

CHASING AFTER
THE FUNERAL

by

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Who hears me, who understands me, becomes mine, — a possession for all time.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

PART ONE

The Funeral

He'd ridden the bus there.

Strange, he'd thought upon seeing the yellow marker come into view from his seat near the driver—a bus stop at a cemetery.

He'd wanted to tell someone on the bus that he was going to his psychologist's funeral. He wanted someone to be as surprised as he was. Oh dear, they would say, hands to their mouths. He wanted them to worry about his condition. What would he do now? A man like him, all alone in the world without his doctor.

But there was no one to tell. The woman in the seat across from him was asleep, her chin buried in the mangy fur of her lined coat.

At one point Allen caught the driver's heavy-lidded eyes in the mirror above the windshield.

"Don't talk to me, baby," he thought he'd heard her say.

"What?" He popped out an earphone, but she wasn't looking at him.

A man in the back of the bus drummed on a notebook with two pencils, his head swinging wildly with each riff. Allen wondered if they might be getting off at the same stop.

Now Allen sat on a bench watching the masses enter the funeral home. Techno music pulsed through earphones wedged deep inside his canals, a German group he never grew tired of. As he looked on, the mourners began to trudge in time to the beat, carrying their heavy hearts in unison.

It started to rain, which he found appropriate for the occasion. He stood up and raised the hood of his sweatshirt.

The people walking toward the limestone funeral home began to run now

grabbing hands, leaning into one another. He wondered if he could pick out the patients. Would it be obvious? A certain weary limp, a curvature of the spine, neck bent forward from the weight of a head full of stones.

Here was a woman in a red raincoat scurrying across the parking lot. Red high heels, blonde hair. She moved too easily, waved too gracefully at a couple stepping out from a green Volvo. She couldn't be one.

Here was a man in a brown suit, the bottoms of his pants dragging through the blacktop puddles. He might be one, yes. His pace did not quicken with the hardening rain. He kept his head low, rain water running down the back of his collar.

Allen felt his own sweatshirt grow heavy. "Yes," he said, pressing a finger against his left earphone. "That's right." He nodded. "Okay then . . . three," he said, and walked into the hundred sheets of rain billowing before him.

Flipsie Moraten was unaware that the first rows of wooden chairs, the ones with side arms for the tearfully weary, were for family members only. She sat down in the middle of the front row, smoothing the black velvet of her skirt in one direction. She turned toward the twenty or so rows of white folding chairs behind her, laughing at the crowd streaming into the room.

"And they just keep coming!" she shouted, scanning the audience for someone to laugh with. She caught the eyes of woman in a navy hat and threw out a gesturing hand. "Can you believe this crowd?"

The woman's eyes darted away, then back to Flipsie. She raised her hand to a ruby hummingbird pinned beneath her throat. "It is a lot of people."

Flipsie slapped her hand against the back of her chair. “Isn’t it, though?” she said, fluffing her short blonde hair. She turned around to face the pulpit and threw her hands in the air. “Who knew?”

That morning, Flipsie sang show tunes as she prepared for the funeral—bouncing about her darkened bedroom, staging movements as if she were the lead in a musical.

A curtsy as she pulled open the dresser drawer,

“And we’ll go danc-ing,” she sang, a little leap on the last syllable,

“in Cinci-nat-ti,” a spin in front of the large, Hollywood mirror lighting the bathroom,

“Cinci-nat-ti,” a second turn, the sound of her heels on the tile making a pleasing, feminine sound,

“or may-be . . .” a bow now toward her reflection, a forlorn face, a quiet appeal to the audience,

“just may-be . . .” she studied her heavily-mascaraed eyes in the mirror, trying to make them as big and sad as Carole Lombard’s.

“may-be . . .” she closed them now, as if dreaming of some big plantation home she’d left for the city,

“I’ll just . . .” letting the words linger here,

“go . . .”

She smacked her lips against the mirror and pulled back from the counter to admire the red imprint. “Wouldya lookit that,” she said, arm on her hip, tipping herself sideways and looking left at her male lead.

“Oh dear!” She shot upright, hand to the skin exposed by the deep V of her rayon sweater. “Oh my, it’s time to go. I simply must go or I’ll be terribly late.” She pulled the stopper from a bottle of perfume and dabbed the cool, glass tip behind her ears.

Jim parked his bike against a pine tree and watched the adults shuffle children and the elderly into the great limestone building. He balked at its grandness—why a building so elegant? A funeral should occur in a setting that matches the affair—an empty warehouse or some endless retail parking lot. Or maybe a stalled construction site, the skeleton of some long-dead blueprint looming in the background.

No, Kluer’s funeral should be held in the common room of a mental ward. “Press Your Luck!” on a small television in the corner, the caged windows holding a few pale flowers stuck between the grating.

Jim smoked a cigarette and was thinking these things out when he heard a bus brake on the road behind him. A small man in a black sweatshirt descended the bus stairs, looked left-right-left and then sat down on a bench. Jim wondered if he was waiting for someone. He watched the man watch the parking lot. It began to rain and the man pulled his hood over his head and continued watching the parking lot with a pale, blank face.

Jim lifted his face to the rain and looked up through the latticework of branches, which seemed to grow in anticipation of a climber. He could, he thought. Climb up there and watch the building from above. As he thought it, a lightning bolt lit the sky. He wondered if it was Kluer, challenging him. *The hot zone is only as hot as you'll let it be.*

Just when Jim determined to make his move from the shelter of the pine, the man

in the sweatshirt charged stiffly through the wet grass toward the parking lot. He turned his head and looked at Jim as he passed by, squinting his eyes and giving a subtle nod. It reminded Jim of some lone cowboy riding down main street in some old town, in some old movie. He waited until the man hit pavement, then dropped his cigarette and followed behind in his muddy tracks.

The viewing line began just inside the door of the funeral home and snaked through a dreary furnished lobby—maroon couches flanked by heavy brass lamps, Kleenex boxes sheathed in satin, a grandfather clock asleep against the wall. The line of mourners continued down a dimly lit hall, a small marble-top table offered pamphlets advertising the rooms they stood within. For the curious, a sneak peek at the room which lay ahead, beyond the curtained doorway of the visitation room.

After thirty minutes, Allen had made it just halfway down the hall. The experience thus far reminded him of waiting in line for a rollercoaster. He had only ridden one in his life: the Mouse Trap at Old Indiana Fun Park. He'd been eleven. His twin brother Glenn had brought a girl named Jodi Crocker, and he'd made fun of Allen right in front of her.

“He doesn't have the guts to ride anything but the kiddie cars,” Glenn said, shoving a giant puff of cotton candy into his brother's hand. “Take this,” he said, handing him Jodi's puff too.

She had laughed at him, his pale face framed by the pink and blue wisps. “You sure you don't wanna come?” she asked, pulling a sweat-stained bra strap up her shoulder.

“Waste of space ain’t going,” his brother said. “Let’s go.” And he grabbed Jodi’s hand and pulled her off toward the rollercoaster.

But she’d looked back at Allen, mouthing the words, “come on” with her pink, frosted lips.

It was, as far as he could remember, the first time any woman younger than his mother had whispered to him. This pretty, freckled face girl releasing silent words meant only for him. Something squirmed inside his 11 year-old body, then a sudden urge to drop the candy sticks and run to the nearest row of turquoise Porta-Potties. But instead of dropping them, he laid each stick on the bench, immediately realizing it was a stupid thing to do. When he turned around, he was surprised to see Jodi coming back towards him.

“Nasty!—I’m not eating that now,” she said. “You’re such a weirdo, Allen.” She laughed when she said it and grabbed his hand.

The thrill of walking up to Glenn hand-in-hand with Jodi Crocker was enough to suspend Allen’s fear all the way to the front of the Mouse Trap line. But when a sunburned, bald man in a ripped, Old-Indiana t-shirt nodded towards Allen, signaling him to get into the first car, he felt his chest cave inward. He suddenly became aware once again of his skinny, mosquito-bitten legs, his oversized Almond Joy t-shirt, the acne that pooled at the bottom of his face.

The Mouse Trap dominated Allen in ways he had not expected. He vomited up some of a Coke and released a dribble of urine on the first plunge. He strained his neck muscles trying to turn around to yell for someone to stop the ride.

When the cars came screeching back to the covered platform, Allen kept his eyes

down, avoiding the blur of impatient onlookers. The ride jerked to a stop and Allen lurched forward, banging his forehead on the front of the car. He heard people laughing. He fumbled around his seat, trying to raise the bar locked across his lap. After a minute of struggle, the bald man was there, jamming the bar into Allen's thighs, causing it to spring upward. "Take it easy, little guy," he said, "it's all over."

Allen's knees shook as he wobbled halfway down the ramp, then turned to wait for Jodi and Glenn. He didn't see them. He started walking again, and then spotted Jodi's pink tank top and the back of Glenn's head moving towards another ride. They were holding hands, and they weren't looking back.

Now Allen's knees began to shake once again as he stood in the hallway of the funeral home. He wasn't sure if he could do it—see a dead body, let alone *his*. He rose up on his toes, trying in vain to gauge his distance from the coffin. Unable to see much past the tied curtains of the visitation doorway, he pushed his earphones back in and tried to pretend he was waiting for the bus.

He watched the two old women in front of him talk out of their cracked, chapped lips. Spittle collected in the corners of their mouths. As they spoke, their lips began moving faster. Then Allen noticed that their eyes were turning evil, their mouths curling into sinister smiles. He knew they were saying awful things about Dr. Kluer. They were planning to do something to his body. Their mouths were now forming words at an alarming rate, their lip movements perfectly synchronized as they stared deep into each other's eyes.

Suddenly he felt a tug at the bottom of his sweatshirt. Allen turned and looked down at a small Asian boy. He pulled out his earphones.

“Don’t pull that man’s jacket,” the boy’s mother said.

Allen knew the boy had a message. He bent down and squatted in front of him. “What is it?” Allen asked. The mother placed a hand on her son’s shoulder, pulling him back towards her. “What do you have to tell me?” Allen whispered, placing a hand on the carpet so he could lean in closer to the boy.

“Come here,” the mother said, and Allen watched the small blue tennis shoes lift from the floor. Maintaining a squatting position, he turned on his toes, stood, and pressed the music back into his ears.

Stew glanced at the newspaper spread out on the kitchen counter and noticed a red circle drawn around an article, his wife’s handwriting—I’M SORRY—in the margin next to the text. *Respected Psychologist Dies in Small Plane Crash*. His heart stopped. He found the name he already knew was there, then read the article slowly, wanting to remember exactly the way he felt reading it, wanting to feel everything both immediately and fully. But when he finished, there was only a clench in his throat.

He slammed his fist against the counter and walked back to his bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

When his wife came home hours later, Stew could hear her unloading groceries, footsteps coming and going from the garage. He looked at the green light of the digital clock and wondered how long his friend had been dead.

Jim didn't have a suit to wear to the funeral. There'd been a suit once, a brown one he'd worn to his grandfather's funeral on a Thursday in his past life. The intense sunlight of that day had disturbed him; the cheeriness it seemed to insist upon. The weather felt like an affront to his grandfather—the old man's friends enjoying themselves in the warm light, his cousin pleased by the tan line beginning to appear where the black lace stopped above her thin arm. Many people had complimented Jim on his suit. They told him he'd become a handsome young man. One woman even referred to him as a “specimen.”

And here he found himself, six years later, preparing for another funeral. The suit still hung in a closet at his parents' house, but retrieving it now was out of the question. It would mean showing up at the door and requesting a former material possession. He could only imagine the smug look on his mother's face as she stood in the doorway, arms-crossed, nodding her head as if she'd already predicted the moment would occur. His father would appear behind her, leaning against the door with the usual trace of a smile on his face. This was always the look on his face, his eyes gleaming in a way that made you wonder just what exactly he was seeing. Even in the midst of a brutal shouting match between Jim and his mother, his father would stand in the corner with the same look, as if every aspect of life pleased him, even its rotten underbelly. When he was old enough to recognize this quality in his father, Jim envied the gift the universe had given him.

Allen studied the profile of the graying man standing in line in front of the two old women. The light in the man's blue eyes contradicted the bruise-colored bags

beneath them. His skin reminded Allen of a sickly Golden Delicious. But his eyes, or at least the one eye that Allen could see from where he stood—how blue it was.

The man was facing the wall, arms crossed, hips pushed forward, looking at a narrow stained glass window. Smooth cuts of green glass at the top of the window turned to amber cuts as the eyes moved downward, amber turning to orange, orange turning to jagged pieces of fiery red. Allen squinted as he looked at the window—fire. Flames. He wondered if the blue-eyed man saw the same thing.

He watched the man pull a plastic water bottle from the pocket of his lined leather jacket and remove the cap.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” one of the elderly women said to the man.

He turned to her, water bottle pressed to his lips and swallowed quickly. “It’s certainly well-wrought,” he said.

Well-wrought, Allen thought. Yes, that’s a good way to describe it—the only thing one could say for it, really.

“Well-wrought,” Allen said out loud, nodding at the window. He tipped his chin and looked down his nose at the glass. “It certainly is.” He didn’t look at either of them, but hoped they were watching him as he contemplated the window.

When he finally did look, he saw that the old woman was watching him, but the man had turned to face the front of the line, the back of his leather jacket turned decidedly against them. Allen was sure he was a patient.

No one asked Flipsie to move before the service began. It seemed everyone in attendance had come prepared for the motley crowd. Undoubtedly, there were some who

had come only for the crowd—friends and distant relatives sitting in secret anticipation of some shocking misbehavior.

The family filled in around Flipsie, smiling sweetly at her inappropriate disposition—the toe-tapping hum of some bright, breezy song. She’s one of his, they thought, looking at her thin legs, the red high heel dangling from her twitching foot. They watched her with a bittersweet gaze, touched by the idea that she was now a lost lamb.

As the organ held its final, dooming chord, Flipsie patted down her bosom, then leaned forward in the chair and felt around her small ankles. She sat back up and began picking through her hair.

“You alright?” the woman sitting next to her whispered, cocking her head.

Flipsie looked at the woman and froze, both hands remaining in her hair. Her eyes, caked with make-up the color of bruises, opened wide. “My God . . .” she whispered, blinking at the woman. “My God . . .” she repeated, lowering her hands, “you look just like him.”

At this, the woman’s smile began to quake.

Flipsie grabbed the woman’s cold hand and turned her attention to the priest, who was now approaching the pulpit.

Stew’s wife Kathy didn’t offer to go to the funeral. Stew didn’t ask her to. The women in his life had made it clear to him in one way or another that they were less than fond of his psychologist. Had he asked Kathy to go, he would have just given her a final opportunity to take a stance against the man.

He was sure that immediately after Kathy had written the note on the newspaper, she'd called his mother to relay the good news. He could imagine his mother's initial reaction—"His own plane? Oh, how horrible." Then a series of sighs, until one of them had the courage to say what she thought they both were thinking. That, albeit in a tragic way, the accident was really a blessing for Stew.

In calling her mother-in-law, Kathy had no doubt set off the usual circuit that would carry the buzzing intelligence from Stew's mother's home in Indiana straight across the 38th parallel to reach his younger sister in Virginia, who would shoot the message back across the plain states, bypassing her mother, and traveling all the way to the Oregon coast, where his oldest sister, sitting in a wicker chair facing the ocean, would lift the phone from a small table at her side and answer it—"What?"

They were ridiculous—Kathy, his mother, his sisters. Their mutual opinion of Gary Kluer rested on a paranoid foundation of fragmented evidence: an occasional monosyllabic response from Stew after a session, a chance encounter with the doctor at the grocery store, a phone call from a nail-biting sister to the family physician. Living amidst the constant hum of hearsay, the four of them had determined that Gary Kluer was too little a therapist, and far too much a friend.

Their disapproval, no matter how well-hidden, was quite detectable to Stew. His mother was easiest to read. Eighty-nine years of hard-earned wisdom meant that she felt free to comment in a passive-aggressive manner about anything that displeased her, no matter how sensitive or sacred the subject. Her baggy jowls fell every time Kluer's name was mentioned. Adjusting her seated posture, she would sigh into some critique. "Well . . . I just hope he has your best interests in mind."

One unfortunate evening, Stew was forced to introduce his mother to Gary at a fundraising gala for the newest wing of the state art museum. When Gary told Stew's mother the wonderful things he had heard about her, she looked up at him, pulled taut the bottom of her blazer and replied, "And I've heard a lot about you too, much more than about Stew's progress."

Kathy was best at holding her tongue. Long ago, after their only daughter Meghan had gone off to college, Kathy had raised her white flag in defeat. She retreated to a chapel in the middle of the city and fell into the ranks of other flag wavers each Sunday. Soon she retreated there Saturdays too, then every other weekday, until soon she was spending more waking hours at church than at home. When asked about her increasing absence, she told Stew she'd finally found a place to set down his problems.

Allen lost the ticking of time as he stood before the coffin, flexing and relaxing his calf to the drumming beat, fusing the doctor's mantra into the song streaming through his head—*fearlessly yourself, fearlessly yourself, fearlessly yourself*. He was beginning to absorb the last bit of information Kluer wanted to communicate when he felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder. He turned to face a large-jawed woman wearing a giant begonia pinned to her blazer. She was saying something and gently pulling him away from the coffin. He turned and walked off into the crowd.

The minister's skin looked as red and delicate as a newborn pig's. He leaned back from the microphone to clear his throat, making Stew aware of an itching at the back of his own. Stew tried soothe it by forcing a vibration of air through his closed

mouth, a technique he'd developed as a child. It produced a noise that sounded like a sick duck, this his wife had told him in the annex of The Prado after shamefully suffering through his persistent itching during a tour of the Pre-Raphaelite galleries.

“And so on and so forth,” the priest continued, pale pink blotches blooming from his Roman collar, “always willing to extend a helping hand, lend a kind ear, or simply sit on the porch steps with a neighbor at the end of a long day.”

Stew winced. He tried to catch the eyes of the heavily bearded man across the aisle, shoot him a “can you believe this guy?” smirk. But when the man noticed Stew, he quickly looked away, returning to his solemn posture—head slightly bowed, hands folded ambiguously in his lap, perhaps in prayer, perhaps not.

After the service Flipsie wandered through the reception room, looking for the woman she'd sat next to during the sermon. Her legs wobbled in the too-big pumps she'd bought from the thrift store, convincing herself she'd grow into them.

Several mourners looked up from hushed conversations to raise a brow at the woman in the black miniskirt and cleavage-baring top, pushing her way through the crowd, semicircles of breast leading the way. She was heading straight toward Regina Kluer, who stood rocking an infant in her arms as she nodded solemnly to the priest.

“Excuse me,” Flipsie said, placing a poorly-manicured hand on both their shoulders. “I just wanted-” she peered into the bundle in Regina's arms. “Now that's a baby,” she said. “Yes sir . . .” she trailed off, staring down at the small face.

“What is it you wanted, my dear?” the soft-spoken Father asked.

Flipsie looked up at the him, then raised her finger as if telling him to wait.

“Could we please talk?” she asked Regina. “In private.”

Regina looked quizzically at the woman, then back to the Father. He looked at her with the clear intent of transmitting his holy judgment, but after a moment’s hesitation she nodded at Flipsie and turned to walk away.

Flipsie stopped her. “No baby,” she said.

“Oh,” Regina said. She turned to the priest. “Father, would you mind holding her? I’ll be right back.”

Flipsie leaned in toward the Father. “Little pitchers, big ears,” she said, giving him a knowing wink. The Father enveloped the child in the heavy folds of his black robe. She looked back at him as they walked away, thinking the image looked frightening and lovely at the same time.

As Kluer’s seven-year old granddaughter was helped down from the step stool that had been placed behind the pulpit, Stew dabbed at his eyes. He’d been astonished by the child’s simple, one-line eulogy. She’d composed herself at the top of the stool, looked out at the crowd, and then told them that the saddest people there, besides herself, were the people that her Grandpa helped. Then she looked at the priest, signaling that she had finished.

Stew decided he should meet her. He imagined sitting and talking to the girl as she played in a sandbox. She would look at him as her grandfather had. She would tell him how to go on.

Just as quick as he’d imagined this, he was ashamed of the desperation of such a thought.

