grizzly bears. Tires wrapped in chains kick up a wake of snow that settles in twin foot-high trails marking the path he’s carved and exposing a hint of the black asphalt.

“Brady,” Pat mumbles as John leaps out of his truck with an armful of ropes and hooks.

“Brady!” I yell, and he stops wiping the snow off the front of Pat’s car.

“Hey!” he yells back through the snow, falling in waves of big fluffy pills.

“What’s up, James! Hey, is that Pat Fischer? What’s up, Pat!” And he ties a slipknot with heavy gloves on.

“Brady, why don’t you come inside? It’s freezing.” I ask.

“Oh yeah.” And he marches up to us. Stamps a collage of snow prints on the porch. “What’s up, guys? This is some storm, huh?”

“Could we take this inside, please? It’s fucking cold,” Pat asserts.

“Yeah, do you want to tow the car later, then?”

“We’re not towing my car, you dumbfuck.”

As I shut the door to the frigid gusts of snow, Brady takes off his coat and coughs.

“Shit, I haven’t seen you guys since—”

“August. Clarkes Landing Park,” I finish.

“Brady,” Pat sighs.

Sitting in the family room, Brady smells like “a fucking Greek fish market. Do you still not shower?”

“Shut up, Pat. At least my hair doesn’t look like an autistic chipmunk’s.” To which Pat responds with a hand through his “beautiful” hair and a roll of the eyes.

“Geez, James, Santa’s been good to you and its not even Christmas yet.” And with that Brady scoops the guitar from the hearth and cradles it in his lap. Pat and I drink from the Bicardi dark in Brady’s flask. Brady’s fingers—the burly leather ones that I always imagine gripping Winchesters and tearing venison—move with the fluid grace of a musician as he plucks strings and twists knobs. “You know,” he says, “this is way out of tune.”

“Yeah and it still has a ribbon on it, you dumbfuck,” Pat snorts.

“I’m not supposed to play it until Christmas,” I explain.

“Oh.” Brady goes on tuning the guitar, happy to have his hands occupied. We take long gulps from Brady’s flask of rum and I begin to feel buzzed. Brady’s eyes swoon with a fogginess that indicates this is not his first flask today. His hands move softly over the strings and the guitar purrs the same chord. I stare at the mountain of presents piled under the tree.

“What do you guys think you’re gonna get?” The plastic tree hovers over warm pictures of Santa and ivy- patterned sheets hiding the secret talismans of the world outside. Until tomorrow morning. Then gorge through the paper and reach with two hands into the bowels of each gift. Hold them close to my skin. Soak the thrill, then tuck them into the safe corner of my bedroom. Presents are weird things.

Brady sits there latched to the guitar, still shivering from the cold, snow dripping out of his hair. “What are we but the secrets we know?”

“Goddammit, Brady. Why do you always have to say awkward shit all the time?” Pat answers. I wonder what it’s like for Brady to feel pathetic and right and the same time.

Later, when Brady passes out and Pat is on the phone telling his mother he *can* drive in a foot of snow, I walk outside in my socks. The sky has opened its valves— waves of falling snow cascade over my face. The trees and cars and mailboxes recede beneath a knee-high blanket of clean white. Memories creep from my skull as crisp and strong as the past really was. Maybe stronger. I feel fine and wonderful and young. Snow breathes a fresh start into reality. That’s what it does. I grasp the world with imagination because vision has been blotted by white. I chuckle at the paradox: mask reality in order to see it. I am standing like a fool in knee deep snow. In the dark. Frozen mothballs clinging to my socks when I hear the unmistakable voice of Jack Fu booming down the corridors of Oakton.

“Never fear! Your leader is here!” he yells.

“Hell, yeah, man!” *Is that Ringo?* “Can you believe all of this fucking snow! This is like a fucking dream!” *No shit.*

“Fu, what the hell are you guys doing here?”

“James,” Fu bellows, trudging slowly down the cul-de-sac, “Pricilla sent me for some eggs. Christmas cookies for Jack Fu.”

“Fu,” your mom doesn’t bake, I sigh and smile at the same time.

Fu stamps his feet and peels off his massive Timberland boots. “Whose cars are here?” Ringo asks, feeling his coat for cigarettes.

“Oh, Pat and Brady are here.” I open the front door and Fu carries his boots like mittens. “I think they’re still passed out in my family room.”

