

Seven Tales
from New Austin

By Robert Ki

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BAD DECK OF CARDS

New Austin was a nowhere town Texas-adjacent. It did not pan out the same way as New York or New Orleans had. Real Austin in Real Texas kept the general public's mindshare. Neighboring towns often imagined this to be of great concern to New Austin's population.

J♣

At the auto shop on Orchid, Davey laid under a two-ton gorgeous beast. He wore one layer of grease, one layer of a smile, and one layer of a beard that he thought did a good job of covering the grease and the smile. He would never admit it to another living soul, but he loved wrenching on the new cars that came in, and not just the old models. He felt like if he ever did admit to liking the new cars, someone might notice, and from then on only rumbling stacks of rust would hurk their way into the shop. So he smiled openly while he laid on his back under the 2000+ models, though before coming out, he prepared a scowl and a rant about how they didn't know how to make cars goddamn sensibly

anymore.

During all his time under the new cars or the old ones, Davey was pretty sure he hadn't thought the name 'New Austin' once.

9♥

In the library downtown, James Gowald shelved another book. This was a public library, and anybody was welcome, of course. Nonetheless, James found himself almost exclusively kept busy by Miss Ruiz and Miss Beatrice. As James shelved novella twelve in the *Leonardo's Fortune* series, he made a note to himself to put in an order for novella thirteen. He did consider whether or not Miss B or Miss R would think of this as unlucky, but decided that if they did, they could simply choose not to read it. Either way, he would procure it for them.

While deciding all of this, the name of New Austin never quite crossed James' mind.

2♠

A white '84 no-model car turned off Bush and onto Sakura. The driver had one hand loosely on the wheel, which rattled from the death metal on his radio. The sound also rattled the driver's brain and groin. As he trolled through the neighborhood, head turning side-to-side, he did wonder about how New Austin had gotten a Sakura Street. As an outsider, the names were apparently of great concern to him. He scratched at his stubble, and it tingled his fingertips in a way he didn't like, so he put his free hand back down to his lap, resting his wrist on top of his erection. When he spotted a cop car coming down the road, he waved to the officer with his wheel hand. The cop waved back. New Austiners (-ites, -ians, -inos, etc.) were simple folk. Simple-minded. Had to be, in a town with that name. The driver tugged at the corners of his black clothes. They fit wronger than they had that morning, for some reason. The man scratched his temple with his wheel hand, while the meth pipe in the car's center console rattled from the metal on the radio.

10♦

In her office above the café downtown, Kaufman slammed

another hard drive against the edge of her desk. Cracking one of these things was supposed to be a play on words—most nerd things were—but in this case, she wanted information destroyed, not recovered. Lawyering gave her a workout sometimes. Thinking about Austin Texas did not. New Austin as a name rarely crossed her radar either, except in the case of her encyclopedic knowledge of New Austin's law, in which the name of the town was mentioned quite frequently, though understandably, never in contrast to Austin Texas (The 'real' Austin according to outsiders. It was also the real Austin according to insiders: there was no disagreement here, though outsiders were often unaware of this).

J♠

Janie stood on the beach of Lake Rabbit, holding her hands together behind her back. To her, if she held them behind her back and didn't think for a while, she could feel like she was holding Lisa's hand again.

She sighed, turned away from the land, and walked back into the lake, her hair pooling up and floating against the tops of the waves when her head went under, again. She wondered if in another parallel universe, maybe Lisa was standing on the sand, holding her own hands together in front of herself and thinking of the girl who drowned.

6♣

Nearby at the DeCroix's farm, Chase was carrying hay over to the horses. He was the only child of a farmer, which he had heard was unusual, and that made him feel important: he felt like he was doing the work of five kids all at once. While he heaved another bale of hay into the feeder, he imagined a brother throwing seed to the chickens, a sister leading the sheep around the small pasture, and another sibling mowing grass somewhere.

As the DeCroix's only child to make it past a year, Chase would soon get around to doing these chores himself.

6♠

In the residential part of town, where all the houses were, Clay added his collection of Pokémon cards to his soon-to-be bindle,

which for the moment was still just his bedsheet, spread all the way out across his bedroom floor. So far he had put two library books into the bundle; three changes of clothes (not his nicest clothes, since he would have to fit in with the hobos); one wooden dagger to fight off wild animals with, and one lightsaber in case his friend Chase joined him in homelessness, and needed something to defend himself with too; and of course the first item that had gone into the bundle, a box of macaroni and cheese that Clay had snuck out of the kitchen after he'd walked home from school that day.

The light above Clay's head flickered as he heard a crash. He looked up to see the light fixture in his ceiling wobble back and forth. On the floor above, he heard his older brother stomp into the living room and try to break up his parents' yelling.

In a shouting whisper under his breath, Clay called all of them stupid motherfucker jerks, and he pretended that they could hear him, and that he won.

Then he remembered that he was winning for real. He was fuckin leaving.

6♥

Nearby, a boy the same age as Clay named Brandon was in his parents' room, wearing his mother's clothes. He did this sometimes when he was home alone. He did a girl voice as he pretended to flirt with the boys in his class, because he thought it was an absolutely hilarious thing to do. When he heard the sound of the front door opening, he changed back into his own clothes as fast as he could, and then jumped into his parents' bed and pretended to be asleep.