A wail erupted toward the front of the room and Stew craned his neck to see what was happening. People in the front row huddled around somebody in a chair. A blonde woman shot up from the middle of the group and staggered towards the pulpit on tweezer-thin legs.

"I need to say something?" she seemed to ask the audience. Her voice cracked, the words broke apart. A woman with a fake flower hanging from her jacket tried to coax the woman back to her seat.

"No," she protested, throwing her elbows. "I have the right."

The woman in the jacket frowned and grabbed at her shoulder as a bald man in a brown suit tried to hook his arm under her other shoulder.

"Hands off," the blonde woman shouted, twisting violently. At this the two Samaritans backed away, embarrassed and bewildered.

The woman stopped short of the pulpit and ran her fingers through her pixie haircut. "Dr. Kluer . . ." she said, turning to the crowd. "Dr. Kluer . . ." Her knees were slightly bent, her heeled feet turned inward. She beat at her heart with a small fist. "Knew me," she said. The priest moved towards her, but she turned to him, her eyes dripping dark make-up, her red lips trembling. "Please," she said, then looked back at the crowd. "He knew me . . ." she said, raising her arms above her head, "better than . . . anyone," she managed to eke out, before dropping her arms and doubling over.

The priest and the bald man flanked the woman's sides and escorted her from the room. Stew could hear the priest murmuring softly in her ear as they passed his row. He watched their procession with a tinge of envy, wishing he had permission to make a scene

like that, to grieve loudly and publicly and primitively. It was a grace to be called crazy, the one label that could release you from the responsibility of yourself.

Remember who you are. I'm not going to let you forget who that is. Stew could picture him leaning forward as he said it, his wire glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. *That's the easy way out, and we both know it.*

Stew looked up at the pulpit. The outburst had clearly thrown the pastor, who was back in position now, nervously shuffling his papers. He looked frantically at someone in the front row and mouthed something.

“Well . . . dear friends,” he began. A wave of shushing washed the commotion from the room. Heads turned back to the pulpit, creaking chairs re-adjusted. “Respecting the family’s wishes, we will end the service here,” he continued, forcing the serene smile expected of him, even at a time like this. “Those wishing to continue on to the burial site should wait here, the family will be walking to the burial site momentarily.”

If it were anyone else, Stew would have gone. He always appreciated a burial more than a funeral—the finality of the scene, the ropes lowering into the cool earth, the silence, the only true silence of the day, a stillness acknowledging the last moments of a life. Seeing a friend or relative through to the end meant that Stew could go on with his own life. Yet he knew somehow it would make no difference this time.

After what felt like an hour, Jim finally found himself up at the coffin, surprisingly, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the man from the bus stop. Jim hadn’t seen the man in line, and he wondered if that meant the man had been standing up there for quite some time.

“Gone,” Jim said, feeling the need to acknowledge the weight aloud. He heard canned music coming from somewhere nearby. Turning in its general direction, he realized the sound was coming from the guy next to him, who was wearing earphones with his music turned up very loud. The man held his head low; his hands clenched the coffin’s satin sideboard.

Jim thought about it for a moment and then dared to look up at Kluer’s face. A dusting of powder covered the thick, peach foundation that sealed his pores, freezing his face into a foreign expression. All wrong. Jim couldn’t stand it. He looked back at what lay directly before him, the legs covered by beige corduroy. He thought he remembered the pants from just a few weeks ago. He studied the outline of Kluer’s knee and tried to think something reverent, but he couldn’t. Not with the tinny blaring of music and the pressing crowd and the man he admired most in the world stretched out before him like an artifact in a museum.

The whole scene was so surreal that he felt nothing but a detached, prickly fascination with his present reality. No emotion, no heartbreak. He started to think this might be it—he would not suffer in his loss, he would simply notice the place that it had left.

“I’m Flipsie,” Flipsie said, standing behind the rack supporting the wet wool of dark overcoats.

“Excuse me?” Regina said.

“Flipsie Moraten. I was a patient of your father’s.”

“Oh, nice to meet you,” Regina said, glancing over her shoulder at the entrance to the coatroom.

Flipsie grabbed both of Regina’s hands. “Your father loved me,” she said, looking into his daughter’s eyes.

“I’m sure he did,” Regina said, pulling her hands away.

“I mean that he was in love with me,” Flipsie said, casting her eyes downward, then toward the ceiling. “Oh God, it’s true.”

Regina glanced between the coat hangers. “I have to get back to my child.”

“Please don’t hate him,” Flipsie said, her voice cracking. She began patting down her hips, her bosom, as if looking for something once more. “That’s the last thing I ever wanted to come of this.”

Regina’s quivering bottom lip would not obey her mind, which was telling her the woman standing before her was delusional.

“Oh honey, please forgive him,” Flipsie said, reaching again for her hands.

Regina laughed abruptly. “I have to go,” she said, and walked down the line of coats, setting them swaying on their hangers.

Flipsie leaned back against the wall and inhaled a deep breath, which pressed her abdomen in toward her spine and jutted her breasts forward. She felt wildly feminine in that moment—imagining herself like some impassioned woman gloriously bound to the stake. She released the breath and fell forward with a cry. Resting her hands on her bony knees, she watched her tears drop to the brown carpet.

Jim once overheard his mother say to someone on the phone: “Oh believe me,

Jimmy shouts his beliefs from the rooftops; it's just that no one understands the message." It outraged him that even his family, his own flesh and blood would bury their faces, hang up, tune out, or walk away whenever he tried to communicate the truth.

Sure, there were a small few who agreed with him. These people nodded their heads aggressively whenever he spoke—

“yeah, yeah, yeah-right-yes-
exactly-right-yeah-yeah-yeah-that's-
and-that's-just-yeah-that's-just-it-man.”

But all in all, he'd come to the conclusion that most people weren't really listening—society was an army of small radios with no receivers. Most conversations proved futile, two faucets pouring down the same drain. And it was the empty feeling following a failed conversation, that suffocating sense of aloneness of the soul, which made Jim act out most of his living within the walls of his apartment. Here he could speak only with people of his choosing; and he chose the great conversationalists of his books.

Yet every two or three weeks Jim would feel the tug of humanity, the hope that there might be someone out there who knew what he knew. Someone who could share the burden of the knowledge that had flooded every fissure of his brain.

In his dreams he returned to the same landscape each night: a gas street lamp and a drab office building standing in three feet of brown water. He would try to relight the lamp, shimmying up the slick pole. Intermittently people would stick their heads out of the office windows and shout things to him that he couldn't understand. The pitch and tone of the shouting made the messages sound like directions or warnings, but he could

never be sure. Eventually he would light the lamp and then always the office building would crumble into the water. Sometimes he willed himself to lean against the pole and wait for something to happen, but the plot would only wait with him. No one would appear in the windows; the floodwaters would continue streaming across his waist. Though he willed the dream to change, it remained a silent, static scene.

Allen walked into the coatroom, turned immediately to the right and pressed his face against the wall. He had seen the body, embalmed and alone. The eyes glued shut with a visible lacquer. Before he'd had time to recover from the shock, he'd been swept into the current of mourners, jostling like salmon toward the bright light of the exit. Their weeping coming to a crescendo as images of Kluer's sealed lids clogged Allen's mind.

Flipsie could hear his heavy breathing and peered between coats to see the back of his hooded sweatshirt rising and falling in time with the gasps.

"Did you see the body?" she asked.

Allen jumped.

Flipsie emerged from between the coats, rubbing the back of her neck. "See, I just knew I couldn't handle that."

He pressed his forehead back against the wall. "Please leave me alone."

"Know your limits," Flipsie said, not so much as a command, but as a quote for them both to contemplate.

"It was awful," Allen mumbled into the wall.

“I knew it,” she said, shaking her head as she walked toward the doorway to the coatroom. “They shouldn’t have let any of us see it.”

Allen turned to look at her, but kept his forehead touching the wall.

“Just look what it’s done,” she said, pointing Allen out to himself.

He lifted his head. “What is it you have to tell me?”

She looked up at the ceiling. “He wouldn’t have wanted this.”

As the guests filed through the hallway and out the double doors, Stew kept his head down, listening to the conversations surrounding him.

“-new Cajun place for lunch.”

“-was lovely, and so short. What time is it anyways?”

“-and Gary’s father was in the tire business with my father.”

Casual banter so soon—so soon after facing his drained, lifeless body. How could anyone be talking? Stew wanted everyone quiet, all of them walking to their cars to get inside them and drive home feeling as numb and vacuous as he did.

“Stew Briggs?” a voice said from behind him. Stew’s heart stopped. He turned to see Marty Mitchell in a pinstriped navy suit and a yellow tie a few paces back.

“I didn’t know you were here,” Marty said, smiling to reveal unusually white teeth. He caught up with Stew, putting one hand on his shoulder and sticking the other out for a shake. “How you doing, Stew?”

Stew shook the man’s hand and forced a smile. “Well, on a day like this-”

“Ah jeez,” Marty cut in, “that’s not really a question for a function like this, is it?” He chuckled. “I’m sorry, forgive me for asking.”

“It’s alright,” Stew said, picking up his pace as they walked toward the exit.

“How’d you know Gary?”

Stew concentrated on the glass doors ahead of him. “Oh, here and there. We served on some charitable boards together. Used to have lunch now and then down on the Circle.”

Marty nodded. “A great man.”

Stew pushed through the doors and hurried toward the curb. Stopping abruptly, he turned around. “Nice seeing you, Marty.”

Marty held up his funeral program with a confused look on his face. “Okay then, we’ll be seeing you,” he called.

Stew turned and walked briskly towards his car, praying no one else would recognize him before he could get to it.

Allen walked out into the daylight, lifted his hood and studied the departing crowd. He turned and scanned the funeral home’s façade, looking in windows where he thought she might be standing, looking back at him. Then he spotted her sitting on a cement bench further down the sidewalk. She was removing her heels.

He walked over and asked her what she was doing.

“Looking for a chain,” she said.

“What kind of chain?”

“A chain of paperclips.”

“In your shoe?”

Flipsie sighed and looked up at him, shielding her eyes from the brightness of the overcast sky. “Sometimes I put it somewhere and then forget where I put it.”

Allen looked down at her feet. “Was he your-”

“Yes,” she said, slipping back into her shoes. She stood up and looked past him as a black BMW drove slowly by. “Oh my God,” she said, “that’s his car.”

Allen turned and saw a woman wearing a large black hat and dark sunglasses looking out the back window of the car.

The sound dropped out of Flipsie’s world as she watched the woman float by. She easily could have been the newly widowed Jackie O., the elegant, wide face and dewy skin; the gleaming, perfectly set hair; the lips drawn down just so. Such a strong, pretty sadness.

Flipsie turned to Allen. “Would you judge me if I told you he was my lover?”

He looked back to the car, which was now pulling into the u-shaped driveway in front of the building’s side entrance. “Probably.”

They both watched as a little girl and boy, holding onto the dress of a teenage girl, emerged from the building and made their way slowly down to the driveway. The back door of the BMW swung open and Flipsie saw two white gloves reach out and pull the children inside.

“Say, that man was in front of me in the line,” Allen said, pointing towards the parking lot.

“Who?” Flipsie asked, pulling her attention from the car. “That guy sort of half-running there?”

“Yes, him,” Allen said. “I think he’s a patient too. Something about the way he acted in line. He seemed very antisocial.”

“Well, look at him now,” Flipsie said, standing up from the bench. Hand to her brow, she tracked the man as he moved across the lot in what looked like a great, flustered hurry. Flipsie bent down and slipped off her heels once more. “I’m going to get him,” she said, stepping from the curb.

“Really?” Allen called, but she’d already taken off running.

“You know what I’ve been reading about lately?” Stew would ask, then continue without an answer, “The idea of the compression and expansion of time.”

Kluer would nod with a smile, holding up a finger and pointing at Stew as if to say, “You, you and I are so alike.”

And before Stew knew it, a half-an-hour would go by, the time spent turning over and over the outskirts of neurology. They both loved Sacks and the amazing minds the man would find: the Touretic Ping Pong ace, the Australian who forgot how to see, the woman who was simply unable to determine the existence of her own body.

Stew enjoyed this intellectual kinship with Kluer and he sensed that the feeling was mutual, that his time slot represented not just another appointment for Gary, but also a visit from a friend. The promise of a respite in the midst of the pageant of exhausting clients. Stimulating conversation with another complex and intelligent man.

Stew saw the crazy woman running barefoot through the parking lot. He turned

to unlock his car, then turned back to look at her again, this time realizing with horror that she was coming straight towards him.

“Oh God,” he said, pulling at the door handle.

“Hey!” she called, but he didn’t look up, throwing open the door and jumping inside the car. He fiddled to get the key in the ignition.

“HEY WAIT!” she called. He had just turned the car over, when all of the sudden her hands slammed against the driver’s side window.

Stew turned his head. She started banging on the glass. “Open the door,” she said, pointing to the handle. “The door,” she shouted, her words coming through in muffled booms.

Stew hesitated. He thought about pulling away, but then he realized she might just be wild enough to throw herself onto the hood.

He rolled down his window a few inches. “I’m sorry—I’m in a hurry.”

The woman was out of breath. She rested her hands on her knees. “Are you one of his patients?” she asked.

Stew didn’t know what to say so he screwed up his face. “What?”

“Because I am.”

He looked at the clock on his dashboard.

“And so is he,” the woman said, standing upright and pointing towards a sloppy-looking guy with white hair sitting on a bench in front of the funeral home. “We want to talk to you,” she said.

Stew looked back at his clock. “What?” It was the only way he could think to respond.

“I’m Flipsie . . . Moraten,” she said, pointing to herself.

Stew didn’t reciprocate.

“Look—just come over and introduce yourself,” she said, then turned and marched back across the lot.

Stew stared into the speedometer, wondering what to do. He looked over at the sidewalk and saw the man stand and offer the woman the bench. She flopped down and flapped her arm at him, signaling there was room for them both.

Stew suddenly realized that this was the same guy standing behind him in the visitation line. He wondered he and the woman had come together, if they were friends. Then he shifted into gear and drove quickly out of the lot.

* * *

Wednesday through Saturday nights, Flipsie drove to Daddy Jack’s restaurant and bar. She and her late husband Howard used to eat dinner there every Friday, usually sharing a table with a large group of their friends. Most of these friends still went to Daddy Jack’s. They bought drinks for Flipsie when she showed up and spoke quietly about her once she was on the other side of the bar.

“She’s gotten so skinny,” Mean Jean, the elderly hostess, would say to anyone standing around her when Flipsie walked through the door.

“She always was a little out there, but without Howard she seems to have gone off the deep end.”

“The hangovers that woman must have. What does she do all day, anyway?”

“Deborah says she cooks meals for women’s luncheons and showers, and things like that.”

“No!”

“And I heard she’ll drive anyone to the airport for fifty dollars.”

“Are you serious?”

“Poor thing.”

Flipsie adored going to Daddy Jack’s. Everyone was always glad to see her, calling out “Well if it ain’t Flipsie Moraten!” and “How’s it, Flips?” when she came through the door. And if Ron and the High Notes were playing that night, they’d do any song she requested. And if Gigi was tending bar, he’d always make a free round of Flipsie Bombs.

But every now and then something would remind her of Howard. Bumping a man’s foot under the table. Hearing a certain song. Not washing her hands in the bathroom. And when this happened, she might go outside and cry a little, or fish the paperclip chain from her purse, or tell some joke to whoever was sitting next to her and laugh even if her audience didn’t.

The one person genuinely concerned about Flipsie’s deterioration was Sam Gowland. He was Howard’s good friend from high school. Sam stood behind Howard at his wedding, watching Flipsie dab at her black-rimmed eyes with the cuff of her lace sleeve. He’d seen Howard notice Flipsie’s occasional boredom at dinner parties or bars, the way he’d pull a pen from his jacket and write some funny thing on a cocktail napkin to make her laugh. He knew how Howard cared for her, how he admired what many people found strange about Flipsie—her “untetheredness” as he liked to put it, her “spirit.” She was unbounded by the social stigmas that kept the other wives at Daddy Jack’s picking at their field greens and slipping away to the bathroom, forever

re-evaluating their attractiveness. Howard had once told Sam that Flipsie checked the mirror too, just once at home before they left. “But she’s good to herself,” Howard had said. “Not like all these other women. She always smiles back at herself.” That had stuck with Sam somehow.

And because Howard loved these things about Flipsie, Sam loved them too. But now that Howard was gone, these qualities were slowly becoming distorted, even grotesque. Her light-hearted attitude had become heedlessness. Her free spirit, disruptive and tactless. Her eclectic style, ridiculous and bordering on inappropriate. Every night he saw her burst through the door of Daddy’s Jack, Sam was confronted with the sad fact that Flipsie had become a mockery of herself.

Sam was the one who made sure Flipsie—wearing a belt around her head, Flipsie missing her shoes, Flipsie announcing she needed dental floss, Flipsie calling everyone Hiram, Flipsie lacking keys and purse—got home every night. Sometimes this meant staying well past the drink that made him want to go home. Sometimes this meant calling a taxi or asking one of the cranky, sober wives to drive her home. And in the worst-case scenarios, when Flipsie couldn’t remember how she used to put one heeled foot in front of the other, Sam was forced to take her home to his apartment. He hated this scenario. No matter how platonic his feelings for her, he still felt himself walk into a cloud of guilt whenever he carried her through his bedroom door. He would hurry to help her into bed, flip off the lamp and shut the door as fast as he could, because it didn’t seem right to see her sleeping face, the slack, open mouth and fluttering lids.

As he settled onto the couch a foot too short for his large frame, he’d transmit some sort of silent apology to Howard. *Sorry about all this. All of it, Howard.*

* * *

The Starbucks was across town, a relief to Stew, who was determined to keep his association with these people very discreet. Pulling open the storefront door, he remembered why he avoided these places—the noxious aroma of coffee grinds, vanilla, and burning milk turned his stomach.

They were easy to spot; the place was dead. Flipsie wagged a hand anyways. “Stew—over here.” His heart quickened when he noticed an unexpected third, a kid who might as well have been holding a sign that said “Crazies Meet Here.”

“Glad you made it,” Flipsie said, with a cheery tilt of her small head. She stood and walked toward him. “Come over and meet the guys.” She put her hand on his forearm and steered him towards the table. Stew found this rude but submitted to in a sort of daze.

The kid was Jim, who’d been at the visitation but hadn’t stayed for the funeral, because of all the “fucking weird looks” he was getting. Stew chuckled at this, but no one else seemed to find humor in a 6’2” kid with a nest of snaking dreadlocks and yards of dark clothing draping his frame, frustrated with the “looks” people gave him.

After three or four rounds of getting-to-know-you queries led by Flipsie, Stew had, if anything, amassed more reasons to regret his decision to come. Allen, a dishwasher at a third-rate Mexican restaurant, lived alone and enjoyed trivia. Flipsie, a “stay-at-home widow,” had one adult child, way too much energy, and a passion for musicals and style—whatever that was supposed to mean. Jim was unsurprisingly unemployed, lived alone, and enjoyed the hell out of the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, it was a delicate art for Stew to distinguish himself without showing anyone up. He

decided to keep it brief: retired banker (forget the ex-president part), father of a lovely daughter, enjoys boating and Formula One. He felt this introduction went over impressively, but without eliciting resentment.

“I have a question,” Allen said, raising a timid hand from his coffee cup. “I’d like to know . . . is anyone going to try to find a new therapist?” He looked around the table, fearing he’d asked a horrendous question.

“Jesus no,” Flipsie said, her eyebrows coming together in an expression of outrage and concern, as if he’d asked if anyone supported cruelty to animals. “Jesus no. It could never be the same.”

“It wouldn’t be,” Jim confirmed. “Any other psychologist’s gonna be a kook. They’re all a bunch of morons on power trips.”

“Oh-ho,” Stew grunted, “no overgeneralizations there.”

“How many have you been to?” Jim said, turning to Stew.

“Just Gary,” he answered. “But I happen to know a lot of people who are therapists and they aren’t all kooks.”

“Well then you go out there and get yourself one,” Jim said, then re-oriented himself towards the others.