Fu and Ringo talk over each other. Fu proclaiming his dominance over Pat, the *skinny bitch forced me to throw him out the window*. Ringo slipping into a husky John Brady pastiche: *Do you guys remember when we used to sit in the park and have pizza and beer . . .*

“Or how about,” I say, shutting the door behind us, “that time Brady passed out in Fu’s basement and we drew all over him in indelible marker.”

We enter the family room to the sound of Brady snoring and the sight of Pat fondling of his jagged platinum hair. Pat looks up and sees Fu and Ringo next to me. He tries not to smile and there is a weird energy in the air all of the sudden and Fu bites his lip and I struggle to keep from grinning. Ringo smiles.

“Well, Jack Fu,” Pat says. “I’ll be damned. Now seriously, is your little sister still a virgin? I’m gonna make some babies with that girl.”

“Pat, we both know that if you so much as look at her I’ll cut off your nuts.” Pat gets up and Fu and he embrace in mock affection that we all know is real love. Pat leaves a handprint on the back of Fu’s frosty coat.

We sit down and talk and finish Brady’s flask. We talk about lots of things except the reasons why we’re all here. Fu unscrews his own flask. “James,” he says, “don’t worry about the butter for the cookies. Pricilla probably won’t be baking after all.”

“Sure, Fu.” And I pass him the flask. Brady twitches in his sleep and I take the guitar from him and put it back on the hearth. “Hey, you guys can spend the night if you need to. I’ve got blankets in the closet.”

My friends stretch out on the family room furniture. Pat yawns and curls into the rocking chair.

I knock and no answer. I peek my head in the door. “Mom, is it all right if some of my friends sleep here? They’re snowed in.”

“Honey, what is it?” Her voice tired and slow. “Is it Christmas?”

“No, Mom, it’s eleven fifteen.” I turn the lights on and she shuts her eyes. The comforter limp over her body, her hair matted against the pillow. Santa’s presents piled on the carpet.

“It’s so good to have you back home, James.” Lamp light like snow falling through the bedroom. Valium on the bed-stand.

“It’s good to be home, Mom.”

“Can you turn off the light, honey?”

“Yes.”



“Thanks . . . James, honey, do you still want to go to midnight Mass?”

“It’s all right. Not if you’re tired.”

“We’ll go next year, James. I love you. Next year we’ll go.”

“Sure, Mom.”

### Three in the Morning

James slowed, turned right onto Vale Road, and accelerated through the darkness. The broken dashboard clock blinked 12:00 in green.

Oh it has to be later than that I know it's later. Wish I had a watch. July only gets cold at three in the morning and this wind feels cold as shit. Goddamned radio doesn't work for shit. Where does all this windshield mist come from? Getting pissed on. Again. What the fuck is the goddamned point of anything anyway.

He passed Clarkes Landing Drive, then Jack Fu's house on the left, then a housing development on the right, finishing his sixth loop and starting his seventh.

All that bullshit yep here it comes again. I got to make me talk. I can feel my brain and I'm so fucking tired that I can't even try to not think about it. I mean not to think about it. Oh please if this fucking memory isn't eroded out of my skull yet then we'll drive all night. How's that sound. Every time. Past was a lie in the first place. Got to make me talk. Bathroom of the Denny's in Herndon. Buying it for Fu because he's a big blowhard whiny bitch who couldn't walk into a bathroom without Ringo who wouldn't ever. Traffic gone and Herndon didn't even smell so bad at midnight. Got to make me talk.

12:00 flashing as James turned right onto Fox Mill road. Lights were off at Fu's probably sleeping that pussy wouldn't go into the bathroom. Smell of Lysol and cherry soap. The broom closet open and you could smell all of the cleaning shit they keep in there. Why am I telling this nobody's listening. Again until it's gone.

They had their food by the time I got there and were sitting by the pisser away from everybody else. Hendon Denny's. Fu wearing his goofy ass letter jacket without a

letter on it because he got cut freshman year from JV basketball. His dad's ancient stiletto sticking out of his jeans and his dad's cell phone bulging in his other pocket.

Goofy fucker.

*James what's up man?* Ringo sitting on his hands. *Sit down. Do you want some fries?* Yes.