“The thing is,” Allen said, watching his finger trace back and forth across the table edge. “Umm . . .” his voice was much softer than the others. Flipsie leaned forward in her chair to hear him. “It seems to me, that starting over with someone would do me more harm than good.” He wrinkled his brow after he said it, as if pulling the statement back through his mind to reconsider its authenticity. He shook his head. “No, that’s not true. It wouldn’t just be harmful, it would be impossible . . . it would be

impossible to have to go through it all again. I couldn't." Flipsie nodded, squeezing her eyes into triangles of empathy.

"And I just keep thinking," Allen continued, "'what am I going to do?'" His voice grew louder as he said it, as if to express the volume inside his head. "What am I supposed to do now?"

No one answered him. The silence that followed felt communal, as if the question and the urgency with which he'd said it was familiar to them all.

For Stew, this was both a comforting and frightening realization. It meant that he wasn't alone in his paralysis, but it also meant that he was sitting in a boat with a bunch of other paralyzed people.

Flipsie slapped her hand against the table. "You know what?" she said, her wide eyes blinking. "We could help each other." She looked to their faces for enthusiasm. "Like a support group."

Stew crossed his arms in front of his chest. Allen leaned slightly forward, listening intently.

"Think about it," she continued, "we're the only ones who really understand what each others' going through. If we can't help each other, we can at least support one another, you know, be there-"

"Uhh . . ." Jim released his doubt into the air.

"Look," Stew said, holding out his hands as if to stop the train of bad ideas, "I don't know about you, but I *have* people who understand me. I just came here to talk with some people who knew a great guy I knew. That's all. I didn't sign-up for group counseling."

“I think it’s a great idea,” Allen said, sitting very still and straight, hands resting on his thighs. He looked at Flipsie with a small smile.

Stew drove home listening to hard rock, taking the back streets that wound along the river. He laughed to himself, thinking what he would’ve told Kathy. “So I joined a self-help group with a druggie, a likely homo, and a crazy lady today.” He laughed aloud.

He knew exactly how she would have reacted, too. That annoyed face, the one she made when she couldn’t tell to what degree he was serious. And when he tried to explain, she’d listen with a strained smirk, guarding herself from looking foolish if she believed what turned out to be a joke. Eventually sighing into “whatever, Stew,” she’d wander up the stairs or down the hall, anywhere away from him. Because the truth was, his goings-ons, in the end, didn’t really matter to her anyway. He knew Kathy had stopped caring years ago. Though he didn’t know the exact date, Stew realized there must have been a day when she woke up to find she didn’t have feelings for him anymore. He was a man she lived with, maybe even a friend. Of course she wanted the best for him, but she wasn’t really concerned anymore if he did things that kept him from getting there.

As he was driving, a rabbit shot across the road. Stew sucked air through his front teeth and braced himself for the bump. But he felt nothing. And yet he hadn’t seen the rabbit get away.

“The rabbit got away,” he said to himself. He thought about this phrase for a moment, and then his mind returned to the scene at Starbucks.

Two weeks later, Stew stood on the back patio looking at four box spring mattresses he'd leaned against the mossy posts that held up the balcony. Kathy had moved out the day before, taking as her last load up the gravel driveway a laundry basket filled with granola, soy milk, dried fruit, and three pints of fish oil. Stew had stood in the picture window, watching as she backed out the drive, reoriented the car, and pulled into the street. He had to imagine from there her car driving to a blue bungalow at the end of a dead-end street a half-mile away.

It was painful. The stereotypical signs of separation in his own home. Half-empty closet, cleared bedside table, naked bathroom counter. Even his toothbrush looked stark and alone in the holder, reminding him of some shot he'd seen in an art house movie. He couldn't believe that this was it—their separation would be no more unique than the thousand portrayals on the screen.

He'd always told Kathy that box springs should be aired out, the dust beaten from them from time to time. Now he was free to do so without scrutiny, banging his way down the stairs with the musty box-springs, scratching the white walls, splintering the doorway as he tried to negotiate the stiff rectangles through. All of them outside, theirs and Meghan's and the two twins from the guestroom. The dust came out in great clouds, lit by the late afternoon sun. He wanted to call her out to the balcony—"You see?"

Stew slapped a mosquito from his face and shook a cigarette from the pack lying on the grill. His vision zoomed past the box-springs down to the river at the end of their yard, then pulled back to the mattresses. He started to cry.

This was it.

No, this wasn't.

It couldn't be.

Stew took down the leather-bound White Pages from the cabinet above the breakfast bar. The binder stung him with the memory of a thousand petty fights.

“Who buys a leather binder for the phone book?”

“Why's it matter to you, Stew?”

“Because *this*,” he'd said, shaking the book, “is fucking ridiculous.”

“Why? Why do you hound me about everything I do in this house?”

Stew's vision began to blur as he flipped through the “M”'s. What had it been? Mort-? Morten?

Moraten.

He kept a finger on the small print and picked up the phone. He'd just explain to her that things had changed. That he was having a harder time than he thought he would. That he was alone now.

* * *

It was the first day of fall, the Thursday before Gary's plane crash, the day they decided to tear down the garden.

“How was your appointment with Gary?” Stew's wife said from behind the shed. He pretended not to hear her as he loosened a rotting 4x4 from its groove in the front of the garden.

She came around the shed carrying something in the palm of her garden glove.

“Look at this.”

Relieved she'd forgotten her question, Stew tipped the plank into the woodpile.

“Can you believe this?” she asked, extending her palm.

He peered into the glove and teared up at the sight of the lightly dusted, blue-green body of a tiny hummingbird.

“Can you believe how small it is?” she asked. With her ungloved hand she carefully stroked its iridescent wing.

Stew swallowed, blinking back tears.

She pointed the tip of her fingernail at the bird’s yellow needle beak. “Look at its little tongue hanging out. I didn’t know they even had tongues, did you?” she asked, looking up into his face. “Oh Stew—are you crying?”

He turned his head and wiped his hand across his face. “I don’t know why.”

Kathy watched a tear run the course of his unshaven cheek. “It’s sad,” she said.

Stew looked back at the hummingbird. “It’s so small,” he said, his voice cracking. “I’ve never seen one not moving.”

“We’ll bury it in the garden,” she said. “Where the peony bush used to be.”

* * *

When the last guest rang the doorbell, Flipsie stopped the tour and went to get the door, leaving Allen and Jim standing in her dimly lit bedroom. Both men felt somewhat invigorated by their surroundings, as neither had stood in a single woman’s bedroom before, its private contents laid bare—something lacy peeping from an opened drawer, a bottle of cream on the nightstand, pink sheets twisted and spilling to the floor, the bed sheets undone.

Suddenly Stew filled the doorway and nodded hello. Then he joined the other

two in the corner, and all three of them stood there, shoulder-to-shoulder, as Flipsie explained the room's decor.

“So I don't know why I really need to show you this, but here's where I get my beauty rest,” she said, collapsing onto her bed, the back of her hand pressed against her forehead. Jim's skin burned as he glanced between her legs at the exact moment she fell backwards, rolling onto her curled back, her legs held briefly in the air. “I'll just be a minute,” she said, closing her eyes. “No, I'm kidding,” she said, laughing and jumping up to her feet.

Stew felt embarrassed for the woman, her behavior reminding him of his daughter as a teenager, so frantic to entertain.

The tour continued with a carpeted guest bathroom, which Stew noted with disgust—carpet in a bathroom was senseless—much more so, thick, shag carpet. He couldn't avoid looking at it, thinking of all the hair of varying lengths stuck between its fibers. The toothpaste and urine soaked up by the yarn. He made a mental note to be sure and use the restroom before coming to her house.

Flipsie opened more doors and switched on more lights—“laundry room, washer, dryer; Kenneth's bedroom—right now he's in California, but I always keep it ready for him, for whenever he gets back; TV room, sometimes I work out on that thing over there.”

When they ended up back in the living room, Flipsie sat down in a La-Z-boy and proclaimed: “So, that's my digs.” She looked at the men, who were still standing. “Sit—sit!” she said, fluttering her hands towards a faux-leather sofa and a green beanbag.

They looked around, attempting to silently negotiate the seating arrangement. It

seemed to be understood that the youngest should be relegated to the beanbag. Stew and Allen sank into the couch, maintaining enough space for another person between them.

Jim looked down at the sunken beanbag.

“That thing’s really comfortable,” Flipsie said. “Just try it. Best seat in the house.”

Jim dropped his lanky frame into the cushion.

“See?” Flipsie said, raising what trace of eyebrows she had left.

Jim smiled with his mouth closed and gave her a thumbs-up.

She certainly wasn’t an *unattractive* woman, Stew thought, just as he had when he saw her at the coffee shop, calm and collected for the first time. But there was something about her—the smallness of her dark, almost black eyes, the wisps of eyebrows above them, or perhaps the oily sheen of her face—something that kept her from being a woman he would call “good-looking.”

“So,” Flipsie said, turning her attention to the couch and setting her hands on her knees. “How do we start this thing?”

Allen held up two fingers.

It was unclear whether someone should call on him. So Stew spoke up, “You don’t have to raise your hand here, there’s only four of us.”

Allen put his hand down and cleared his throat. “It seems to me that at this sort of a meeting, the first thing we ought to do is stand up and introduce ourselves.”

Jim grunted from the floor.

“We already know each other,” Stew said.

“Okay, but maybe we can say a little more,” Flipsie said. “Like why we’re here or something.”

Stew slumped back into the couch. He was wasting his time. “Alright, but let’s just get going. I play tennis at eight-thirty.”

Allen stood and joined his hands in the front pocket of his hooded sweatshirt. “I’m Allen Lynch. I am, or . . . I was a patient of the former doctor.”

“Oh no,” Flipsie said, grabbing fistfuls of hair on each side of her head and tapping her toes against the floor. “Don’t call him that. Don’t put that awful word in front of his name.”

Allen looked to Stew, who shrugged.

“He’s not former,” Flipsie said, leaning forward and dropping her head in between her legs. “He’ll never be former to me.”

“Alright then,” Allen said. “I’m Allen Lynch, a former patient of Dr. Kluer. And I’m here,” he spoke in a calm, almost didactic tone, “I’m here to share my experience of grief with others who find themselves in the same position.” He looked around, seeking approval. Receiving none, he sat down, still satisfied that he had demonstrated a thoughtful introduction.

Flipsie pulled herself up from the recliner. “Frances ‘Flipsie’ Moraten and I’m here because . . .” she blinked rapidly, as if to contain her tears, “I don’t think I can live my life,” she said, then stuck the knuckles of her fist into her mouth and closed her eyes. She stood like that a moment, then she sat back down.

Stew imagined himself clapping slowly, then rising to his feet, his clapping

growing louder and stronger. It was briefer, but no less powerful a performance than the one she gave in front of Kluer's coffin.

Now Jim began gathering the folds of his pants, preparing to rise to his feet. When he achieved this position, he told them, "I'm Jim and I'm here because I have nothing better to do, really." Then he scratched at his tangled mangle and looked intently at the coffee table in front of him. "And I guess, I don't usually feel anything when people die, but this time I do."

Allen made a sympathetic "mmm."

Stew was surprised by Jim's admission.

Now Flipsie pointed to Stew and the heat of embarrassment broke across his forehead. He wondered what Gary would think of this. He imagined him laughing in his quiet, easy way. *Wait a minute—you and those three?*

"I'm Stew," he began, "and . . . Gary was not only my psychologist, but he was also my good friend."

Flipsie pressed her hands together as if in prayer and rested her chin on the tips of her fingers. Then she whispered, "Well put," which bothered Stew, because what did she know about their friendship? Though she might have wished it, clearly this woman never had a mutually engaging relationship with Gary—in what way was she his equal? What could she possibly offer him in terms of stimulating conversation?

There was music blaring now from somewhere in the house. Stew thought it sounded like Stevie Wonder.

"Oop!" Flipsie said, slapping her hands over her mouth. "I totally forgot about Jerry—he's in the garage." She got up and motioned the men to follow.

They walked down a short hall, at the end of it Flipsie pushed open a door leading into a garage. Stew looked past her and was surprised to see a man with thin, fluffy white hair, sitting on a cot holding a microphone. The man turned to them and smiled.

"Just doing some karaoke," he said. "Come on in."

Stew looked at a small television on a shelf in front of the cot. A black screen displayed a string of bouncing quarter notes, the words to "Boogie on Reggae Woman" scrolled across its bottom in bright green letters.

Jerry had turned back to the TV, and was rocking from side to side, rhythmically jutting his chin as he waited for the right moment to jump back into the song. When he did, he sang in a falsetto voice, dropping to a low growl on the word "boogie."

It was hard not to laugh. The loud music, the fluorescent light bouncing off the bald spot at the back of Jerry's head, the bizarre décor of the cement block garage. A taxidermic bear cub wearing a cowboy hat, a metallic banner hanging from the rafters reading "It's Party Time!", a poster of a whip-wielding, buxom blonde sitting on top of an elderly man's shoulders.

Flipsie stood on the bottom step, watching Jerry with amusement. Every now and then she'd turn back and wink at her guests, as if she was a proud mother.

When the song faded, Jerry lowered his head and ceased to move until the last notes dropped out. He lifted his head and stood up. "Why the party?" he asked, stretching out his arms like a ringmaster.

"It's a therapy group," Flipsie said, "not a party."

Jerry dropped his arms. "A therapy group?"

“Yeah, these guys are all patients of Dr. Kluer and we’re all in mourning, you know, so.” Flipsie suddenly wondered why mourning required a group.

“And we’re helping each other through it,” Allen said matter-of-factly.

“Ah. Good for you,” he said, with what registered as uncanny sincerity. “Wanna beer?”

God yes, Stew thought. “No, no thanks,” he said, waving his hand.

“Not now,” Flipsie said, as Jerry rummaged through a microfridge. “We’re in too much pain, Jer. It’ll make us worse.” She looked with concern at her group members.

“We’re gonna go, okay?”

“Suit yourself,” he called from behind the door of the fridge.

They filed out and Flipsie shut the door.

“Is that your husband?” Jim asked as they walked back into the living room. Oh no, Stew thought. God, doesn’t this kid listen?

“No, my husband died,” Flipsie said. “Jerry’s just a guy I let live in the garage.”

“Oh, right,” Jim mumbled.

“I take it you knew Jerry before then?” Allen asked.

Flipsie sat down and scratched at an ink mark on the vinyl couch. “No. He just showed up about six months ago and asked if I had a place he could stay.”

“And you just let him in?” Stew asked.

“He seemed harmless enough,” Flipsie said, wetting her thumb. “And of course, Kenneth was here then.”

The meeting quickly lapsed into undirected conversation. Allen talked a lot about wild turkeys and dishwashing. Flipsie talked about the people she didn’t like at the

funeral. Stew zoned in and out of the conversation—trying to make room in his mind for these strange people. Jim mostly stayed quiet, occasionally questioning what struck him as irrational.

“What were you doing in the front row at the funeral anyways?” he asked Flipsie.

Stew perked up for this one.

Flipsie put her hand to her chest. “Why I’m a dear, dear friend. I’m closer to him than most those people up there were.”

“How’s that?” Stew asked.

Flipsie smiled slyly. “Allen knows,” she said, winking at Allen. Stew rolled his eyes—hoping she wasn’t insinuating the whopper she was probably insinuating.

“I don’t know anything,” Allen said.

“Anyways, I’m sure we’ll get to that eventually,” she said. Stew laughed out loud, and Flipsie stopped smiling. “Just like we’ll get to why you’re so quiet, Jim. And why Stew thinks he’s better than all of us.”

“What’s that?” Stew said.

Jim didn’t seem to mind the comment on his reticence.

“You think I think I’m better than you?” Stew asked. He laughed again. “How the hell do you get that?”

“The car,” Flipsie said. “The way you treated us in the parking lot that day. You were acting elitist.”

“Look, the whole thing was a little weird, alright?” Stew said, putting his hands out to his sides. “A barefoot woman banging on my window in a funeral home parking lot?”

Jim leaned forward in the beanbag, his hands squeezed together in anticipation of a good scene.

“I wasn’t being elitist,” Stew continued, enunciating the word “elitist” in an elitist way, Jim noted. “I was just a little uncomfortable with the whole thing. Give me a break.”

“Well,” Flipsie said, “I can see your true colors shining through.”

What was her problem? Stew looked at his watch and rose from the couch. “You know what?” he said, pointing at Flipsie. “You don’t know me. And I’m going to be late.” He walked toward the front door. “Thank you for the hospitality,” he called over his shoulder, “but I’m not sure I’ll be here next week.”

Jim saw his out and stood up too. “Me neither,” he said, stretching his arms above his head. Flipsie saw a blue tattoo slide out from underneath his shirtsleeve.

“Artemis?” she asked.

“Huh?” Jim yawned. “Oh yeah,” he said, looking at his wrist.

“Why her?” Flipsie asked.

“She reminds me of this girl I knew,” he said.

“That’s lovely.” Flipsie wondered what goddess she might remind a man of. Perhaps a nymph, or some sort of fairy who could fit in a tulip.

“Wait, Stew,” Allen stood up and hurried toward the door. “If you and Jim don’t come back, we’ll only have two people in the group.”

Stew shrugged. “I’m sure there are others out there.” He opened the door and stepped outside. Jim followed close on his heels.

“Okay, well,” Flipsie called sunnily from the doorway, as if she’d not heard what

either man had said. “We’ll be seeing you.” She propped open the screen door, smiling and waving.

Inside the house, Allen pulled back the living room curtain and watched as Stew climbed into a sports car and Jim lifted his junk bicycle from the grass.

* * *

“I’ve got no clue where my son is,” Flipsie said, studying the sun spots on the back of her hand. It was their third meeting and she felt it was time to confess her faults as a mother.

“You don’t know where Kenneth is?” Allen asked.

“Nope. He’s somewhere up in Northern California, and that’s this huge, huge space,” she said, widening extended hands for emphasis.

“Well, how do you even know that?” Jim asked from a folding chair that had been pulled from the wreckage of the basement.

“One of his old girlfriends,” Flipsie said. She pulled back her hair with both hands, pulling taut the skin of her face. Stew saw a flash of a younger, prettier Flipsie.

“Oh God,” she continued, “and he’s living in a dairy truck.”

Jim stifled laughter into the collar of his jacket.

Flipsie threw her arm toward the hallway. “When he’s got a room right here,” she cried.

The garage door opened and Jerry stuck his head out. “What’s that?”

“Nothing, Jer,” Flipsie said. She looked back at the group. “So what am I supposed to do?”

Stew had nothing. He found it difficult to take this woman’s problems seriously,

just like the never-ending problems of his mother's friends. It was hard to truly worry about Luella's knees, or Ivy Frank's worsening vision. Their lives were so completely unrelated to his own, that he listened to what happened within them as he listened to the news. Their experiences were information that went only to the brain, not the stomach, gut, or heart. He was generally at peace with this inability to empathize with most people, until one day it happened with his daughter.

Meghan had called one night, a week into her first year of college. Usually her mother fielded the calls, but Kathy was at Bible study, and Meghan sounded upset. "Well, I'm here," Stew had offered. "We can talk." Initially she'd hesitated, but then the dam gave way and in a rush of sniffling sobs she told him that John Myer had already found a new girlfriend, just a week after he and Meghan had broken up. "And it's killing me, Dad," she'd whimpered into the phone. "It just hurts so bad." Intellectually, he'd understood her pain—this was John Myer, her boyfriend of two years. His actions had hurt her terribly. But when Stew listened to her broken voice, he felt nothing. Not anger or pain or sadness. Here was his only daughter, crying out to him from three states away, and he felt completely numb. And when he did feel something, hours later, it was only the selfish fear that something might be terribly wrong with him.

"Oh, what am I gonna do?" Flipsie whimpered, holding her head in her hands.

"Well, Stew, you're the other parent here," Allen said, turning to him. "What would you do?"

"Me?" Stew asked, without needing to. "Well, I guess I'd have to think about it for a moment," he said, rubbing his knuckles against his chin. "But I can tell you one

thing, if it was my daughter out there, you can be sure I'd be on the first flight I could find leaving for California.

"Of course you would," Jim said, shaking his head. "But not everyone has the money to jump on a flight to California."

"I realize that—"

"Are you gonna let me finish?"

Stew smiled, then raised his hands and shrugged, signaling that he could easily be the bigger man in an argument with a kid.

Jim turned to Flipsie. "Look, I gotta tell you, if it was me out there, I'd hate it if my parents showed up trying to check in on me or some shit. I mean, obviously your son—wait, what's his name?"

"Kenneth," Flipsie said.

"Right, obviously Kenneth is seeking this kind of isolation, and the last thing he wants is his Mom showing up out there trying to tell him how to live his life.

"But I wouldn't try to tell—"

"It doesn't matter," Jim said. "Look, he doesn't want to see you, okay? I know it's kinda harsh, but just trust me on that, okay?"

Flipsie let out a little cry and covered her face with her hands.

Allen winced, looking as if he was in physical pain. "Oh now wait," he said, "what Jim's saying isn't necessarily true. I think Stew's right, Flipsie, a parent should always be there to protect their child. I'm sure that even if he didn't act like it, your son would be happy to see you. He'd be happy because he'd know you care."

"Wrong," Jim said, shaking his head.

Stew shot out his arm towards Jim, mouthing “shut up.” Jim rolled his eyes and kept quiet.

“Hey,” Allen said, placing a hand on Flipsie’s upper arm.

“Oh gosh,” Flipsie sighed, looking up and dragging her sleeve across her nose. Her face was a blotched mess now, make-up leaking down her cheeks, her small eyes red and swollen. Seeing her like this made Stew feel both tenderness and repulsion, these feelings because in that moment she reminded him of Kathy.

“He would know,” Flipsie said, rubbing an eye with her small fist. “He would. Dr. Kluer would know what I should do.”

“He would,” Allen said, “that’s why we’re here.”

The last Flipsie heard, Kenneth was living in a milk truck somewhere in the Cascade Mountains. The only reason she knew this was because she called the last number she had for him, a “416” number, and a girl named Rocco told her so.

“A milk truck?” Flipsie repeated.

“Have you read *Into the Wild*?” the girl asked. Flipsie could hear her dealing with some sort of heavy-breathing animal. “I think it’s some obsession he has with that story. I told him he’d never find a bus; but I guess he sort of did.”

Flipsie wasn’t sure what to ask next. “Is that a dog?” she asked.

“I gotta go Kenneth’s Mom,” the girl said.

“Wait—where is this truck exactly?”

“Somewhere up in North Cali, around the Cascade Mountains I think,” Rocco said. “Other than that, I’ve got no idea. We aren’t exactly friendly anymore.”

Flipsie heard a high-pitched whining.

“Gotta go,” Rocco said, and hung up.

Flipsie held the phone to her ear until the dial tone blared.

Then she went into the living room and pulled out a desk drawer. She dumped everything out of it and looked at the U.S. map taped in the bottom.

Flipsie waited to turn out the living room lights until she heard Jerry put on Cat Stevens, which meant he was going to bed. It comforted her to have someone in the house whose day was so ritualized. She knew what noises to expect and when to expect them. And gradually, they’d begun to inform her life too, like little bells that reminded her—you haven’t eaten, you should shower now, the mail’s probably come.

She took down a candle from the mantle above the fake fireplace and set it on the carpet in the middle of the room. She lit the wick and sat cross-legged before it, slowly filling her lungs with air as she’d seen Drea Kahn do on the Yoga Hour. She closed her eyes and imagined his office—the fighter jet mobile jostling in the wind from the corner vent. The books she could remember—*Patiently Waiting*, *Forest Through the Trees*, *The Power of One*. The black and white photo of the Little Rascals gang hanging by the door—the kids lined tallest to shortest across a fallen log.

She tried to feel the skin of the worn leather armchair, the sweat that would form between the backs of her knees and the soft hide. She tried to picture him—the deep set eyes, the permanent crease of concern between his brows, the staticky tuft of gray hair at the top of his head.

She sensed the candle flickering.

"What should I do?" she whispered. She listened, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to keep his face before her, the chair beneath her, the air conditioning whirring from the vent. She needed a half-hour, at least a half-hour.

* * *

During the next month of weekly meetings, the memory of Dr. Kluer loomed like a giant looking down on the little circle of chairs. He grew taller and taller, his wisdom and benevolence expanding between each white box of the calendar, until he was larger than life. The birth of his mythic figure tracing back to the blackest of calendar boxes, the one containing that contained "X" marking the day he fell from the sky.

The four of them—Stew, Allen, Flipsie, and Jim—worked on issues, and around issues, and even through a few, straining to listen to their collective memory of the doctor, and in doing so, to resurrect him, to hear his voice, and maybe even one day, come together to find him sitting in a chair amongst them.

Their small group was not spared the usual undulations of any larger social group—alliances formed and disbanded, sympathies and suspicions grew quickly and withered. And all this time the strange entity known as "group therapy" looped its complex nature around their ankles, weaving through underarms and between fingers and toes, binding them to a form they did not know how to create nor undo.

But this intricate attachment was not evident to any one of them at the time of their fifth weekly meeting. And it wouldn't be, until three weeks later, in a place none of them expected.

Stew approached the small concrete porch outside Flipsie's door, and considered

the fact that he'd been coming to these meetings for over a month now. This truth suddenly seemed ridiculous and foreign to him. As if another version of himself had been coming to the meetings and now here he was, the real, rational Stew, standing outside this aluminum-sided, ranch house on the East side wondering what the hell he was doing there. He would make clear to everyone today that this would be his last meeting. Stuffing the remainder of his English muffin in his mouth, he jammed his finger into the doorbell. He waited with his head down, looking at the sad row of small, clay pots lined against the house, each holding the dry stubble of a plant.

“Flipsie’s gone to California,” Allen said when he opened the door.

“What?” Stew mumbled through food. He was fifteen minutes late and had crumbs all over his fleece pullover. “How the hell’s she gonna do that?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t know.”

Stew shoved his way inside, letting the screen door slam shut behind him. “How do you know she’s gone?”

Allen blinked. “Jerry just came out of the garage and told me.”

Stew sighed in a way that reminded Allen of his manager at Dos Cariños, who would sigh in much the same way whenever he'd come back to the dish room and see all the dishes piled on the left side of the washer. Allen would look up through the mist of hot water and say something like “sorry” or “I’ve got it,” but the young, tie-wearing man would only sigh and walk back into the kitchen.

“So where’s Jerry?” Stew asked, putting up his hands in a way that suggested he should have been told this information by now.

“He’s in the kitchen,” Allen said.

Jerry had few answers. “Said she was gonna take a taxi to the truck stop up there on I-70 and find herself a ride west,” he said.

“Jesus, you gotta be kidding me,” Stew said.

“Oh my God, but that’s so dangerous,” Allen half-whispered, and these were the moments when he seemed most effeminate, gasping and holding a delicate hand up to his pale face. “Oh no, no, that’s very dangerous. I can’t tell you how many crime shows I’ve seen where someone ends up hurt that way.”

“It’s fucking ridiculous is what it is,” Stew said, leaning his weight into the counter. “I mean—what the hell is that woman thinking?”

The outburst hung in the air.

“‘Bout her boy I guess,” Jerry said after some consideration.

“Jesus,” Stew said again, standing up and scratching the back of his head. “And where the hell’s Jim?”

“Jim?” Jerry asked.

“The boy with the hair and the pants,” Allen said, pantomiming both.

“Ah,” Jerry nodded.

Stew felt a sudden horror at the community of people he’d somehow become involved with. He watched Allen and Jerry’s exaggerated non-verbal communication and thought of the retarded boy who they were forced to incorporate into their student newspaper class. They’d give him an easy assignment, like the lunch menu for the upcoming week, and he would toil away for a week. Going back and forth from the pressroom to the cafeteria several dozen times, checking and re-checking the menu. Then he’d spend hours in front of a typewriter in the back of the room, rocking side to

side, humming an endless song. Once, when Stew was looking for staples in the stock closet, he had a chance to glance at the typewriter. The smeared, uneven lettering read “JULIE ANDREW’s 8666666666666666 pussy.” The boy had twisted around in his chair and pointed frantically at the page, his tongue stretching out the corner of his mouth. “I’m working on my story,” he said. Stew had nodded and told him to keep up the good work. He never spoke to the boy again.

“Well we’ve just gotta do something,” Allen said, dropping his hands to his sides. “I mean we’re practically family now.”

Stew lowered his head. “We’ve had five meetings, Allen. I never said I’d be anybody’s keeper. She’s an adult.”

Allen chewed nervously at his fingers, staring at a blue square in the center of the tile beneath his shoe. “Well, I won’t be able to live with myself if something happens to her. If you can, then that’s you.” He didn’t look up at Stew, but turned and pulled the telephone receiver from the wall.

“Who you calling?” Jerry asked.

Allen didn’t answer as he sucked in his stomach, pushed his hips forward and retrieved some yellow scraps of paper from the front pocket of his jeans. He uncrumpled the first one, then stuck it in his mouth. Then he unfolded the next one. Now he moved the phone between his shoulder and ear and dialed.

“Don’t get the cops over here,” Jerry hissed, starting to back away toward the garage.

Stew opened a cupboard and grabbed a cup. He went to the sink, pretending he wasn’t interested in who Allen was calling.

Allen exhaled loudly and put his hand above the phone's cradle that was screwed into the wall. He leaned into the wall and looked down at his feet. He drummed his fingers against the flowered wallpaper. Stew glanced at him and recognized the dramatic posture from hundreds of movies.

"Jim?" Allen said, pushing away from the wall. "Is this Jim?" He pressed his finger against his ear. "Hello, this is Allen . . . Allen, from group . . . What? . . . Oh, listen—Flipsie's trying to hitchhike to California to find Kenneth . . . Well that's what I said . . . You are? . . . Oh, I didn't know that. Well, that park is always a mess . . . I know, but at least it's a worthwhile task . . . Yes, he's here. But he's not all that concerned . . . Exactly . . . Okay, well see you then."

Allen hung up the phone and turned around. "Jim's coming over after he's done cleaning up McCormick's Park. He's doing community service there."

"For what?" Jerry asked.

"I'd rather not say."

Stew poured his water down the drain and turned around. "What's with telling him I'm not all that concerned?"

Allen shrugged, frowning. "It just didn't seem you were all that worried about her."

Stew held his cup at waist level and leaned back against the sink. "There's a difference between being concerned and getting involved."

Allen shrugged again. "Okay. You can tell Jim that when he gets here."

Stew looked at Jerry and realized he was not going to get any support. "Well, I'm sorry that I have a family and places to be," Stew said, setting his cup in the sink.

“She likes dishes to go in the dishwasher,” Jerry said, pointing towards the machine.

Stew huffed, pulled it open, and threw his cup inside.

Allen raised his eyebrows and rubbed the side of his neck.

“Tell Jim that I said thanks, on behalf of the tax-paying community,” Stew said as he walked into the living room.

Jerry and Allen heard the screen door slam.

“Stew? Hello, this message is for Stew. Stew?—it’s Allen. From group. Look, Jim and I have decided to set out driving west to try to catch up with Flipsie. She called Jerry from a payphone in Illinois last night, and she’s refusing to come home . . . We’re thinking she must be on I-70 and I guess we’re just gonna stop at random truck stops and see if anyone’s seen her . . . so . . . that’s the plan. If you want to help give us a call.”

Stew took his hand off his mouth and let himself breathe. They couldn’t be serious. He pushed the arrow to listen to the next message.

“Stew? Hey. It’s Allen again. I forgot to tell you, or, ask you rather . . . Jim and I are both sort of low on funds right now. So, even just financial help could be your way of contributing. That’s all. Call either one of us back. Bye.”

Stew looked up and shook his head, laughing out loud. He caught his face in the brass-framed mirror above the fireplace and liked seeing himself laughing alone. It made him feel like a fun guy.

He erased the two messages and went to the kitchen to see if there was anything left in the freezer.

PART TWO

The Chase

The '66 Pontiac moved slowly down a one-way alley, then turned left, precariously hugging the corner of the three-story apartment building.

Stew honked twice and was surprised to see Jim emerge from somewhere below the building, stepping out of what looked like an access shaft. He slung a green army duffel over his shoulder and walked toward the idling car.

“Hey,” he said, throwing his bag through the back window, then opening the door and climbing in.

“Do you live in the basement of this place?” Stew asked.

“Yeah,” Jim said—pulling tight the ends of the handkerchief covering his dreadlocks.

“Is that even a legitimate apartment?” Stew asked.

“What does that matter?”

“Well an apartment has to meet certain standards to be a legal rental,” Stew explained, looking at Jim through the review mirror.

“Who cares?” Jim said.

“Your parents might.” Stew threw his arm across the top of the front seat bench and turned to face Jim.

“What do you know? My parents don’t even know I live in this city.”

“And I’m saying that probably worries them,” Stew said.

“Well, you’re wrong; actually it doesn’t. Nice car, Allen.”

“Thanks,” Allen said, struggling to roll down the passenger side window. “It’s called a Pontiac Catalina. It’s been sitting in my aunt’s garage for years. She gave it to me when she passed, but I’m nervous about cars this big.”

“And by the way, Stew,” Jim said, returning to their discussion, “it’s really none of your fucking business about my apartment.”

“Huh,” Stew said, nodding his head. “Well, I guess I thought it was my business, being that I’m in your support group.”

“Support group?” Jim laughed. “Oh so now you’re all about it?”

“I’m just saying, Jim.”

“Now that you want to give me your wise words of wisdom, you’re ready to call it-” and here he raised his fingers in mock quotation, “‘supporting’ me?”

Stew maintained a cool, steady voice, believing this displayed maturity in the face of Jim’s young hot-headedness. “You know your parents would be relieved to see you.”

“No, they wouldn’t. They’d just give me a bunch of crap about being dirty and not getting a job and shit.”

“I bet not,” Stew said, shaking his head. “They’d just be glad to see you.”

“Oh, you’re right, Stew,” Jim said. “Open arms. My Mom would probably bake me a cake and then we’d sit around and talk about all the wonderful adventures I’ve been having.”

“You owe it to them to at least let them know you’re okay,” Stew said.

Jim leaned forward, “What the hell do you know about what I owe my family?”

“Let’s be on our way,” Allen said.

Jim huffed back against the seat and crossed his arms.

Stew turned around and put the car in drive. He looked at Jim in the rearview mirror. “They’d be happy to see you.”

“Oh fuck it.” Jim bumped the ceiling with his fists. “Fine Stew—let’s go over

there. Huh? Let's just go over to their house and see what my goddamn parents have to say, alright?"

Allen turned to Stew. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I think it's a great idea," Stew said.

Flipsie sat in the back of the Dial-a-Cab with her head against the window, watching her neighborhood float past, feeling a lot like Marion Crane in the beginning of *Psycho*. Here she was, a lone, headstrong woman, hitting the road to do what she'd determined she must. She wondered now what her driver, Darnell, whose name she'd read on the certification license screwed into the back of the seat in front of her, what Darnell must have thought when she walked up to his window, gym bag slung over her shoulder, and asked for a ride. She realized he probably wondered what a pretty woman with what could only be a few days worth of clothes on her back, was up to, calling a cab at nine in the morning to take her there of all places.

Flipsie looked up the street and saw a tiny woman hurrying along the sidewalk. From behind she looked a lot like Donna Marsh from the public library, the frizzy perm and the child-like width of her shoulders. But Flipsie realized, turning around as they passed her, that the woman was only a stranger, cardio-walking triumphantly up Baker Street.

Flipsie's mind turned to the note she'd left on the coffee table; she recited the words she'd worried over all morning. She hoped Jerry would understand what she meant by "hemming the loose flap of the heart."

“You want the window down?” Darnell suddenly asked, without registering eye contact in the mirror.

“Oh, no thank you,” Flipsie said. “I wouldn’t want anyone to see me.”

The silence that followed was practically deafening. She knew she’d thrown him a curveball. Now he probably just wanted her out of the car.

Jim’s house was three stories of white brick. A breakfast nook with a floor-to-ceiling window expanded outward from the side of the house facing the street, its interior prominently displayed. When the Catalina pulled into the gravel driveway that ran perpendicular to the lawn, Jim could see his mother and father sitting at the breakfast table, wearing their wire-rimmed glasses, flipping through magazines and sipping wine. He could tell they’d just finished eating, their plates stacked neatly in the middle of the table. He knew there was probably opera music playing on the kitchen stereo. He rolled his eyes at this sophisticated posturing—every meal at that table, just so the neighbors could catch a glimpse as they drove by.

Stew opened the enormous car door and turned to Allen. “You should stay here,” he said. “One stranger at the front door’s probably enough.”

Allen nodded and sat with his hands in the pocket of his sweatshirt as Jim and Stew slammed their doors. He waited a moment, then slid over into the driver’s seat. He watched Stew and Jim walk through a small, iron gate and up a sidewalk to the main entrance at the side of the house.

When they reached the door, Allen could see Jim’s parents as they heard the doorbell ring. His mother set down her wine and looked over her glasses at her husband.

He lowered his magazine and looked over the top of his glasses back at her. Then she got up and disappeared stage right. A few seconds later, he rose and followed, carrying his wine glass with him.

Allen saw a yellow light illuminate Jim and Stew as the front door opened, but he couldn't quite make out their expressions. They both stood there awhile, then walked inside the house, the porch darkening once again.

Allen looked back at the now empty breakfast nook, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. He pulled the key from the ignition and got out of the car.

Jim's parents surprised Stew. His mother was tall and big-boned—a large forehead and squared-off chin. Her overall appearance was not so much masculine as it was unfeminine. Jim's father had a round, almost cherubic face; a red stubby nose and soft, deep-set eyes.

Jim's mother opened the door. "Well-," she said, blinking into the dark. "Jimmy . . . and . . . who's this?"

"Uh, this is Stew," Jim said.

His mother kept the door half shut, her large figure blocking the entrance. She looked at Stew. "I'm Jimmy's mother—Mrs. Smitson." She looked back at Jim. "What are you doing here, Jim? Would you like to come in?"

"Well of course they would, Jeannie," Jim heard his father say from behind the door.

Mrs. Smitson pushed open the door and allowed them to pass by. Stew smiled as he brushed past her. "Hope we aren't interrupting anything."

“Oh no,” Mr. Smitson said with a friendly growl, “We’re just sitting around with our bellies full.” He put a hand on Jim’s shoulder and squeezed. “Hey guy, how are you?”

“Alright,” Jim said.

“Yeah?” His father kept his hand on his shoulder. “Well, what brings you by, son?”

“Oh,” Jim said, subtly dropping his shoulder. “I actually just came by to tell you that I’m going out west for awhile.”

“Out west?” Mrs. Smitson said. “Well, we didn’t even know you were in town, Jimmy.”

“What’s out west?” Mr. Smitson asked, taking a sip of his wine.

“Why, the great American West,” Stew answered. “The Grand Canyon, the Rockies, Death Valley, the Painted Desert.”

Jim looked at his mother, who was looking quizzically at Stew.

“There’s no better way to see it than a road trip,” Stew concluded.

“Yeah,” Jim said, looking at his Dad. “We decided to go on this big road trip.”

“And I’m sorry, who are you?” Mrs. Smitson asked, looking at Stew.

“Oh,” Stew laughed, “I’m a friend of Jim’s.”

“And where do you know him from?” she asked, this time looking to Jim for the answer.

“The coffee shop in Broadripple mainly,” Stew said. “A bunch of us regulars are always sitting around up there, discussing one crazy thing or another.”

Mrs. Smitson glanced at her husband.

“So you’ve been living in Broadripple?” she asked Jim.

“Yeah.”

“And are you working somewhere?”

“Hey-” Jim’s father said, snapping his fingers in the air, “Jim, you want some cowboy boots for your trip? I got this great old pair up in the attic.”

“Actually, we gotta get going,” Jim said, sidestepping toward the door.

“Jim, do you know Dr. Kluer passed away?” his mother asked.

Jim glanced at Stew. “Yeah,” he said, “I knew that.”

“Oh. Well I don’t know if you ever really appreciated him,” Mrs. Smitson said, looking down at the tips of her cream moccasins, “but he really was a wonderful counselor.”

Jim felt his face flush with anger. “As a matter of fact, I did appreciate him.”

“Okay,” his mother said, “I’m sorry. I just didn’t know if-”

“In fact, I think I knew him a lot better than you ever did.”

“Alright,” Mrs. Smitson said, raising her hands. “I just didn’t know if you ever really gave him a chance, Jimmy. That’s all.” She looked to her husband, then back at her son. “I mean, we had to pay you just to go to your appointments.”