*No.* Sitting down next to Fu my mouth all dry and my hand cold like the salt shaker. Fu touching my thigh? Oh just hand me the goddamned money is what I should have said. Fifty bucks for a gram bag. *What are you guys up to tonight?* Fu belching about needing to study for geometry so he could graduate with us. Bullshit the dyslexic fucker can't read his own license. Grease—no, sweat—all slippery on the crisp bill. Tuck it in my pocket.

Ringo leans in and whispers across the table like we're in a goddamned movie (*he's in there waiting*) and doesn't realize that this is my movie. Guess he means the bathroom.

*Well go in there and buy your shit is what I should have said.* Fu sipping coffee like he has some kind of clue. Ringo picking salt off his fries and mumbling drivel about *quality blow* through clenched teeth. Oh real subtle you dumb fucker. What did I say? Oh yeah, so why do you need me again? Waitress fills Fu's coffee and then the polished gem from Ringo: *cuz neither of us have ever bought it before and we don't want to get shafted.* Like I'm a fucking expert.

*Pussies. So you want me to walk in the bathroom and buy it for you. That's why I drove out here?*

*Yes. Yup.* No. So into the bathroom of the empty Herndon Denny's I venture around midnight for Fu on Ringo's advice. Smell of Lysol and cherries.

James flicked his lights and squinted at the signs along Fox Mill. He slowed down and veered to the right. Stuart Mill road. He sped down the unlit, unpainted asphalt that glimmered like a platinum carpet under his high beams. He glanced again at the broken clock.

Twelve o'clock and all's well except this fucking stereo. American electronics worst idea since medical leeches. I wonder what it's like to bleed to death. Uncle Andy after the war when he fell through Nana's window. All the medals and dead japs and he dies of a cut wrist. Ha. But mom still keeps the bastard's rug. How do you set this fucking clock?

"Rory?" the bulging pyramid of a black man leaning against the toilet stall asks.

"No. My name is James."

"No shit?" He smiles a metallic grin and curls his yellow eyes. Claps my back with an anvil of a hand. "Man do you look like Rory!"

"Sorry." I shrug.

"Used to work with a bird look jus like you." He squints at me and tightens his mahogany lips into a cracked smile. Like he wants to recognize an old friend. "Course that was twenty years ago."

"Sorry." I slide Fu's crisp fifty from my pocket and attempt the esoteric *I want to buy drugs* nod.

And what the fuck kind of coke dealer talks to people like that and why did I even make conversation in the first place. There's no way I could have known. But still.

Well no way he could have known either but it doesn't matter now anyway. And never would have met me if Fu hadn't been such a pussy. Kept his bags in a pack of cigarettes so maybe he wasn't a total amateur. But this is the last time. No more babysitting Jack Fu I am not doing this stupid shit ever again I don't even use the shit since sophomore year for lacrosse. I swear it's gotta be three in the morning I would die for a fucking clock that worked.

12:00 flashed in an emerald glow. James slowed and then turned right onto Vale road. He steered through the waves of familiar Oakton images. He passed Clarkes Landing Drive on the right, Fu's house on the left, and the new housing development with the glaring sodium lights to keep out idiots like Fu. A mist beaded on the windshield. The wipers smeared it like brown ink.

Clarkes Landing Drive. Wonder why they named it that. All the new developments are called Rushing Meadows or Pine Glen or shit like that. New one should be called Swamp Ridge. But Clarkes Landing, my place just has to be different. Brady's place too. What was his name? Yeah Billy Jarvis lived there too. When his family was gone and my father took me to learn to swim in his pool during the lightning storm. Damn that was so long ago how old was I then? Seven.

Chalk veins wriggle down against the swollen black clouds. Dad locks the gate behind him. Thunder splashes through my belly. *Don't panic, son. Feel the water and make circles with your hands.* And then he lifts me by the armpits and tosses me in the deep end. Goosebumps on my heart as the icy water explodes over my face. Sinking.

"Where did you used to work?" Inside the handicapped stall now, Rogers picking a gram bag out of his pack of Newports.

“Oh man, I tell you what son you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” I hand him the fifty. His splotted lead knuckles whiten as he rolls Fu’s bill into a straw.

And sauntering out of the Denny’s bathroom all jittery and my sinuses burning. Rogers follows and guides his bulk out the side door. Disappears behind my glass reflection into the parking lot. Ringo and Fu in an intense moment of must be deliberation see me.

*Shit James are you all right?* And I realize it’s been what twenty minutes in there. Wipe my nose again must be red. No.