The words seemed to have an electricity to them; they hovered and crackled in the air above them. Jim looked down at a blossom on the oriental rug, his face burning.

“Let’s go,” he said to Stew.

“Wait a minute,” Jim’s father said. “You guys want something to eat?”

“We’ve got steak left,” his mother said.

Stew smiled graciously. “Oh no, thank you,” he said, bowing slightly as he

backed toward the door. “That’s fine. But thank you, though, thanks.” He turned and walked through the doorway. Jim was already standing in the dark on the bottom step.

His parents filled the doorway, silhouetted by the light behind them.

“Hope we get to visit more next time,” his father said.

“You be careful, Jim,” his mother called.

“Glad to see you!”

Jim raised a floppy arm behind him as he trudged back down the sidewalk.

From a thicket of berry bushes encircling the front porch, Allen could see Jim’s parents through a window in the front hall. There was Stew, his back toward the window, gesturing as he explained something to the group. Mrs. Smitson listened with an ugly expression on her face, looking as if he were speaking about something quite distasteful. Jim’s father looked slightly bemused, smiling with eyebrows half-raised.

Now Stew turned to the left, apparently to say something to Jim, who wasn’t in Allen’s field of vision. During Stew’s aside, Allen watched Jim’s mother turn her head to her husband and mouth exaggeratedly, what looked to like—“Is he drunk?” Jim’s father grimaced, shrugged, and then looked back at Stew, regaining his pleasant expression.

“Oh my,” Allen whispered into the dark.

Stew decided not to say a word as the Pontiac pulled from the gravel. They drove through the gently winding roads of Jim’s old neighborhood, dubbed “Nottingham Forest,” this etched in whimsical letters on the granite boulders flanking its gated

entrance. It was enough for Stew that Jim's parents had said it. He almost felt sorry for the kid, trying to make everyone believe he took his life so desperately seriously, all the while living with the reality of being spoiled to the point of payment for his privileges.

Jim burned in the backseat, watching the Chestertons' and then the Wasmuths' houses drift by, followed by the Carmichaels' acres of statue-ridden woods and then their gargantuan cottage, a fever dream version of a quaint, French cottage. As the old neighborhood flashed by, the familiar nausea of hatred washed through Jim's bowels. These people, *his parents*, sequestered in their private forest, sitting vigilant on their nests, guarding their eggs. His mother, she knew he wanted nothing to do with it all, and yet she'd said that right in front of Stew. How could she? He hated them both for ever even offering the ludicrous deal. How disgusting, how pathetic!—paying your own son to go to the psychologist. And had he really any choice in the matter—what child, what grown-up could refuse?

* * *

Bill was an amalgam of all the extreme qualities Flipsie associated with the term “truck driver.” Either fast-food obese or heroin thin; either bald-bald or horsehair ponytail. But when all these disparate qualities came together in one man, they cancelled each other out somehow, so that the result was a fairly normal, if not a bit boring, 50-something year old man. Which is perhaps why Flipsie had approached Bill in the first place; sitting in a lump before a plate of eggs in one of the dulled vinyl booths of the truck stop diner. And it's also probably why, an hour into riding in the passenger seat of his rig, after the novelty of the height and size and sound of it all wore off, Flipsie felt something a little like disappointment settle in. The truth, though she did not realize it,

was that the percolation of a small amount of fear was part of what had enabled her to go from the house to the truck stop to the highway like she had. Without it, the vision of her journey, which quivered brilliantly under the influence of fear, dulled a notch, and became vulnerable to boredom or disillusionment—a tail between the legs kind of retreat.

At first, Flipsie had attempted to extract color from the situation, asking Bill questions about possible tattoos, or criminal records, dangerous relatives or life-or-death situations he might have faced, etc. When the personal failed, she asked about the indirectly interesting—highway hold-ups and trucker brawls; nasty pile-ups, dangerous exits, notorious truckers, and contraband hauls.

“You’re chock full of questions, huh?” Bill remarked in a way that told Flipsie he was through with them for a while. “What—you writing a book or something?”

“Me?” She was delighted that such a question would be directed toward her. “Oh gosh, no. I could never—I don’t know, I’m just curious, I guess. Trucking’s this whole other world I know nothing about, you know?”

“Mm,” Bill said, tracking an approaching truck. When it neared, he nodded at the driver just before it thundered past.

“Well, you just sit back and watch then,” Bill said. “It’ll make itself known to you.”

She wasn’t stupid; she got the hint. Re-adjusting the shoulder belt that insisted on crossing her short frame just below the chin, she sighed into the silence that she knew would be hard for her to maintain.

Once the Catalina flashed across the boundary of the city limit, a weight seemed to lift from the car, as if the hand of a giant child had finally released their car, sending it flying forward on its own momentum. The sign marking the arbitrary line that divided the land into “home” and “escape,” offered a sort of psychological relief for each man. Crossing the line meant leaving Indianapolis; heading west from the funeral home, from the gravesite, from the emptiness of jobs and no jobs, from the silent rooms where each man still had to try to sleep, even after all that had happened.

So it made sense when, after rushing past the green sign, Stew fiddled with the radio and then blasted “Take the Money and Run,” Jim popping up from the back seat to come in on “Billy Mac-,” then everyone belting out the lyrics, Allen’s deadpan, deaf man’s yell making the sudden revelry all the more hilarious

The customary optimism and cordiality of the first few hours of a group trip were honored. Allen asked Jim if he had enough room for his legs; Jim wondered if anyone would mind him smoking a cigarette; Jim told Stew he’d drive whenever Stew got sick of it; Allen announced he’d be happy to eat lunch anywhere they wanted; and all the while Stew kept the radio tuner moving according to his passengers’ tastes, while selflessly denying his own.

But by the third hour the novelty of the group car ride had worn off, and the pins and needles that would nettle each of them began to rise from the cracks in the seats. It seemed Allen knew a piece of trivia about every bump that rose from the earth—the oldest water tower in Indiana, the direct translation of a creek’s Indian name, the rate at which a cow passes cud through her GI tract. At first, Stew and Jim felt compelled to respond with interest—“really?,” “is that right?”—but it soon became clear that the ticker

tape trivia would continue with or without an audience. And so Allen's knowledge flew right out the window to travel nowhere with the wind.

Jim, meanwhile, was constantly purchasing and consuming sticky foods packaged in crackling, foil envelopes which once torn open, were gradually manipulated around the disappearing food until they were tossed out the window or dropped to the floor.

Smudges of chocolate appeared on seats and door ashtrays, and even on the steering wheel, which quickly initiated a mandatory driving rule and the purchase of a box of Handi-wipes.

For his part, Stew was unable to gauge how he shaped-up as a road companion, because he was blinded by his opinion that he was a very agreeable one. He was not aware, for instance, that Jim couldn't stand the toe-tapping, wheel-drumming, rhythmical fit that overtook Stew's body whenever a song that struck some rock n' roll chord deep within him came on the radio. Nor did Stew know that when he disregarded the urgency in Allen's request for a pit stop, that his passenger suffered quietly in his seat, his bladder like a tight fist, the quivering muscles sending urgent, maddening signals to his brain.

By far, the most conscientious of the road companions was Allen, who thought very much about his contribution to the car's atmosphere, even before the trip began. He'd determined the night before they left, while folding his clothes into the tissue paper that would keep them neatly separated in his suitcase, that he should try his best to keep everyone's spirits lifted on the trip. Before he went to bed he wrote "Positive attitude" on a yellow post-it note and stuck it to the bathroom mirror. Later, as he lay under his covers, his hands folded neatly across his chest, he remembered something and got up to go back to the bathroom. He took down the post-it note and wrote beneath the first

message, “Keep Stew and Jim from fighting.” He returned to the imprint he’d left in the mattress, and drifted off to sleep, thinking of laughing and eating and sleeping with other people.

It started to rain and Bill switched on wipers the length of crutches.

Flipsie had been staring at a picture stapled to the felt ceiling, just above the rearview mirror. A pale, round-shouldered young woman in a small, black tank top held a sweaty-haired toddler against her hip. A pacifier hung from a chain attached to the collar of the baby’s pink sundress. The picture was overexposed—the woman squinting into the camera lens, the baby’s attention held by something off-camera, which she did not seem to please her. It was obvious to Flipsie that this was the freeze frame just before the tantrum—the pumping legs, the rigid outstretched arms, the violent twisting, and then the long, loud squeal.

“Who’s this?” Flipsie asked, pointing to the picture.

“My daughter and her girl,” Bill said, without having to look.

“Where do they live?”

“North Dakota,” Bill said. “Her husband works for Basin Electric Power.”

“Do you get to see them much?”

“Haven’t even met that one,” Bill said, nodding towards the photo. “Keep asking my boss for a route out that way, but it ain’t happened yet.”

Flipsie wanted to ask why he didn’t just drive himself to North Dakota sometime. “Well, she looks like she’s a great mom,” Flipsie said, wondering how a picture of a woman and her child in a parking lot communicated good or bad parenting. She tried to

conjure up a photograph of herself and her own Mom. A vague image surfaced of herself as a toddler, sitting on a carousel lion, her mother standing next to the animal's giant, painted mouth. Flipsie thought she remembered that she was looking down at her shoe in the picture, while her mother smiled stiffly at the camera. What would this picture say about them?

“My mother and I weren't all that close,” she said.

“Oh?” Bill replied, barely making it a question.

“Yeah,” Flipsie said. “Not like other mothers and daughters I knew. I mean, we never cooked together or went shopping together or anything like that.”

Bill was silent.

“She was a good mother,” Flipsie said. “She just wasn't what I think of when I think of a mother I guess.”

“How did you think of a mother?”

“Oh you know, warm and affectionate and all that. Not my mother. She had this cool way about her, like it was against some principle she had to show much emotion.”

“A principle?”

“Well I guess so—what else would it be?”

“Maybe it was just the way she was.”

“Uh-uh,” Flipsie said, shaking her head. “No. I'm telling you, a person has to work to be that way. It's just not natural. Especially for a mother.”

She was quiet a moment, watching water droplets on the windshield shimmer in the oncoming headlights of another semi. “Okay, here, can I tell you a story about her?”

“Go ahead,” Bill nodded. “It's all there is to do out here, really.”

“Okay. So, when I was in seventh grade I got my period. And I was like one of the first girls in seventh to get mine, so I had not a clue how to use a tampon, right?”

Flipsie slapped her hands on her thighs and leaned forward, laughing.

Bill looked over at her and then back to the road.

“Oh gosh, okay, sorry,” she said, sitting back up, holding the back of her hand up to her nose. “It’s just,” she laughed through her nose. “It’s just, it really just seems like a miracle that any of us ever survive the whole, horrible thing.” She tried to stifle her giggling. “Okay, I’m sorry,” she said, sobering her expression. “Anyways, so, my mother bought me this box of tampons and she hands it to me in the kitchen, telling me to just go read the directions.”

Bill’s face remained flat, his eyes on the road.

“And . . .” Flipsie lost her train of thought for a moment, remembering all the maneuvering on the cold toilet seat, trying to push the painful cardboard inside. “And . . . I’m telling you, I tried and tried for like half an hour. But I just couldn’t figure out how to get that damn thing in.”

Bill heaved a rattling cough from his lungs, then proceeded to choke on its aftermath.

Flipsie waited, turning her head towards her window. “So,” she began again, when the coughing had settled, “finally, tear-stained and frustrated, I called to my mother. And I think she called back to me that she was busy or something, but I called again and told her that I really needed her. And after a minute I hear her coming down the hall, grumbling to herself, and then she pulls open the sliding door and she looks at me sitting there huddled on the toilet, and she puts her hands on her hips.

“‘I can’t do this,’ I say to her in tears. And she just sighs and looks at me with her face tight and angry. ‘Jesus,’ she groans, grabbing the tampon from me. ‘Okay, get down on the floor,’ she tells me. She starts to kneel down on the ground, but I’m just looking at her, totally unsure and afraid.

“‘Come on—hurry up,’ she says, ‘I’ve got dinner cooking. Lie down.’

“So I lower myself down to the pink rug in front of my sink, my Carter’s underwear hanging around my ankles. I’m completely humiliated. And then before I know it, she just pushes my knees up and shoves the thing in.”

Bill said nothing.

“And I remember not even knowing she’d done it. I’m just lying there staring up at the heat lamp, trying not to cry. Then she gets up and I raise my head and look down there.

“‘Well get up,’ I remember her saying. ‘Put your clothes back on and wash your hands, then come out for dinner.’

“And then she shut the door and I just lay there, not ever wanting to come out of that bathroom again.”

Flipsie’s foot twitched back and forth. She looked over at Bill who was looking straight ahead, as if he hadn’t heard anything she’d said.

“Were you listening?”

He glanced over at her. “Yes.”

“Well, you see how she was now?”

He looked back out at the road. “I suppose I do.”

“Okay, that was a really short-lived adios. I forgot my Baklava.”

Stew watched the large-breasted woman walk back past his table toward the cash register. He marveled at the way these waitresses seemed to find it appropriate to yell to one another across the restaurant.

“We knew you forgot it,” the skinny blonde one pouring coffee at the table across from his called. “BreAnne put it in the walk-in.” As this second waitress passed by, Stew tried to get her attention. “Miss?” But her wiry frame brushed right past him, as she laughed out loud at something behind him.

He took another sip of his cold coffee and looked at his watch. Though he’d already settled up, he debated whether there’d be time for a second beer. But then Jim and Allen walked into the restaurant carrying several Wal-Mart bags each, and the cold, brown bottle that was almost in his hand, evaporated with their arrival.

Jim put his shopping bags in the booth and slid in. Allen stopped at the foot of the table, set down his bags, and pulled something out of one. “Here we go,” he said, holding up a box with a metallic blue boom box pictured on the front. “It was the best of the cheaper ones,” he said. “And then Jim got some CDs he likes, and I got two Rachmaninoffs, and we couldn’t find Creedence Clearwater Revival, but we did find this.” He handed Stew a Jefferson Airplane CD, then bent down to rummage through the other bag.

Jim looked across the table at Stew and made the shape of a gun with his hand and pointed it at his head.

Stew nodded with a smirk on his face. He owed Jim for going with Allen. Both of them had needed a break from the guy.

“Well,” Stew said, starting to scoot out of the booth, “there’s 35 more miles till Columbia, so let’s get rolling.”

“Oh, here’s your change,” Allen said, sticking out his hips and digging into his front pocket.

“You hold onto it,” Stew said, noticing that people were watching them. He realized that he, Allen, and Jim made a strange crew, but the way some people stared at them in these small towns made him nervous. He stood up and followed Jim’s big-pants swagger to the door.

“First homo bar’s not for miles!” he heard a female voice call out behind him. Then came an eruption of laughter, overpowered by one high-pitched cackle.

The sleeping arrangements were easily made, as Bill was surprisingly upfront about the whole thing. “We’ll find you a motel near the truck stop,” he’d said, after Flipsie asked a slew of questions about truckers and their sleeping conditions. She learned that Bill’s driving life was meticulously copied down into a logbook that the police or his boss could ask to read at any time. She wondered if her name would appear within its pages. *Picked up female hitchhiker. Approx. weight: 110 lbs.*

Bill told her that truck stops were the preferred locale for parking and sleeping, but the lots filled quickly once the sun started going down. In these lots, there were trucks called “reefers” which were bad to park beside, and men called “lot lizards” who were to be feared and avoided. After hearing all this, Flipsie felt a tiny lump of disappointment in her throat when Bill made clear that she would not be sleeping in the truck. A part of her had wanted to be in the midst of all that activity—the sun setting and

the stream of rumbling semis rolling in off the exit ramp, the giant beasts jockeying for parking spaces. She imagined herself in the passenger seat with the dome light on, watching all the dogged men file into the crowded truck stop diner. And some man would notice her, and then tap another man and point up to her sitting in the lit cab. And soon a whole group of men would be looking up at her, this lone, glassed-in woman, her hair illuminated by the yellow light. And this vision might bring them some comfort—her presence, her smile, reminding them of the softer, gentler life that exists in the space between hauls.

Allen wondered what a stranger would think if he looked through their motel window. He lay on his back on top of the comforter on the motel's double bed, fully clothed, fingers interlocked across his chest. Would an observer think they were three men on a vacation? That maybe Jim, on the floor beneath the in-room sink, was Stew's son. Maybe they would think Allen was Stew's brother. It wasn't likely. Allen knew that his pale, mottled skin looked nothing like Stew's darker, smoother complexion. They were both thin, yes, but Allen's shoulders fell quickly away from his neck while Stew had respectable shoulders. There was a dignity, a strength to Stew's slightness that Allen lacked.

Certainly the three of them did not look like businessmen. No suits in zippered bags hanging from the rod in the open closet, no briefcases at the foot of the beds, no files stacked on the small, round table.

Allen could hear Stew in the bathroom, brushing his teeth with his mouth open.

Then he wondered if someone looking through the window might think they were homosexuals.

In the buzzing light of the bathroom, Stew looked at the loose skin sagging from his ribcage. He needed to eat more meat. He would make them stop at a roadhouse tomorrow. He would order a steak. He paused his brushing to spit, then continued, watching the toothbrush make its neat, rhythmic progress across his upper gums. He looked into his eyes and noticed the red tinge of his corneas. He forced his gaze to stay locked on his pupils. Gary had once told him that a man at peace can look himself in the eyes for fifteen consecutive seconds. It sounded so simple, but every time Stew tried it, just around the eight second mark, something inside him would begin to shift. And he'd feel it threatening to rise to the surface, something swimming and swimming towards his consciousness. And that's when he'd have to look away.

Four hours into their second day together, Flipsie had finally confessed to Bill that she wasn't going to meet her husband in Sacramento. To her surprise, when she told him this, he simply said, "alright then," and continued looking in the side view mirror, trying to negotiate a lane change.

From that point on she'd found herself talking almost non-stop about Howard's death and Kenneth's disappearance and Dr. Kluer's plane crash and the formation of the self-help group. Bill listened passively to the confusing narratives, which often ran concurrently and seemed to mix up names and places and times. His only interruptions were physiological in nature, and he hardly noticed them, as he was used to being alone.

At one point, her chatter stopped abruptly, and she told him that she needed a restroom. Bill told her there'd be a rest stop in ten miles, and the cab went quiet for the longest period in hours.

“You ever heard of what they call an exorcism?” Bill asked after awhile.

“An exorcism?” Flipsie looked at herself in the mirror outside her window.

“Yeah, I know what that is.”

“Mhm,” Bill said, nodding. He kept his big, flannel-covered arms straight out in front of him, his giant hands swallowing the top of the wheel. This position made his shoulders rise unnaturally and the fat beneath his chin fold into several bulging layers.

“Well,” he began, then stopped to allow for a gurgling cough. “Ain't none of my business, but just listening to you talk about your problems, I got to thinking that it might be something that could help you.”

Flipsie felt her heart double beat. She grabbed the armrests of her seat, turned and looked at Bill with wide eyes. “What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing bad,” Bill said, looking at her for the first time in well over an hour.

“Just an idea, like a million other ideas floating around. Don't make nothing change, just 'cause it's out there.”

Flipsie began to inhale short breaths through her nose, trying to catch up with her heaving chest.

“I'm-” she tried to get the words out, “I'm not a bad person.”

“Oh, I don't mean that you are,” Bill said. “You seem like a real sweet lady. But evil rubs up against all types.”

“What?” Flipsie’s voice came out a strangled gasp. “Why are you saying this to me?” She covered her mouth.

“Listen now, I’m not trying to scare you. I’m a man who walks with the Lord, and it just struck me maybe I knew something that could be of help to you. But could just as well be I’m plain wrong.”

Flipsie pressed her hands against her breastbone. “Oh God,” she said. She patted her hands all around her chest, pressing the places where she felt the most pressure. “Oh God.”

Bill glanced at her. “Hey there, calm down now. It’s alright.”

She wrapped her arms around her stomach and leaned forward, pressing her head against her knees. “A demon,” she moaned, “inside of me.”

“No, no,” Bill said. He undid his seatbelt and grimaced as he tried to turn his torso towards her.

Flipsie hit a low, guttural note. She held her mouth open, face against the terrycloth of her sweatpants, and let the animal noise drain out of her—the unusual sound coming from her body, only further convincing her of the possibility. She breathed in and let the howl run through her again, the vibration of her ribcage soothing somehow.