*No, man. He tried to sell us fake shit. He stole your money, Fu.* And Fu erupting in his feigned wrestler rage so Ringo will calm him though he’s just must be relieved he wasn’t the one to go in there.

*Fu, relax man!* Ringo out of the booth to restrain Fu all upset but must be glad he gets to hold Fu’s beefy deltoids for a thrill of a brief second.

*That’s bullshit!* Clutching his dad’s ancient stiletto *let’s get that bastard!* And Ringo hanging from his shoulders like a lovesick deli sign. I knife into the booth and what’s on this goddamned menu anyway. My friends back in their seats because of a threatening look from the manager. And it was there but it wasn’t yet like I knew it and didn’t realize it. Liver dumplings with our special sauce sound interesting. My own father.

“A cop? Fairfax County or State Trooper?”

“Naw, man. The District. 3D.”

“You worked DC’s third district?”

“Yes. It’s Rogers.” And he extended his massive hand and we shook.

“James.” Iron grip.

“Yeah you told me already.” Rogers’s features spread over his face like lug nuts melted into a bent slab of sheet metal. A dimple ruptured the even rust sheen of each cheek. “Damn you look so much like Rory.”

What could the odds have been and what kind of coke dealer talks to people. Told me his goddamned name. I’m sinking I’m drowning.

James turned right onto Stuart Mill road. The loop he’d driven seven times now resembled more of a bent circle than a triangle. The three roads—Stuart Mill, Vale, and Fox Mill—straddled the core of Oakton like the links of a warped chain-link fence. James knew the curves by heart. His pulse drooped and fluttered and raced from the three white lines he’d snorted around midnight. James flicked off his lights and steered by memory and moonlight.

And there was a moment when we both knew. Did I ask him? Can’t remember. Maybe he just told me. Why can’t I remember.

“Your dad is the reason this country survives,” Rogers said. “You can go the movies and get handjobs from your girlfriend and walk outside in the morning and get your paper and admire your American flag over a cup of coffee because of people like your dad.”

James handed Rogers Fu’s fifty-dollar straw. Wiped his nose and swallowed. Didn’t smell any Lysol. “That’s good shit.” Quicksilver tongues licking his veins. His lungs needing bigger breaths of air. “Damn good shit.”

Rogers squinted. His huge lips tightened as though resisting gravity from pulling his face clean off his skull. He wiped the straw.

“Hey look, James, take the bag you can have it. It’s not even about the bag.”

Rogers pinched his face. James watched a glob of cheek bulge between two black fingers, like grape jelly.

“I don’t understand.”

“James, what are you—sixteen? You know what Rory would do if—”

“Eighteen.” Lie, seventeen really.

“Son, you just don’t know and there’s nothin’ I can say that’s gonna make you know.” Rogers paused and scanned the graffiti of the Denny’s handicapped stall for inspiration. “You ought to respect your dad. He’s done shit—so much shit, man—shit for you that you can’t begin to comprehend.” Rogers’ yellow eyes jiggled in his skull.

“Terrible awful heroic shit.”

“I don’t understand.”

Fu’s never gonna believe I drove the entire Stuart Mill in stealth. Oh dear Jesus I’m gonna die it’s so fucking dark of God I can’t believe I haven’t crashed. Wonder how far I can make it. Never knew I could see in the dark.

James made it safely through the unlit canopied stretch all the way to Vale Road. He paused and let his eyes adjust the extra light, then turned right for the seventh time. Confident now with the distant light pollution of Vienna to guide him, he accelerated around the curves before Clarkes Landing. Faster still, his tires began to squeal. James saw red and blue lights flicker in his rearview mirror. He sped up, but the flashing lights closed in and then he heard the unmistakable *whoop* of a single siren burst. James slowed. Pulled to the side of the road and skidded to a halt in the gravel somewhere between Fu’s house and Fox Mill Road. In a flash, his world turned white. And he could



hear the cop-car behind him crunching gravel—slower, then quiet. Nuclear headlights still burning his eyes, James listened for voices in the muffled static of the police radio.

Move your arms and make circles is what he said but I was drowning and he didn't get in to help me. My skin felt like an electric suit like I was flying so alive but I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see. Thunder burping, mumbling to me at the pool bottom and it was black and I couldn't see. I did push off the bottom and move my hands. When my head popped out of the water it was like I had new skin but he still didn't help me. Don't cry, James. He said panic will do nothing for you. I rolled on my back and shut my eyes. Hair all heavy like a wig, I tried to keep my nose out of the water.

James turned off his engine and put the keys in his pocket. He realized he was shivering so he rolled up the windows. How long is that pig gonna wait well what time is it? Clock still blinking 12:00. Wonder if it means AM or PM. Five minutes later, James saw a second cop car pull in behind the first. Bet cops love the sound of gravel under their tires. Fuckers.

Rory Fischer. I bet you didn't know your dad was a Green Beret in Vietnam.

Yes I did. What's that got to do with him being a hero cop. I thought he worked in payroll.

Yeah. He worked payroll.

And he never rose from the rank of private in the biggest clusterfuck of a police imaginable. How's that make him a hero?

Your dad could make people talk.

I don't understand.

Click. Click. On the window. James rolled it down.

“License and registration.”

“I don’t even fuckin’ know where that shit is it’s my dad’s car why don’t you crimefighters just take me away. Let’s go to jail.”

“Step out of the car, son.”

*Gram bag under the seat. Oh shit.* James rolled up the window, locked the Tempo as he got out. He slammed the door behind him. In the glare of the incandescent flashlight, his nametag—Castle—shined as cleanly as his gaunt mid-twenties face. He adjusted his crisp blue hat and took a slow breath. “You been drinking tonight, son?”

“Look I don’t know where you get off harassing me when all I’m doing is driving home.”

Officer Castle cleared his throat. “Now, son, you are aware that you were driving without your headlights.”

“Look I ain’t your son, Castle. Just give me the fucking breathalizer so I can go home.”

Officer Castle led James to the trunk of the cruiser, swallowed each time James blew 0.0. “Son—” he hesitated, lips twitching for the right words. “Son, you’ve got some explaining to do.” He shined the flashlight in James’ eyes. James swiveled his face out of the light. “Now I want you to follow my finger with your eyes,” Castle explained. His finger carved a slow arc around James’ head.

I’m just gonna stare in his shit colored eyes. I know this fucking trick. Pupils dilated, if they shake up and down then that means narcotics. Car’s still locked.

Son—follow my—son, Immuna need to search your vehicle.

Fuck you pig.

Bet he saw dad's FOP sticker on the back. This clown looks like he actually wants to serve and protect. With what though I mean he's not gonna find anything in there except a bag of blow. Cops never ask the right questions.

Let me in your car, son.

It's locked, Castle. You can get a warrant or beat the shit out of me and take the keys.

James heard a third police cruiser slow into the popping gravel behind the others. Two officers climbed out of the newest car and marched toward him. Two more flashlights blinded his view of Castle's face. James squeezed the keys in his pocket. The three opal beams cut a silver dish out of the night. The flickering red-blue siren bulbs cast a spray of gems over the gravel. James stood in the center of the flat, sparkling chalice of light, eyes closed, squeezing his keys.

Son, you're gonna let us into your vehicle.

Same tenor. I can't believe this all started because Fu was a pussy and wouldn't walk into the Denny's bathroom. What was that smell?

Look, here's my license. Take me to prison. I don't want to be here anymore.

James Fischer. Clarkes Landing Drive. You're not so far from home. Does your old man know where his car is?

Tell me about my dad, Rogers. He interrogated people? Is that what he did?

Never asked questions. Made 'em talk. He could make 'em talk.

## Is That All There Is?

It was past his bedtime, but his mom wasn't home yet, so James remained on the Chinese rug in the family room, Indian-style in Transformer pajamas. He had dimmed the lamp so the light that cupped his face and pressed on the rug was soft and sleepy and didn't block his vision or yank on his thoughts.

James stared at the rug. He dunked his vision into the symmetry of its arabesque design like his face in soapy bath water. Staggered diamonds inscribed by arching turquoise chevrons. His eyes grappled with the design of the rug. It had been brought back in 1945 from China by his British great-uncle, a Chindit, who fell through a window and died of a cut wrist three years later. It was huge and gave him allergies but he still liked it because it was different than anything he had ever seen in Oakton. The rug's multitude of shapes and colors fit together like his own hands moving in an applause. And it glowed—it really did glow. When it reeled in his eyes, James could immerse himself in the beauty of its patterns. Tonight it looked like a face . . . an Apache . . . the glistening tight frown of a war-painted medicine man, inviting him inside. James looked away and the new image stamped on his memory began to fade.