Bill reached a flabby arm across the console and put it down on her back.

“Please. You shouldn’t be afraid,” he said.

Flipsie whimpered into her lap, her pointy shoulder blades rising above her back like the wings of a baby bird.

“It’s alright now,” Bill said. “God will deliver you.”

The monotony of the group was broken just as Stew had imagined it might be, when a wisp of a girl in a pink dress materialized in the horizon at noon on the second day. It was impossible to say how long it would take to reach her—the stretch of barren plain before them making distances difficult to judge.

“Pick her up,” Stew said, sitting up in the middle of the back seat. “Pick her up, Allen.”

All three men were silent, each trying to determine the age of the nearing figure.

In this order Stew realized that: the girl had red-hair, a flat chest, pale skin, thin lips, freckles, blue eyes.

“Thanks for stopping,” the girl said, speaking through the crack in the driver’s side window.

“Jesus, Allen, roll the window down,” Stew said.

Allen dutifully pumped the handle.

“Who are you guys?” she asked, pulling a wet strand of hair from her mouth.

The question made Allen sit back, offering up Jim to answer her.

Stew was thrown by the question for a second, then rolled down the back window. “We’re three mental patients on a mission.” He thought she looked like the kind of girl who could appreciate the absurd.

The girl laughed. “Well, can I join the mission?”

“Sure you can,” Stew said.

She smiled and bent down to pick up her bag.

“I’ll get the trunk,” Jim said, throwing open his door and running around the back of the car.

Christine smelled like a campfire and brought a levity to the Pontiac that had been missing for a day and a half. Careful not to bombard her with questions, they gradually pieced together that she was a 17-year old from Great Falls who was heading to Nevada to deliver soccer balls to an Indian reservation.

“They love soccer,” she said from the passenger seat. “All the websites I looked at had pictures of kids playing soccer on these shitty, grassless fields with flat balls, not soccer balls though—like everything except soccer balls. Wiffle balls, basketballs, those big plastic balls you get out of the crate at Wal-Mart. And oh God, in one picture they were even playing with a plastic Pepsi bottle. Can you believe?”

“How many balls did you bring?” Jim asked.

“Forty. They’re all deflated, but I brought some hand pumps too.”

“That’s a wonderful thing,” Allen said, smiling out at the road.

“Yeah well, we robbed them blind,” Christine said, looking out the window as a herd of flesh-colored cattle flashed by.

“We sure did,” Jim said. From his seat behind her, he watched as Christine’s fingers separated her hair into pigtails—a white part running down the back of her skull.

“You ever heard about the Sachawanee switch?” Allen asked.

She looked at him over at him. “What?”

Stew stuck his hand out the window, swimming it through the wall of hot wind, preparing to zone out for Allen’s monologue.

“In 1877,” Allen began, “a group of settlers who’d set up a community in South Dakota, realized that they’d settled on unusually acidic land. Well, when they realized this, it was already autumn, and there were too many women and children to relocate

very far away. Now, they'd been aware of an Indian community north of the river they lived upon. A hunter, who'd learned a bit of their language, knew that these Indian had been settled there for years, hunting and farming the land."

Jim exhaled loudly and made eyes at Stew, who put a finger gun to his head and pulled the trigger. But Christine was sitting up straight, leaning closer to hear Allen's soft voice.

"So the white men made a deal with these Indians, telling them that their land had been good to them, but that the community wanted to be closer to Pierre, as many of them did business there. So they offered the Indians 30 hides and 40 bags of corn, telling them the corn was from that year's harvest. Well, you can guess what happened next."

"The Sachawanee switch," Christine said. "Oh God, that's so awful." She turned around and looked over the seat at Jim. "Doesn't that just make you sick?"

He pulled himself up and looked into her blue eyes. "Of course it does."

"God, I should have gone there instead," Christine said, resting her chin on the seat back, looking at Jim. "Do you think the Sachawanee are still there?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Allen said.

"I hate us," Christine said. She flipped back around in her seat.

"Them," Stew pronounced. "It's not our fault."

"You sound just like my Dad," Christine said.

Stew felt his persona suddenly whisked out the window. The young-at-heart bachelor, unshaven and unwashed, who'd hit the road with his motley crew, heading who knows where for who knows what, just for the hell of it, was suddenly a middle-class

Dad with a nice car and a retirement plan, a wiser-than-thou attitude and what's worse, probably even a wife.

Assuming he had the best chance, Stew had considered it—sex with Christine. Not because he didn't love Kathy, but because he didn't even feel like Kathy's husband at present. He was a grieving man slipping from the grasp of reality. He was no longer in control of his life, just as he was not in control of this car, or the people it picked up, or the continually westward cities it hurled itself through. He was on some sort of a mid-life crisis joyride, he could imagine explaining to Kathy as she stood in her nightgown behind the kitchen counter.

“Losing your therapist fucks with your mind, Kath. I just completely lost it there for awhile.”

“I thought your midlife crisis was last year,” she would say, her nipples poking through the thin gingham of her white nightgown. He wondered if this always happened when she was angry. Had he noticed it before?

Later that afternoon, Flipsie stood in a daze next to a black hose pumping gas into the tank of Bill's truck. She stared at the waves of molecules emanating from the mouth of the tank, smearing her perception of the nozzle and the rusty door.

A whistle shot through the parking lot. She looked up to see Bill holding open the gas station door, waving her inside with a white, flapping arm. She looked at the meter, which was only now clicking through the 20s, and then stepped out from the shadow of the truck.

“They got a meeting we can go to at five,” Bill said as she stepped past him into a

wall of stale air conditioning. It smelled like all the truck stops she'd been in so far—mint candy covering cigarette smoke covering the overused oil of a deep fryer.

She knew to keep her eyes down when she walked into these places—avoiding the hundred eyes that would shift to her figure: men licking dry lips, men staring out from under the bills of hats, eyes peering at her over food racks, cashiers tracking her ass to the bathroom.

She looked down at the top of Bill's low-slung gut. "Where?" she whispered.

Bill stepped around her and she followed his waddling figure across the linoleum, looking up only once to negotiate her way past two men standing in the doorway leading to the hallway. The men separated to let Bill lumber past, but they stepped back towards one another when Flipsie tried to follow.

"Excuse me," she said, looking at the younger one, who held a toothpick clenched between his rotten teeth.

"Where you going, pretty lady?"

Flipsie looked to the other man.

"Can we do something for ya?" he asked, a smile spreading his thin lips.

Flipsie hesitated. She'd thought about similar hypothetical situations many times on the road. What if a trucker pushed her up against a wall? What if someone followed her into the restroom? What if one of them said something horrible to her? She'd realized there was little her obese, slow-moving escort would be able to do to protect her. And every strategy she played out in her mind ended with her either encouraging or antagonizing her persecutor.

“Please move,” she said to the younger one. But he only gave her a dull-eyed stare and slowly turned the toothpick over vertically in his mouth.

“My son’s a trucker!” Flipsie blurted out. Where had the statement come from?

The older man grunted, then he started sniggering with his mouth close, his shoulders beginning to shake. The other man narrowed his eyes at Flipsie, stared her down for a couple seconds more, and then started laughing too. Flipsie pushed past them as their laughter grew wilder. She heard other men’s laughter revving up too.

She looked to her left and saw Bill dragging his body down a yellow-lit hallway. She could hear his labored wheezing and she realized then that he hadn’t even heard the confrontation in the great effort to get himself down the hall.

It was Topeka and hot and morning, and the Catalina was inching through a traffic jam. Allen was driving because he liked to drive in the morning and because he couldn’t see well enough to drive once the sun set. Stew was laid out across the back seats, a t-shirt covering his face, the middle seatbelt flung uselessly across his stomach. Jim sat in the passenger seat, drumming his hand against the outside of the door. He looked over at the person in the silver Audi next to them. The driver looked a few years older than him, and wore a blue dress shirt and a suit jacket. His windows were up, so he didn’t hear Jim call him a “fucking drone.”

“What’s that?” Allen asked, smiling. Allen didn’t mind being stuck in traffic. In fact he welcomed the break from the nerve-racking pace of the interstate. He hated going so fast, helplessly swept along by the speeding current, his vehicle careening down the road, on the constant verge of a terrible, bloody accident.

“This guy,” Jim said, pointing his thumb towards the Audi. “Look at him. He’s a fucking drone. Probably went to fucking business school and now he’s got the soul-sucking job of milking the system.

Allen leaned forward and looked past Jim. He considered the man for a few seconds. “How do you know that about him?”

Jim knew not to bother answering the question that would only lead to a series of more questions about one of a hundred stereotypes Allen didn’t seem understand. “I just do,” he said.

“He doesn’t know anything. Don’t listen to him,” Stew called out from beneath the t-shirt.

“Stew, would you just sit up and look at this kid?” Jim said.

Stew pulled the t-shirt off his face and looked up at the ceiling. “I’ve got an MBA, does that make me a drone?”

“Yeah, it probably does,” Jim said.

Stew laughed to himself and sat up, positioning his body in the middle of the back seat. “I don’t get it, Jim. What makes you hate capitalism so damn much? What’d it ever do to you, besides give you a comfortable life?”

“I didn’t ask for a comfortable life,” Jim said.

This declaration made even Allen laugh.

“Who says that kind of thing?” Stew asked. “I hate to tell you this, Jim, but martyrdom just isn’t your bag.”

“Look,” Jim said, “you just don’t get it.”

“It?” Stew asked.

“The machine,” Jim pronounced.

Allen leaned his head out the window, then pulled back inside. “Does anybody hear that?” he asked. “Do you hear that person calling my name?”

The car went silent.

“I don’t,” Stew said.

“Oh my God.” Allen stuck his head out the window again, this time pulling his shoulders through the frame, his bottom lifting from the seat. He came back through. “You can’t hear that? Someone’s shouting ‘All-en . . . All-en.’” He made his voice sound far off and small.

Jim leaned closer to his window and listened. “I don’t hear it,” he said.

“You’re sure?” Allen asked.

Jim listened one more time. “Yep.”

Allen chewed at the side of his thumb. “Okay,” he mumbled, nodding, “okay.”

Stew decided to play fair and hear Jim out, thinking that’s probably what Gary had to do with him.

What followed was a litany of accusations. The machine was the rich and the government and the corporations and oil moguls and Republicans and Wall Street, and what we’re talking about here is 9/11, and people not thinking, because if they did they would wonder why the footage of the collapse looks exactly like a demolition implosion, and why some witnesses reported hearing explosions in the basement, and why the seventh World Trade Center building fell.

At some point Stew stopped listening, instead thinking about Gary and how he handled working with these people day in and day out. Listening to them and caring

about them and trying to help them find a rabbit hole back to reality. Stew clicked back into the conversation when he heard Jim's intonation change, perhaps signaling the end of his tirade.

"And that," Jim said, "that is why I hate money and the disgusting way it's distributed in this country."

"Ah," Stew said, nodding. He looked at the back of Allen's head and tried to stop thinking about the one thing he wanted to say to him. "Hmm," he said, scratching the front of his scalp. He tried to think of another reply, something Gary would say, but the tempting one was going off like a buzzer in his head. Fuck it. It was too good of a card. "So then, how does a 20-year-old paid by his parents to go to the psychologist fit into the machine?"

"Huh?" Jim said. "Well yeah, exactly . . . that's what I'm saying. It's disgusting what they did."

"But you accepted it," Stew pushed. "You accepted the same money you despise."

The blow made contact then. A tremor shook the bedrock of Jim's theory. Bewilderment. He couldn't plug in the question, and he couldn't pull it apart. What did he have? What could he say?

"Fuck you."

"Hey—there it is again," Allen shouted, raising a finger in the air.

Stew wondered now if Allen should be driving. "Hey, maybe you should lie down for awhile."

"No, no," Allen said, still gnawing at side of his thumb. "I got it. It's okay."

Jim turned around and looked at Stew.

“Oh,” Allen said, making it sound like a question, “ah,” he looked out the window. “I’ll be right back,” he said, and opened the door.

“Allen!” Jim shouted, as the car started to move forward. Jim grabbed at the wheel, sliding across the bench to get his foot on the brake.

“What the fuck?” Stew shouted. “Wait a minute, what the fuck is he doing?” he said, leaning over the front seat. Jim shrugged and pressed his palm against the soft rubber of the horn.

Allen walked briskly up the line of traffic, paying no attention to the horn blaring behind him. “You’ve got the right idea, bud!” someone yelled from the outside lane. Allen looked straight forward, his eyes locked on a blue Corolla three vehicles ahead. He stepped over the shredded remains of a tire as he neared the car. A young Hispanic woman sat in the driver’s seat, a small girl sat next to her, looking at a picture book.

When Allen approached the window, the woman startled and banged her elbow against the window frame. Her mouth shaped into a little “O” as she rubbed her elbow and looked up at Allen. “What you doing?” she demanded.

Allen stepped back a little and held up his hands. “Sorry,” he said.

A man stuck his head out of the window of the large truck behind the Corolla. “Leave the lady alone,” he shouted. Allen froze, looking at the bearded man’s angry face.

Then he looked back at the woman. “I just want to know what you have to tell me,” he said. The woman’s dark eyebrows came together; then she began furiously pumping up the window.

“You were calling me,” Allen shouted, trying to get the words to her before the glass reached the frame. But it was too late, the window sealed shut, and the woman looked at him and raised her middle finger.

Flipsie pushed open the door to the women’s locker room—which consisted of a lone toilet, a mildewed shower rigged up in the corner, and a mammoth drain clogged with hair at the center of the painted cement floor. For the first time, she thought about women truck drivers and wondered why she hadn’t seen any. She wondered if they felt scared in truck stops like she did or if they just felt left out. She wondered if they looked and dressed like men, and if they were all unmarried or lesbian.

When she came out of the locker room she saw a large man in gray sweatpants and a red t-shirt standing on an old fashioned scale that seemed to be playing some sort of circus music. He was a black man, one of fewer and fewer she’d seen in these places as they moved west.

He looked over his shoulder. “Hope this is gonna show me something better than the last time,” he said. His voice was much higher than one would expect from a man his size. It was a comical voice, stuck in the back of the throat. It sounded like a muted trumpet.

The man’s fat fist pushed two coins into the machine—which lit like a pinball machine and started tinkling out, “All Around the Mulberry Bush.” When the man stepped his mass onto the metal box a slow drum roll began. How humiliating, Flipsie thought. He stood very still, arms hanging at his sides, fingers wiggling in anticipation. Finally a gong sounded. Flipsie watched as his head dropped. He exhaled loudly, frozen

atop the scale for a moment, then he turned to the side and stepped down from the machine.

“No good?” Flipsie asked, feeling compelled to sympathize with someone in his situation. When he turned around, she saw that he was younger than she’d thought, now that she could see his pimpled face. Maybe only thirty or so.

“I bought this fold-up bicycle, and I been riding it in circles round and round whenever I stop somewhere.”

Flipsie smiled, nodding encouragement. “That’s great,” she said.

“And somebody always laughing at me every time. But I tell ‘em, you wait and see, I’m gonna lose all this.” He grabbed fistfuls of belly and t-shirt. “And now look—what good it do me? Huh? I ain’t even lost a goddamn pound.”

Flipsie considered the now silent machine. “That old thing’s probably just off.”

“No it ain’t,” the man said, oddly defensive about it.

Flipsie could think of other explanations, but he didn’t seem to want one. So she asked if he knew where the lounge was. He pointed down a hallway that branched off to the right.

“Thanks,” she said, forcing a laugh as he turned to walk away. “These truck stops are just so big.”

“I’m big,” he said over his shoulder.

A sneeze blasted Allen back to the hot car. He slid up in his seat, feeling

disturbed beads of sweat run down his chest. He blinked away the film of sleep and tried to read the green road sign ahead.

Ludlow.

Three seconds later it clicked.

"My brother's in Ludlow," he said.

"Huh?" Stew asked from the driver's seat.

"My brother lives in Ludlow."

Stew looked over at Jim. Then at the green sign just as they rushed past it. "How come you never said anything?" he asked.

Allen shrugged.

"Wait—what's this?" Jim raised his head from the sweatshirt he'd crammed against the door. "What about a brother?" Jim asked, turning around to look at Allen.

"His brother lives off the exit we just passed," Stew said.

"What?" Jim said, clapping his hands together. "We gotta see him. Allen's fucking brother!"

Allen looked straight ahead. "I'm not sure it's a good idea."

Stew adjusted the rearview to frame Allen. "Come on, he's fifteen miles south. It'd be pretty crazy not to."

"Is he older or younger than you?" Jim asked, alert and alive again.

"We're twins," Allen said.

"Ho-ly shit," Jim said. "How the hell did that not come up in group?"

Allen continued looking out the window. "We're not that close. I haven't talked to him in years."

"Wow," Jim said, "that's crazy."

"All the better reason to stop," Stew said.

"I don't know about that," Allen said.

"Turn the car around," Jim said.

"I don't know if . . ." Allen said.

"Go back—go back!" Jim said, drumming his fists against the dashboard.

"He might not even live there anymore. I really have no idea."

"Let's just go see," Stew said. "Come on Allen, aren't you even a bit curious how's he's been?"

"I guess so."

"Turn this piece of shit car around!" Jim shouted, pounding against the outside of his door.

Stew slowed the Catalina just enough to bring its wide trunk skittering around, sending the back tires off the road and kicking up a wave of dust that excited Jim to the point of screaming, "Fuck yeah!" as he braced himself against the door, feeling like a rabble-rouser in a Steve McQueen movie.

The waif of a man who insisted on filling their tank and checking the oil, mashed his lips together and looked up from the hot engine. "Glenn?" his voice cracked, the loose skin on his neck quaking as tried to hold steady his nodding head. "Tall fella?" he asked, raising the oil rag to the back of his neck.

Stew stuck his head around the raised hood and called to Allen, "Is he tall?"

Allen's answer was lost in the wind.

"What?"

"Taller than Allen," Jim shouted back.

Stew turned to the man. "Not especially."

The man dragged the rag back and forth across his neck. "I seen him go in and outta that café," he said, nodding up the street.

Stew squinted into the sun, looking up the unpaved street. He spotted a sidewalk board that read "COFFEE HERE" in big red letters.

When they approached the building, they saw "Never Enough Nature Coffee Shop" was painted across the dingy glass of the front door. Stew had to shove the thing open, setting off a cacophony of wind chimes when he did so. Pushing aside several large fern leaves blocking the entryway, the men walked into what seemed a jungle of sorts. Twisting, flailing green covered the walls, blocking out the light from the windows and choking the ceiling fans. A handful of patrons sat at round tables scattered across the grimy black and white checkered floor. Stew noticed a chair in the corner that had become engulfed by the vining decor.

The newcomers stood in front of the door. A woman in her 50s, wearing a strapless bathing suit and blue shorts looked up from a game of Solitaire, clutching the draw pile to her chest. Allen studied her skin and thought of a saddle.

A red-bearded man sitting at the table closest to them, kept his eyes on the newspaper spread out beneath his mug. Two other men sat in the corner, playing chess on a board painted onto the tabletop. Jim caught the eyes of the bald player who faced them. The man quickly looked back down at the game.

A woman's voice called out from somewhere behind the back wall of vines,

"They found her!" Jim saw a rustling of ferns behind the counter, and felt a sharp twinge of excitement when a pale girl with stringy blonde hair emerged from the tangle.

"They found a body," she reported, then noticed the new customers. "Oh God. I didn't know anyone was here. Sorry." She pulled her hair behind her shoulders.

"No problem," Stew said.

"We had this bet going," the girl explained, "about Natalee Holloway. You know, that girl from Alabama?"

Stew had no idea what this meant.

"Natalee Holloway," Allen repeated. "Oh yes, she's been missing for fourteen months now."

Jim slid his hands into the front pockets of his pants.

"Yeah," the girl nodded. "Well they just found a girl's body 60 miles off-shore out there. You hear that, Donovan? I told you."

The red-haired man looked up from his paper. "Ain't gonna be her," he said.

"How are you so sure?" she asked him.

"That girl's been shark feed for a year."

The girl put her hand where her hip should be. "Well, I'm gonna think positive about it. I'm not paying you a dime until they're sure."

Donovan harrumphed. "Suit yourself."

The woman in the bathing suit looked up at the men and smiled. "Shannie, don't leave these fellows just standing there. See what they're drinking."

Shannie blushed and pulled her apron flap up from her waist, slipping the neck

over her head. "Oh God, sorry. You want some coffee or something?" She smiled, revealing a crowded set of teeth, which Jim found irresistibly ordinary.

Stew ordered three coffees.

As she turned to get them, Jim stepped forward and asked, "Do you have fair trade coffee?"

The girl turned back around with a brown mug in her hand. "What do you mean?"

Jim blinked several times before speaking. "Uh, fair trade, you know, like coffee that guarantees the beans are harvested by workers . . . who are treated fairly, like paid well and stuff."

"Huh," the girl said. She lifted a large can from the counter. "Umm . . ." she ran her finger over the label. "This says their beans are imported from San . . ."

Jim squeezed his fist inside his pocket, hoping she'd get it right.

"San . . . Joe . . ."

"San Jose," Allen pronounced correctly, keeping his eyes to the ground.

"Oh—hah!—okay, that's Spanish. Okay, umm . . ." She turned the can around, knitting her brows as she studied the back.

"That's okay," Jim said, holding up his hand. "Don't keep looking. It's okay." He pulled out a chair from the table to his right. "No worries. We'll take whatever you got."

The girl tilted her head. "You sure?" she asked. "We've got a couple other kinds sitting in the back."

"Just give 'em some coffee," Donovan grunted. The older woman looked up from

her cards and tsked. She lay down her next card slowly, keeping her eyes trained on the strangers.

The men seated themselves. The card lady, who introduced herself as Verna, asked what they were doing in Ludlow.

Allen's throat tightened.

"Well," Stew said, leaning back in his chair. "We're actually looking for a man named Glenn Lynch."

"Oh," she said, adjusting herself in her chair. She tapped the stack of cards against the table. "And why are you looking for this man?"

Allen felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

"Well," Stew said. He hesitated, then clamped a hand down on Allen's shoulder. "Allen here is his twin."

Allen needed a restroom.

"We're on a trip out West," Stew continued, "and we just happened to be passing by."

Allen looked down at his lap. He was sure now that stopping here was a very bad idea.

"Well," she said, looking at Allen. "That's real nice. But I'm afraid I don't know any Glenns in Ludlow."

Allen looked at Stew. He raised his eyebrows, hoping to signal that he wanted to leave, immediately.

"I should tell you," the red-bearded man said, looking up at Stew, "that that's Glenn Lynch over there." He pointed to the chess player whose back was to them.

The bald chess player looked up at his opponent. "Glenn," he said.

Allen felt his heart double pump as the man turned around.

"What's this?" the man asked, as if he had just become aware of the larger scene around him.

"These men say they're looking for you," Donovan said.

"Oh yeah?" Glenn said, swinging a gangly arm around the back of his chair.

He was certainly no dead mark for Allen, thought Stew. He wasn't just taller than Allen, he completely dwarfed the guy sitting across the table from him. His long legs folded like a grasshopper's beneath him, jutting out from both sides of the table. A thick gray-brown mustache obscured his face, which was as equally discomfiting as the sallow, scarred skin of Allen's face. In this one way they were the same.

"Are you Glenn Lynch?" Stew asked.

"Now just a minute," Glenn said, leaning so that he could see the man behind Stew, hunkered down over his coffee. "Al?" he said. "Is that you?" There was the slightest hint of ridicule in his voice as he peered at his brother, cowering behind Stew. "Well shit, Al. What the hell are you doing out here?"

Allen peered over Stew's shoulder at his brother. "We were just passing by," he said.

"Hah," Glenn laughed. "Just passing by?" He looked at his chess partner. "Now can you believe that? My brother just happened to be passing by Ludlow."

"Where you headed?" the bald man asked, tipping up his chin.

Allen hesitated, so Stew spoke up. "Sacramento. We're meeting up with a friend there."

Jim glanced over at Shannie who was standing behind the counter. He prayed this would be the extent of the explanation.

Allen watched his brother slide his long, bony fingers into the breast pocket of his white checked shirt. He pulled out a pack of Marlboros, nodding slightly, keeping his eyes on Stew. Allen suddenly wanted it to sound better. "She's a woman," he said, "a very lovely woman."

Jim cringed.

"And she went off hitchhiking," Allen heard himself continuing, "from Indianapolis to Sacramento, without telling anybody. So we're trying to catch up to her before something terrible happens."

Glenn gave his brother a quizzical smile as he neatly tapped out a cigarette from the red box. "Well, that sounds like a big adventure," he said. He slipped the cigarette between his thin lips, so that the next words he spoke were hard to make out. "But what I'm wondering is, how does the restaurant fare without their dishwasher?" He cupped his hands around the cigarette and lit it, then elegantly pulled them away like a magician. All his languid gestures--the long-fingered slide reaching into the pocket, the turn of the wrist to loosen a single cigarette, the careful, slow-cupped burn—roused emotions in Allen quite disproportionate to the significance of the minute acts.

Stew felt a repugnance toward this man, who reminded him of a younger boy his mother had made him drive to high school. Though Stew was two years his senior, the boy would get into the car and flop his feet against the dash, then pull back the lever and tilt his seat, all in a way that suggested he believed himself superior to Stew. In the same way, everything Glenn did seem to demonstrate the fact that he believed himself better

than the men before him. Stew wanted to announce that he was once a bank president. See how that shut Glenn down.

But instead, Glenn stood up and moved towards his brother. Allen's muscles tensed. Glenn laid a hand on Allen's shoulder, and looking down at him he said, "Well, I've got to get going, brother. But hey, thanks for stopping by with your friends here."

Allen looked at his brother, blinking rapidly, his mouth slightly open. "But . . ."

"What?" Glenn said. "Did you think we were gonna hang or something?" He smiled. "Safe travel, boys," he said, with a slight nod of the head as he turned to walk toward the door. Suddenly Stew's chair flipped over as he lunged for Glenn, grabbing him around the waist and knocking him to the ground. The women shrieked and the older one yelled something like, "Here, scum!" Jim was out of his seat before Glenn's stubby friend could get up, and he got in one good kick to Glenn's ribs, before the friend barreled into Jim, throwing him into a table and chairs.

Allen rose on shaky legs, holding his breath, and watched, wide-eyed, as the strange turn of events unfolded before him like a dream.

"You know, if you think about it," Jim said, contemplating his green-socked foot hanging out the back window. "What did Kluer ever really tell us that we couldn't have found in the right self-help book?"

Allen held his mouth in the awkward side overbite he made when he was thinking hard about something.

Stew raised a water bottle to his lips and then leaned his head back on the passenger headrest. "Would you have listened to a self-help book?" he asked.

Jim appreciated the contrast of the stark blue sky against the green of the sock.

“Maybe.”

“I wouldn’t have even known what kind of book I needed,” Allen said.

“Oh-ho, I would’ve,” Stew said, looking up at the loose fabric rippling across the ceiling. “The BIG book.”

“The Bible?” Allen asked.

“Oh no, my friend, the other big book. The big book for alcoholics, like me.”

Jim laughed from the back seat.

Allen looked over at Stew. “Didn’t Dr. Kluer want you to read it?”

“No, actually, he didn’t,” Stew said.

“So Kluer didn’t buy into AA?” Jim asked.

“Oh, I suppose he believed in it for some people. But Gary knew, like I knew, that that stuff just wasn’t for me.”

“I thought the whole idea was humility and equality, that kind of shit,” Jim said.

“Look,” Stew explained, “Gary recognized after meeting with me just once that I have a highly analytical mind, like off-the-charts analytical. I see through that AA stuff immediately—it’s like I’m always one step ahead of them. I already know everything they’re going to tell me about myself. I know AA works for a lot of people, I don’t deny that, but it just doesn’t work for me.”

“Because you’re too analytical,” Allen said.

“Right.”

“What he means is that he’s too intelligent,” Jim said.

“That’s probably part of it, yes,” Stew said, nodding. “I’d guess that I’m probably smarter than . . . we’ll say 97 percent of the people at any given AA meeting.”

“So you’re too smart for the twelve steps?” Jim asked.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’ve done steps one through four of the 12 steps, but nothing ever clicks. It’s like I’m just going through the motions.”

“I thought the whole spirit of the thing was humbleness.” Jim squinted into the sun, watching two vultures turn lazy ovals in the sky.

“How do you know so much about AA?” Allen asked.

“I’ve been to a couple NA meetings,” Jim said. “Mostly to track down some people I’d met in various bars. The first time I went, I was just going to stand around outside until the meeting let out, but then I heard chanting coming from inside and got curious. Interesting stuff. The cleanest anarchical operation I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, well,” Stew said.

“Actually, it’s a good thing you’re not in it, Stew. You’re just the kind of guy who could screw it up.”

“Thanks Jim.”

“I’m serious,” Jim said. “You don’t need AA, Stew? Well guess what? AA doesn’t want you.”

“Got it,” Stew said.

“Egotistical . . . capitalist,” Jim mumbled, pulling his foot back inside the car.

“Oh yeah, Jim? You think you’re not a part of the system? Where’d you get those cigarettes you smoke? Huh? Where’d you get those shoes on your feet, Jim? And who you buying your pot from, kiddo?”

“Shut the fuck up, Stew,” Jim said, with dramatic calm.

Allen’s palms began to sweat against the vinyl of the steering wheel. He flipped on the radio. Otis Redding crooned “My Girl,” which made his hands sweat even more because he knew it was a poor selection for the moment. But no one said anything, so he kept the orange tuning stripe where it was.

“You seem to have some trouble living up to your ideology, son. Can’t keep it all straight, can you?”

“Don’t push me, man,” Jim said, pressing his left foot into the back of Stew’s seat.

“I’m just saying *man-*”

“Oh, look at that scarecrow,” Allen said, rapping his knuckles against his window. “Looks different than most. Must be an antique.”

“And this car,” Stew continued, “shouldn’t we be using some kind of corn fuel, Jim? Doesn’t it make you feel dirty, burning this Saudi oil all day long?”

Jim suddenly pulled the lever at the side of his chair, flipping his seat violently backwards and slamming the headrest into Stew’s face.

“Ow!” Stew shouted.

Allen let out a yelp and swerved off the road for a second.

“Dammit, Jim!” Stew held his nose.

Jim flipped around in his seat, pulling the still-pinned Stew’s shirt collar. “I said, ‘Shut the fuck up.’”

Stew looked into his face, trying to regain seniority. “Jim—get out of my face and get your goddamn seat off my legs.”

“Get off him,” Allen said, looking nervously out the corner of his eyes, his hands remaining at two and ten after the off-road shake-up.

Jim shoved Stew backwards and flipped his seat back up.

Stew smoothed out his shirt and looked up at the ceiling, letting out a slow laugh.

Jim glanced at himself in the side view mirror. His stoic face made the sides of his mouth curl against his will. He looked away from his reflection as he smiled, thinking of the absurdity of the seat flip.

The truck stop lounge reminded Flipsie of the bleak waiting room at the auto shop—sink, microwave, water cooler, television bolted to the ceiling playing a talk show no one wanted to watch.

She sat uncomfortably through the meeting, feigning effortless navigation of the dog-eared Bible that the leader, Carlos, had handed her. She kept her eyes open when the men bowed their heads to pray, afraid she would miss some cue that meant praying was over, or that it was time to cross yourself or something.

“How many of you find that it isn’t easy to make time for the Lord when you’re on the road?” Carlos asked. When the other four men raised their hands, Flipsie timidly raised hers, too.

“Hey, ain’t there some companies that don’t make you work on Sundays?” a young man in his mid-twenties asked. He sat hunched down in his chair, his legs spread wide, his shiny, black cowboy boots on full display.

“I’ve heard of a few companies that do honor the Sabbath, yes,” Carlos said.

“One is Brenner Brothers outta Boise, and seems like I’ve heard there’s a few down in Florida.”

A muscular man with a beard and a “Mello Yello” cap leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees and rubbing his hands together. “That’d sure be nice,” he said. “I can’t remember the last time I went to church with the wife and kids.”

“Well, the Lord understands,” Carlos said.

“I have a question,” Flipsie said, raising her hand.

“Yes, please, go ahead.”

“Do you believe in exorcisms?” she asked Carlos.

Everyone in the circle looked at her blankly. Bill cleared his throat. “I’ve been telling Flipsie here that an exorcism might purge a demon that could be tampering with her mind.”

“Oh,” Carlos said, lowering his Styrofoam coffee cup to his lap. He scooted back in his chair, seeming to shrink in on himself, as if resigning from his role.

“Whoa,” black boots chuckled, “ain’t sure we know about all that, lady.”

The oldest man in the circle, who’d kept silent during the meeting, now took off his netted hat and licked his lips as if to loosen them. “I had a brother been exorcised,” he said. He kept his eyes on the hat, rolling its grimy bill back and forth in his hands. “He was always real sick—struggling to breathe all the time and waking up in the nights, just screaming and hollering in his bed.”

“Oh gosh,” Flipsie said, “How old was he?”

“Nine years,” the man answered.

“How awful.”

“The thing is, one day my mother took him on a train up to Utah. Went to see a priest she’d heard could do exorcisms.”

“And what happened?” Flipsie asked.

“Can’t say I really know. When he came home, he didn’t want to talk about it none, and mother said that was his right.”

Black boots stacked one boot on top of the other. “Must of scared him pretty damn bad.”

“Don’t know if it did,” the man said. “He passed away a few months later.”

“Oh,” Flipsie gasped, her hands moving to her face before she could stop them.

“May he rest in heaven,” Carlos mumbled into his coffee.

“But I’ll tell you what,” the old man said. “Never did have another night of hollering. Slept peaceful all the nights he had left.”

“Wow,” Flipsie said, drawing the word out in a whisper. “So something really did happen.”

The old man’s eyes glazed over as he stared at a candy wrapper in the center of their small circle.

“Well, that ain’t for sure,” black boots retorted. “Who’s to say it weren’t just a coincidence?”

“Yes, but,” Bill spoke up, “it certainly didn’t hurt him. The Lord had mercy on that boy, whether it was through the work of that priest or not.”

“Do you really think he had a demon in him?” Flipsie asked the old man, who blinked himself back into reality. He frowned as he thought about it. “Seemed to me for being just a boy, he suffered more than he should of.” He looked down at his lap,

contemplated the worried hat bill. “Don’t know. Maybe every sick child’s got a demon.”

Flipsie felt herself blown back by these words. She didn’t know whether she wanted to cry from sadness or fear. Stuck between the two emotions, her eyes remained dry.

She looked at Carlos and noticed that his eyes had gone wide and his lips had stretched into a wiry frown. It was fear. He probably wasn’t used to Bible study going this way—his meetings were probably simple and comforting, serving to remind lonely, worn-out truckers that they had a friend in Jesus. A few prayers for families and clear roads. A petition for a strained back or high blood pressure or the buddy who’d fallen from a loading dock. And then everyone would go on their way, filled with enough hope to last him till the next truck stop with a neon cross shining in the window. It seemed to Flipsie an easy, chewable faith; an open buffet of tenets. And even though she’d never been to church, she knew enough about God to know that Carlos was a coward.

Stew sat in the rumbling backseat and thought of Kathy, leaning over her Bible in the little blue bungalow. Sitting in an overstuffed armchair, in a white robe, the makeup washed from her face, a retainer wire crossing her teeth. He was sure she was happy, comfortable, at peace. Everything that he wasn’t in that moment. And it was the book in her hands that made her feel that way, and the thing those people had convinced her was in it. When Kathy found church, religion reared its ugly head (the head Stew had only heard about before then) and he had to face the fact that it had now become his enemy.

Are you angry with God? he remembered Gary asking him carefully, quietly,

using the tone he took when he believed he'd honed in on something, when he thought he was asking the "difficult question," the knife that hits the mark and sticks. Stew shook his head. He was fine with God, he said, even if he could never find Him. It was the fans of God—the "fanatics"—who made his blood boil. Those slippery charismatics and two-faced evangelicals who'd spoiled his wife's mind. They'd seduced her and then turned her against him. Whispering into her ear, "You deserve happiness, you deserve happiness, you deserve happiness," until on day she started to believe she was unhappy.

It never occurred to him that Kathy might have walked away for any other reason. His mind was a steel trap like that; he had great control over what self-knowledge got inside and what remained forever circulating in the thin plasma of the subconscious. In the case of his marriage, Stew entertained only those thoughts which kept him blameless.

Jim pulled into the orange light of the filling station, stopped the car in front of pump nine and rested his head against the steering wheel. He stared through his arms at the odometer. 159,016 miles. How many of them had been spent just burning money, bumping around in an un-air conditioned car with two strangers who did nothing to stimulate his intellect, chasing a woman who did even less so? God, he could be finishing the Prussians now, be onto the Romanian philosophers.

"What's wrong?" Allen asked from the back seat.

"Nothing," Jim mumbled.

"Jim wants to go home," Stew said.

"Why?"

"Cause we aren't fucking getting anywhere." Jim sat up and motioned out the

windshield as if the scene before them was evidence of this fact. “We’re no closer than when we were standing in her goddamn kitchen.”

“Oh now that’s not true,” Allen said, with a maternal tone. “Remember that man back in Hallmark who said she’d asked him about the magazine?”

“Fuck, Allen,” Jim said, turning around in his seat, “that’s one person in three days. How many 5’4 women with short blonde hair does he probably see a day?”

“Exactly,” Stew pronounced.

“You-” Jim said, pointing a finger at Stew, “you know this is pointless.”

“Incorrect.”

Allen slowly opened the back door and slid out of the car.

“You just want to stay away from your empty house and your missing wife,” Jim said.

Stew spit out a laugh. “You’re pathetic,” he said, shaking his head.

“You know it’s true,” Jim said. “You can’t handle any of your shit without your little friend Gary.”

“Stop it!” Allen shouted, slamming his fist against the roof of the car. The strength of his voice surprised all three of them. He leaned down and stuck his head in the back window. His face muscles quivered as he looked at Stew and Jim. “Can any of us?” he asked. “I mean it. Can any one of us handle our lives?”

The question silenced the car. Allen pulled away from the window and stood up, leaning his back against the car.

Jim turned around in his seat. Stew stared out the windshield.

“Actually, Jim’s gonna be just fine,” Stew said, staring out the back window.

“Once his parents find him a new shrink.”

“Fuck you,” Jim said, ‘fucking drunk.’”

“What?”

“I called you a fucking drunk.”

“When have you seen me drink anything besides at dinner?” Stew asked.

“No one takes nips from a water bottle,” Jim said, a small smile curling his upper lip at the satisfaction of finally calling him on it.

“What?”

“Allen and I see you taking nips out of that fucking Evian bottle all the time.”

“So? It’s water. I’m thirsty.”

“Dude—we can smell vodka almost every time you get back in the car, Stew.

“Well I don’t know why, because it’s water in there.”

Jim grunted. “You’re shameless, man.”

“It’s fucking water in the water bottle, Jim.”

“Let me see it then.” Jim nodded at the small nylon duffel at Stew’s feet. Jim knew its contents by now: wallet, phone, sunglasses case, water bottle, Juicy Fruit gum.

Stew kept the bag with him every time he moved seats. Jim called it his “man purse.”

“No,” Stew replied. “I’m not submitting to your ridiculous accusation.”

“Guilty as charged.”

Stew scowled and opened the door. “Whatever you wanna think, Jim,” he said, grabbing his bag and stepping out of the car and slamming the door.

“Asshole!” Jim called after him.

Jim was watching the meter, picking his teeth with a plastic straw when Stew came back out to the car.

“Where’s Allen?” Stew asked, opening a bag of BBQ chips.

Jim kept watching the meter, his back turned. He shrugged.

“Well, he’s not inside,” Stew said.

The meter clicked noisily through the numbers. A cat walked out from under a demolished parked car. Jim watched it tiptoe across the pavement.

“Jim-”

“What?” Jim turned around, clearly irritated.

“We can’t leave until we find him.”

“I don’t where the fuck he went,” Jim said.

“Well, go and check around the back of the building. I’ll go back inside and look.”