He pondered going to bed to avoid his mom when she got back. He should set out his school shoes and pack his book bag. James looked back at the rug beneath him. It was a giant map pulsing and spreading over the walls. He gazed as though through the porthole of a starship, a universe swelling and him floating over it.

Doorknob jingle. Footsteps. "James, are you in bed?"

"No, mom, I'm in here."

"In where?" *Angry.*

"In *here*," he shouted, hoisting his body from the carpet and dumping himself into the recliner.

He heard her heavy footsteps tromp through the hallway, the kitchen, through the double doors and into the family room. She hovered over him, clenching a ream of loose papers. Tired makeup and a tight scowl. She inhaled.

"James . . . dammit! What are you doing in here with all the lights down?" The boy shifted on the cushion and looked at the run in her stockings. "Your father and I work eighty hours a week to pay for your school. James, look at me! Now I work evenings, selling jewelry at Dart Drug so that you can stay at St. Leo's. And *this* is what you do." She waved the stack of papers at him. Several sheets careened into the rug.

"Sorry, mom." She'd been to teacher conferences. "I did the best I could."

"No. Nonononono, James." She snapped out a paper. He saw his prose adorned with red circles, lines and cursive. "You can't spell *manipulate*, *mollify*, *mollusk*? And those are just the M's." She yanked off her clip earrings. "Now go get your spelling book." She kicked off her pumps. Blinked so slowly that he wondered if she was sleepwalking.

"But, mom, it's past my bedtime. I have school."

"Dammit, James! Get your book and no back talk." She sat down on the couch, arms limp in her lap. She looked at her wrinkled clothes and her hands that had never done anything really important and her young son peering over at her with his big scared eyes. Wished she could relax. Wished she had the energy to pick her legs up and lie

down. Rest her eyes. “James, Father Paul said you weren’t going to be an altar boy and he also said that sometimes you just sit there daydreaming—James, get your book!”

James went to his room to get the book. His mother was snoring—dreaming of her Irish grandmother at Dart Drug whispering to her *the English sunk the Lusitania!*—before he reached the top stair. James mind felt jumbled with memories and ideas and emotions that he didn’t understand. He wanted a root-beer float with his dad. That’s what he wanted.

James dumped out his bag and found: fruit in various stages of decomposition (his mom said Fruit Roll Ups rot your teeth), a piece of glass he used to carve into his desk, a broken walkie-talkie, a spelling book missing its cover, dirty Kleenex, several other books. He looked at the pile. He turned and looked out his window but only saw his reflection. He put his nose to the glass and felt cold breaths of night wash over his face. He felt a tickling in his brain and an itch in his heart that he perhaps could only have satisfied by stretching his wings in flight. As he sifted through his pile of shit, a vague frustration took hold of him. He grabbed the spelling book and growled and ripped off the back cover and slammed it into the carpet. He was *mad* and wanted to punch his mom in the belly and go hide in Clarkes Landing Park. He was mad and didn’t know why.

James picked up the hammer he’d used to hang his new posters. It felt heavy and cold in his grip. He lifted it over his head. His skin was hot against the chill of bedroom air. He swung the hammer down into his schoolbooks and it ricocheted out of his hand. James grabbed the hammer and swung it again and again. Pummeling his schoolbooks into the carpet, his rage melted. But carving steel arcs in his bedroom air awoke

something else inside him. His heart was beating fast as he obliterated his Lego fort garrisoned with GI Joes. Like inscribing the tickles of his brain onto the world. Smash! He felt strong and he whispered those words that Father Paul had taught him—*Redemption, Sacrifice, Salvation*—because they were strong words too. In an instant, then, he could see it all—the square walls and the ketchup stain on his hanging navy uniform and the inevitability of tomorrow and Fred (his turtle) bumping in his cage.

James felt alive. Like the instant clarity of falling from the swing set. He tried a sideways T-ball swing at his clock, but the hammer slipped from his palm. Spun like a boomerang and planted with a thud into the wall. The drywall creaked as he yanked out the hammer like Nerf arrow.

“James,” his mother shouted from downstairs, “What was that?”