The man looked 6’4”, glow of a light bulb bouncing off his bald head. He was wearing some sort of Tex-Mex style button-up shirt tucked into his jeans—zigzags of brown and tan, yellow and blue crossing his wide belly. She stands listening to him the way a wife listens to a man she finds endearing, but very confused. Almost like a mother listening to her young child, her eyebrows raised—as if in encouragement of the silly words, an expectant smile on her face, amused, waiting for a punch line—some point to all this ridiculous babble.

The woman has a row of bangs falling just above her eyes, an arch of stiff, sprayed hair rising cheerfully above this—long hair for a woman of her age, fifty-

something. Hair that's gray-brown in color, "dishwater brown" some might call it, hanging straight, hitting just above her moderate chest. A vibrant purple sweater—a long necklace—diamond outline of a heart dangling in the gentle slope between her breasts. Below, black corduroy pants, fitting snug and loose in all the wrong places. A wide face, more yellow than olive-skinned now, probably from years of smoking. Small, unlined eyes and mottled cheeks, tinted a shade darker than the beige make-up coating everything else—covering the scarring of forehead and chin. Some blush, a rosy pink would do her good, but instead this neutral color, washing her out, layering on the age.

Allen's only ever this critical of people when he's watching them through a window. Perhaps similar to the way one suddenly looks differently at a dog when it's sitting behind the glass of a pet store. One takes a closer look at that which is framed; it has been set aside for his consideration.

This was perhaps what drew Allen to windows in the first place—this safe separation from other people. Through a window people became framed specimens, acting out household, acting out family. He wasn't sure what he wanted from his voyeurism in the beginning. It all started when his amputated family—Mother, Glenn, and himself—moved from the lone farmhouse sitting beside Country Road 11, to a 2-bedroom in the outdated suburbs of the city's south side. With the move came a neighborhood, and streets and cul-de-sacs (a wonderful new word), sidewalks and lawns. And neighbors—kids on bikes and swings, mothers calling pets and children from the doorways, fathers pulling into driveways at 5 p.m. greeted by running children and wobbling toddlers. Then every night, as if on cue, all of the families would close up their houses to the darkening night, settling down and settling in, all at once and together.

The people Allen lived with felt nothing like a family—he and Glenn, without bikes or footballs or affection for one another. With only a phantom limb of a father—a slight pain in the chest whenever he pulled the rusted lawnmower from the shed, a fuzzy tingling sensation around the eyes when he smelled tomato juice. Allen and Glenn had a mother, yes, but she was a mother who pulled into the driveway at 6:00 a.m., got out and went to her room to go to bed.

So window watching became a nightly ritual for Allen. In the cover of darkness, after finishing his TV dinner, he would sneak outside and make his rounds. He had his favorite windows, of course. Through the kitchen window at the McDevitts he could watch Mrs. McDevitt make dinner, while Mr. McDevitt sat at the breakfast table, usually smoking a pipe or opening the mail. She always wore a yellow apron that said “Relish the Day” with a picture of a hot dog on it. Allen loved this apron because it made Mrs. McDevitt seem like a fun mother, one who would pretend she was mad at you and then turn around and tickle you to death. In fact, Allen felt closer to Mrs. McDevitt than anyone else in the neighborhood. There were some things only the two of them shared. For instance, only Allen saw the faces she made when she turned around to face the sink. Sometimes Mr. McDevitt would speak in a big puff of smoke and she would turn to the window and roll her eyes. Other times she would turn to the window and move her lips, just barely, as if saying something only to herself. When she did this, a tiny smile would spread across her lips, and sometimes her shoulders would even jump with the hiccup of a laugh.

But the best moments in the McDevitt window were when Mrs. McDevitt would turn to the sink—to rinse a pan or wash some vegetable—and sometimes, only

sometimes, she'd just stand there, letting the hot water run over her hands, and stare out the window. Her face would go slack as if she'd drifted in some kind of trance. The hair on Allen's arms would rise as he closed off his breathing and wondered if she could see him—there in the bushes, just ten feet away. Or could she even see through the window at all? Maybe it was only blackness—just one shade of night when she looked through the glass. Or maybe she was only looking at her own reflection—the steam from the water floating up past her face, the words on her apron running backwards in the window. Whatever it was that happened in those moments, at that point in his life, those were the times Allen felt closest to someone.

* * *

After waiting twenty minutes at the gas station, Stew and Jim got in the car and drove up and down the lifeless streets of little town huddled around a small, white church. It didn't take long to cover all the streets. They didn't find him. Without discussion, Stew turned the car around and they traced the same course again.

Jim spotted Allen coming up a driveway in a small, ratty yard with pinwheels and American flags stuck in the grass where perhaps a fence would go.

“What are you doing?” Stew shouted out the window, pulling to a stop.

Allen kept his hands in his front jean pockets and walked toward the car with his head down.

“Where the hell were you? We've been ready to go for like forty-five minutes now.”

“I went for a walk,” Allen said.

“A walk?” Jim scoffed.

“Yes.”

“Well next time tell us, instead of slinking off like some weirdo,” Stew said.

Allen opened the back door and got in the car.

“What were you doing in that driveway, anyways?” Jim asked.

“I thought I saw something,” Allen said.

“Huh?” Jim asked.

“A cat. I thought I saw a dead cat back there.”

* * *

Allen had been caught several times as a child—large-jawed fathers suddenly lurching from Lazy-Boys, banging on the windows, their booming voices saying “Get outta here” and “Calling the cops.” These were terrifying moments, when the specimens came through the glass, when the exhibit became alarmingly real and the observed turned on the observer. Once this happened of course, the house became off-limits, the windows as good as painted black. And that was fine with Allen, because he didn’t want to look through those windows anyhow; those were the places where the spell had broken.

* * *

“Fearlessly yourself, right?” Flipsie’s voice sounded thin and weak on the crackling line. “Well I can’t be myself if I’ve got this thing inside me.”

She had finally called, and Stew had to keep her on the line. He had to keep his cool, which meant pushing back the bile that was bubbling up inside him. The old, acidic anger. Those fucking evangelicals.

“Flipsie,” he said, “this place could make things much worse. You’re risking your stability.”

Her voice was far away. “I’m risking it if I don’t go.”

Stew heard a man say something about chicken wings in the background. Then a sound like Flipsie was muffling the receiver with some piece of clothing.

“Hey Stew?” She was back on the line. “I’ve gotta get going, okay? Tell Allen and Jim about it. Please, think about coming.”

“Wait now—what’s the exact name of the place?”

“I don’t know—but it’s in Scagsborough, Arizona,” Flipsie said.

“Scags-bur-rrow?”

“Promise me you’ll think about coming, okay? It might be just what we all need.”

“Flipsie wait—” Stew said, struggling to keep her on the line. “What do you think Gary would say about this?”

“I already know what he says. Give everybody a hug for me, Stew—gotta go.”

“Peck, P-E-C-K,” Allen said, leaning over to look at Stew’s monitor.

“Communication Junction” seemed to be Montoya, New Mexico’s portal to the greater world. Three ‘94 computers (one labeled “Out of Service”), a dusty fax machine, and two silent copy machines awaited the citizens of Montoya. So did the elderly clerk, who seemed to work in a state of half-blindness—squinting continually to perform his duties.

Stew typed “Gregory Peck” and clicked on the first site that came up. A picture of the severe, young doctor slowly downloaded.

“‘People of the Lie,’ have you read that?” he asked Allen.

“No, but I think that’s the book that introduces his theory.”

Allen’s own search—“exorcist + Scagsborough, Arizona”—had returned a link for the Scagsborough Holy Church of the Divine. When the church’s home page loaded, a fourth of the screen was a picture of “Nestor Prince, Head Pastor”—a pale, red-bearded man with shining hair, neatly combed back. Allen imagined him with a headset microphone, striking the forehead of a quaking woman.

“Okay, listen.” Stew read from his screen: “It is my experience that there are certain psychological conditions that simply cannot be explained by traditional psychiatry.”

Jim, standing computer-less behind them, leaned over Stew’s shoulder.

Stew continued, following the words with his finger pressed to the screen: “But these cases of demon possession are extremely rare.”

“Okay, this guy’s nuts” Jim said.

“Then it says-” Stew continued.

“Hands off the screen,” the old man suddenly barked from across the room.

“Whoa, eagle eye,” Jim muttered, which launched Stew into a fit of coughing.

Allen scribbled down the Holy Church of the Divine’s address on the back of their receipt. He decided against showing Stew and Jim the picture of Nestor Prince.

Bill passed Flipsie off to a female trucker in Laredo. Even though he told Flipsie it was because he had to go north for a pickup in Idaho, she feared the hand-off had something to do with the tampon story.

Georgie was this trucker’s name, and she loved the Thirsty Tortoise burger chain.

She insisted they stop and eat there for every meal. Flipsie thought all the food looked the same shade of orange, and in one toilet she found a small pinch of bowel of the exact same color, and that was the end of her appetite for the Thirsty Tortoise. But she didn't complain because Georgie was friendly and had a husband who'd died too, and it was nice to talk with a woman who didn't know what to do with her husband's clothes either.

Flipsie told Georgie about going to find Kenneth.

"Well, at least you got a son to find," Georgie had said.

Flipsie also told her what Bill had said about exorcisms, which made Georgie extend her upper teeth over her lower lip and make a sucking sound.

"What are you thinking?" Flipsie asked, after Georgie continued in this manner for a while.

"Seems to me you ain't gonna be of use to your son 'less you get yourself right. See this?" She reached a short, chubby arm to grab at a laminated card hanging from the rearview mirror. Flipsie had noticed the card earlier—a penciled drawing of a round, young woman draped in a dark cloak, standing in a wooden boat. She held a large gold cross to her chest and gazed out at the sea with a look of strength and perseverance.

"Read this." Georgie flipped the card around so that what looked like a poem faced Flipsie.

Father You hear the cry of the widow.

I do not fear, neither am I confounded nor depressed.

I forget the shame of my youth

and remember no more the reproach of my widowhood;

for you Oh Lord, are my Husband.

Something about the words “widow” and “husband” written in such sweet, gentle script pricked Flipsie’s heart. Widow, widow . . . A Prayer for the Widow. The word objectified the ache inside her—someone knew, someone understood that her life deserved a prayer.

“When Terry died I thought I’d never leave the house again,” Georgie said. “Kept getting up before 5:00, making enough coffee for two, watching the weather report. One day his brother calls me seeing if I need help selling Terry’s truck, and I just lost it. Went through his underwear drawer, different pant pockets and jackets looking for those keys. I found ‘em in his trucking cap, and the minute I got them in my hand I knew how I was gonna do it.”

“Do what?” Flipsie asked.

“Keep going,” Georgie said.

Flipsie wondered what would have been the alternative.

Georgie hit the steering wheel and let out a smoky cackle. “You know, I put that hat on and called up Terry’s brother and told him that truck wasn’t going nowhere.”

Flipsie followed suite, chuckling and brightening her expression without knowing why she was doing so.

“Four months later, I’m settling into this big ol’ sunken imprint in Terry’s driving seat, heading to Billings on my first route.”

“Wait, this is Terry’s truck?” Flipsie asked, setting her hands on the ends of the armrests and squeezing. Georgie nodded and the atmosphere of the cabin shifted—everything was suddenly worn and sentimental—the crackling CV radio he’d held, the darkened leather on the steering wheel where his grubby hands had gripped the red

leather. The seats, her seat—where Georgie had probably sat once, looking over at her husband as Flipsie now looked over at Georgie.

Georgie was like the truckers in movies, Flipsie thought. She talked about her life like a movie cowboy or a war vet—in a gruff, nonchalant tone that seemed to transmit that none of it really mattered. As if she, they—the movie cowboys and the vets and the truckers—moved fast enough to keep pain from catching up with them. Dr. Kluer would have brought that up immediately—*your voice doesn't match your insides*.

“Your voice doesn't match your insides,” Flipsie said, without knowing where she'd go with the observation.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Georgie said, glancing at Flipsie.

“It's just something my therapist said to me once.”

Georgie grunted. “Right.”

“It really ended up making a lot of sense to me,” Flipsie said. “When I was ready to hear it.”

“Well good for you.”

“Oh, I didn't mean anything by it,” Flipsie said. “It's just that, you guys—”

Georgie shot her a look, raised an eyebrow as a warning.

“People like you and Bill,” Flipsie sped up. “You're so good at helping people and I—”

Georgie reached up and switched a flip on a metal box above her head. A twangy male voice filled the truck's cabin, belting a chorus about “the checkerboard way she loved.”

“I'm just trying to help you,” Flipsie said over the music.

“Better just worry about yourself,” Georgie said flatly, keeping her eyes on the road as she adjusted the volume.

Flipsie could feel her throat tightening, her chest brimming with despair—why didn’t anyone ever want *her* advice? Why was everybody always telling her the way things were? Why didn’t she ever get to tell somebody how it was? What was wrong with her?

Some people just aren’t ready to stand still with themselves. Kluer’s words surfaced from the muck at the bottom of mind. They calmed her. She felt she could rest in the confidence of a knowledge that Georgie didn’t have. She could even feel sorry for Georgie, if she wanted to.

The church parking lot held only a few cars at that late hour of the afternoon. Stew pulled the Catalina between the white lines, three spaces down from a dusty, black truck. A few large cages sat in the truck’s bed; heat-withered dogs looked out from them with yellow eyes.

He shut off the rumbling engine, and the men sat in silence as the desert air consumed the car. He counted in his head—it’d been four, no five years since he’d last stepped in a church. And it’d been six weeks since he’d last seen Kathy. He wondered what she’d think of what he was about to do—disrupting a holy ceremony, trying to save another woman from a church.

Allen leaned his head out the passenger side window so he could get a better look at the Scagsborough Holy Church of the Divine. It was a beige stucco building with a faded, red-tiled roof. An ornate, rusty cross rose above the roof’s apex, a bird’s nest

spilling over the left arm.

“So,” Stew said, turning to face his passengers, “unless they do something crazy, we sit and we watch, and the minute it’s over we grab her and get out to the car.”

“Define crazy,” Jim said.

“Christ, I don’t know.” Stew sighed. “Like if they get out snakes or sickles or something.” The adrenaline was steadily pumping into his bloodstream. He was sweating and he couldn’t explain to them the craziness that could go on in these places. “Look, just, if it seems like they might hurt her, ok?”

Allen remembered the picture of Nestor Prince and wondered if he looked like the kind of guy who could physically harm people. “We should go,” he said, pulling the door handle and climbing out of the car.

Jim got out too. He stretched his arms skyward—his eyes momentarily looking into the sun. Then his vision went all white. A current of fear fired across his neurons—a half-formed notion that the devil, a demon, some evil in this place had just taken away his vision. As quick as he thought it, spots of color began filling in the white void. He took a deep breath and felt the blood rising to his head again.

Allen put a hand to his brow and squinted at a sign nailed to a post near the entrance to the church. “What’s that say?” Stew called across the top of the car. He was standing outside of it, fiddling with his duffel bag on the roof.

““Sunday services,”” Allen read. ““Ten o’clock. Public exorcisms. All are welcome.””

“Are you kidding me?” Jim asked, walking towards the sign. “*Public exorcisms?* That’s like, Inquisition shit.”

Allen's mind flipped through images of black hoods, fires, pulleys, ropes.

Stew shut the car door. "Don't worry," he said. "These kind of people are always *very* friendly." He smiled smugly as he said it. The cynicism felt good, like it always did.

As they walked up the red-painted steps leading to the church entrance, Jim thought of blood rushing down them. The great wooden doors were covered in carvings of tiny, flying creatures—some playing instruments, some singing, some riding on top of one another.. A tingle of fear ran across Stew's scalp. It was hard to tell whether the beings were meant to be angelic or demonic. He grabbed the wrought-iron door latch and tried to lift it. But it wouldn't move. He tried the other latch, which wouldn't lift either.

Two doors at the back of the building were covered with same eerie carvings and were locked as well. Stew banged his fists against them..

"Let's just wait in the car," Jim said.

"I've got an idea," Allen offered, stepping from the sidewalk into the ornate landscaping that ran the perimeter of the building. Stew and Jim watched as he squeezed between two giant jojoba bushes and disappeared. "There's windows back here," he called.

"Is he serious?" Stew asked. Jim shrugged and stepped into the bushes.

There was much maneuvering around large, paddle-shaped cacti. Stew and Jim watched Allen slip deftly beneath the appendage of a six-foot cactus, then crouch down against the building. He put his index finger to his lips. Stew held his breath and watched Allen rise slowly up the wall, inching his line of vision just past the windowsill. Then suddenly he shot up. "Empty office."

The other windows held the same disappointment—abandoned children’s nursery, another dark office, an impressive, but empty sanctuary. All three of them stood looking in the last window for awhile, staring up at the sanctuary’s high-pitched, wood-beamed ceiling, which Allen thought looked like the bow of an overturned boat. They were hoping that any minute, a huddle of black-robed priests might enter the sanctuary, leading Flipsie down the middle aisle.

Allen leaned closer to the window, his nose almost touching it. “I’ve been looking through peoples’ windows since I was eleven,” he said. “I never told Dr. Kleur that.”

No one said anything for a while.

“Is that what you were doing when we found you in that driveway?” Stew asked.

“Yeah,” Allen said.

Stew considered the gravity of this admission. “I’m glad you told us,” he said. Then he wondered if he really meant it.

Allen looked down at their shoes standing on the rose-colored gravel.

“I’ve looked through a couple windows,” Jim said. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Oh yeah?” Allen said in a daze. He looked back up at the window and saw three faint figures in the glass.

Resigned to wait in the car, they rounded the far side of the building only to find that this side had a small, weathered door with no carvings. Only a latch handle, which opened. The atmosphere shifted for Stew as he stepped inside a small, dark vestibule that appeared to open into the sanctuary. He walked through a doorway and ran his eyes

across the rows and rows of pews, the long gold cushions covering the benches, the offering envelopes and pencils in the plastic holders.. He thought of Meghan drawing the hangman's gallow, counting out the letters, then carefully setting the envelope on his knee, placing the little pencil delicately on top. The could see Kathy looking at him over Meghan's head, cracking a devious smile, shaking her head.

“Stew, come on,” Jim whispered hoarsely, leaning out from another doorway, closer to the back of the sanctuary.

They decided to walk down a hall that branched off from the back of the sanctuary. A narrow Oriental rug ran its length before the hall turned a corner. Stew walked behind Jim and Allen, watching Allen's short-clipped, shuffle; Jim's long, cool gait. As they moved forward, Stew could hear the sound of muffled voices coming from down the hall. His adrenaline surged as Jim and Allen broke into a half-run. He picked up his pace too, trying to hear Flipsie's voice in the muted discord.

They stopped at a wooden door with a gold plaque on the wall next to it. “Traitus Prayer Room.” The voices were clearer now—sounds like pleading, like moans. Jim put his hand on the door knob. Stew's muscles tensed. He locked eyes with Jim and nodded.

Jim silently turned the handle, opened the door just enough so they could see . . . Flipsie, sitting on a metal chair, wearing a black robe. Nestor Prince kneeling before her, his ginger head bowed, his freckled, red-knuckled hands clasping her smaller ones—a string of syncopated nonsense pouring from his mouth. Four others in dark suits surrounded her—hands covering her body—head, neck, shoulders, back, knees. Hands hard to trace to bodies, because of so many fingers, so many palms and wrists.

A woman with dark hair pinned in a lofty bun, crooned softly, her eyes raised toward the ceiling. A teenage girl crouched like a child at the foot of Flipsie's chair, her thin arms crossed on Flipsie's knees, her head bent forward. She seemed to be cheering in a fervent whisper, "Yes Lord, yes Lord, hear us Lord, hear us now." A heavysset man stood behind Flipsie, his hands covering her shoulders, shaking his head defiantly, his eyes squeezed shut, a whimper trying to push through his closed lips. Another man, white-haired and feeble, stood next to Flipsie, bending back and forth from the waist like a sapling blowing in the wind. He whispered words in an ancient and terrifying language.

And there was Flipsie, sitting in the middle of that spiritual battle—her face tilted upward, her skin glowing like yellow pearls, her hair swept back from her face, as if by some phantom wind. All three saw the way her eyes shone, focusing on something that seemed to hang just before her. They watched as she reached her hand out to the empty air, her eyes wide, as if she were seeing something magnificent.

Stew put his hand on Jim's shoulder. He told him they should shut the door.