*Nothing.* He peered into the black crevice in his wall. He didn't hear his mother's footsteps. He didn't consider the trouble he'd be in or wonder how to cover it. His mind was clear and fresh as ice water. He peered in the hole and in a dithyramb of vision: rip the whole thing down and jump into the electric chill of midnight air. Stand out there in the cul-de-sac eroded by his roller-skates and eyes and sneakers and blood from the time John Brady beat him up because he was a strong country boy—all of it hollow and asleep beneath a lush quilt of night. Stand out there and fill his lungs with the cold rushes of air and skim his hands though the black. Say strong words like Father Paul, only his own language. *Bizadi.* Stare out into the freshness of the ripe night cut like an August watermelon and—

“James! What are you doing?” The anger in her voice did not scare him so much as the fear and concern did. James turned to her, dry-wall powder on his cheeks and hammer dangling from his fist. He expected a spanking but didn’t care.

“James, get in bed right now. God, you’re shaking.” Honest concern, and trying to figure out how to scold a much-scolded boy. She put pieces of wall back in the whole. “It’s time for bed.” She assembled his books for him and put them in his bag. “Oh, James . . .”

James stopped trembling and put the hammer down. “Mom, I have to brush my teeth.” He darted into the bathroom. Stuffed a toothbrush in his mouth and tried to gulp back the hot tears that squirmed out of his eyes burned long paths down his cheeks. He sensed that irresistible gravity of crying—really crying—turning in his stomach. He bit his toothbrush and felt more tears like a glob of PlayDo pressing the backs of his eyes. James had no idea why. He wiped the tears away.

The next morning James skipped across the kitchen floor in his navy blue uniform with the ketchup stain on the collar. He tried to stamp out the sun’s glare that slid across the linoleum as his own shadow followed him. “James, do you want blueberries in your pancakes?” his mom asked, barbecue apron wrapped over her crisp silk blouse.

James shook his head. “I’m allergic.”

“Oh, honey, you’re not allergic to blueberries just because they made you sick when you had the flu.” She sprinkled frozen blueberries onto the uncooked, bubbly side of each oval of batter.

“But I’ll die—”



“Oh, James,” she sighed, her left hand untying the apron as her right flipped the pancakes with a *whsshh* on the pan, “You won’t die. Now go find your school shoes, we’ll be late again.” The clock was ten minutes fast, a secret he’d figured out a long time ago.

“I’ve gottum on,” he mumbled, gesturing at the creased penny-loafers to which he’d once tried gluing quarters.

“All right, now eat your breakfast.” Her voice said *lets forget about last night but don’t push your luck*. James munched away on the pancakes and wished he were allergic to blueberries.

“Mum . . . I haga—”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” He swallowed several times and torqued his head as though shaking water from his hair. Her eyes narrowed.

“I had a dream last night and I remembered it.”

“Oh really?” Her voice sounded almost the way it had on seeing the hammer. She crossed her arms. “Well say it fast because we’re late again.”

“I was in Bizadi.”

“Oh? *Biz-ahh-dee*, huh?”

“Yup,” he croaked, feeling an unusual interest in his mother’s eyes. He watched a melting glob of butter slide off his pancake pile and into a pool of syrup.

*In his dream: James puts his fingers in the crack in the wall. He peels back the wall like the skin of an orange. A gash into the darkness outside. The lamp in his room flickers out. James’ fingers keep the hole steady as a gate fluttering in the wind. The ocean of*

*darkness spills inside and clings to his skin. Beads of darkness condensing on his Legos. More darkness splashing, weaving the air. Everything is black—the glow in the dark emblem on his pajamas, the chalky pieces of broken drywall, the whites of his eyes, the air itself. He can see.*

On the way to school, James began telling her his dream.

“So,” she asked, “are you king of Bizadi?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s my kingdom.”

“Let me guess . . . there’s no school in Bizadi.”

“Nope.” James looked at his mom and felt for once that he could do more for her than spell. He explained the air in Bizadi, how it shimmers with happiness and energy. Everywhere, music so resonant and rich that people can smell it and feel it on their faces. Bizadi’s grass is like the skin of an angel, a silk that drains away your sorrow and fills you with joy. No one has a name and no one is allowed to remember anything anyway.

“No memories?” she asked, honking in the traffic, trying to merge left.

“Nope. No fear.”

“Maybe you could bring back some Bizadi treasure, help with the mortgage.”

“Okay, mom.” The car scooted down the exit ramp. For a minute they both listened to the sounds of the freeway. Her knuckles relaxed on the wheel.

“Well is the music Bach? I think Bach is so nice.”

“Sure,” he said. Seeing her smile, he smiled back.