8♣

A few blocks over on Sakura Street, the squad car and the out-of-town car passed each other for the second time. Again, the bearded Satan-looking man waved to the officer. Again, the officer waved back. The officer noted the bent antenna of the man's car, but otherwise, the vehicle seemed in fine enough repair. No fix-it tickets to give Davey any business, although Marley (the officer) would be sure to mention the antenna the next

time he saw Davey anyways.

Marley glanced around as he drove, checking. It was what he did day in and out: “Just checking, sir/ma’am/son/sweetie.” And ninety nine times out of a hundred, things were fine. Marley checked his rearview. A local boy was walking down the sidewalk, with a bindle slung over his shoulder. A gust of wind blew the big trees in the lawns. The out-of-town car had pulled over on the side of the road; definitely lost. The next time Marley circled around, he would be sure to stop and offer directions.

A♥

Dr. Robinson sat on the floor by his front door, putting on his shoes to go make a house call to Miss Beatrice on the other side of town. As he finished tying the first shoe’s knot, he glanced up out of the window by his front door, and saw a car he didn’t recognize parked on the street in front of his house. Clay, a local boy, was walking past it. The doctor looked back down at his feet and hands, and finished tying the second shoe’s knot. When he looked back up again, the car was driving away.

Dr. Robinson thought, for a moment, that he had seen Clay in the car’s passenger seat as it was leaving.

He opened his front door, and looked down the road in the direction the car had gone; it was turning off of Sakura Street, onto Marble. Clay was nowhere to be seen, but then, the local boys often cut across people’s yards when out playing, and so there were many ways that Clay could have disappeared.

Dr. Robinson kept these thoughts in the back of his mind as he grabbed his bag, and walked to Miss B’s house. He thought that on the way back, he might make a social visit to Clay’s family’s house, and see how they were getting along.

Q♦

In her bakery downtown, Miss Ruiz pulled a tray of assorted muffins out of the oven. After setting the muffins on the decorating counter, she put a tray of tarts into the oven in the muffins’ spot, and closed the oven back up.

While the muffins cooled, she had a free moment. She walked to the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting area, and stood

there looking at the four people eating in her shop that afternoon.

One of them, Miss Kaufman, noticed Miss Ruiz watching from the doorway. Mid-bite, Kaufman paused and smiled around her bear claw. With her free hand, she gave Miss Ruiz a small wave. Miss Ruiz smiled and waved back, and then stepped back into the kitchen to finish preparing the muffins.

A♦

At the gas station by the highway, a kid named Jory looked down both ends of the aisle he was in, and then stuffed a bag of sour gummy worms into each of his back pockets. The clerk eyed Jory as he left, but did not stop the unaccompanied boy with the short blonde hair.

A♠

The clerk, after watching the boy leave the shop, returned his attention to ringing up the customer at the counter, who had purchased four packs of cigarettes. The man would be back the next day for another four packs, as he always was.

“You share these?” the clerk asked.

The man, making no attempt at a friendly expression, looked the clerk level in the eyes.

The clerk, eventually picking up on the heavily-implied ‘no,’ looked down. He handed the man his change.

The man turned and walked away.

6♦

Lisa sat in the bushes behind the gas station, looking out at the playground across the street that had the green slide. Specifically, she was watching the older kids in the parking lot, who were trying to do skateboard tricks. She wanted to learn to do them too. But she was nervous about talking to them. She was very, very afraid of making friends.

JOKER

One of the older kids at the playground, having found the stub of a piece of pink chalk, drew a dick on the parking lot.

10♠

Janis, hearing a knock at the door, set the stovetop on low and went to see who was visiting. On the way, she put on a smile and brushed back the strands of her hair that had escaped from her ponytail. When she opened the door, she was a bit surprised to see Dr. Robinson standing on her porch.

“Hi, Phil,” Jan said.

“Afternoon Janis,” the doctor said. He stood with one hand in his pocket, the other hand tapping absently against the side of his leg.

“Care to come in? Just spaghetti tonight, but you’re more than welcome to some.”

“You’re very sweet Mrs. James,” the doctor said, “but I just stopped by to say hello. I saw Clay out earlier, and thought to see how all of you have been.”

As Janis and Phil carried on, Janis bit her tongue on the fact that her son was supposed to be grounded. She would sort him out when he came home, if he wasn’t back already.

3♣

In New Austin’s woods, a hunter sat below one of his deer stands—he had tried to climb it three times, but had fallen off each time before reaching the top. He figured the ladder was too wobbly, and that he would have to fasten it better at some point. In the meantime, he took another drink from his flask.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a squirrel in a tree.

He lifted his rifle, shot it more on instinct than on any actual use of the rifle’s sights, and then stood to go collect the rodent.

2♣

Adam DeCroix, sitting on the back porch of his farmhouse, heard a gunshot in the woods. He took a long drag of his cigarette. He thought for a moment about his older brother Arthur, who had died in Vietnam.

It was Adam who had been drafted. But Arthur was the one who wanted to go, and so he went—and died—under the name of his younger brother.

Officially, the United States government feigned ignorance to

all of this, and still listed Adam DeCroix as having been Killed in Action in 1968. This did not exempt him from being taxed posthumously for revenue earned on his farmland.

7♥

In the narrow alleyway between the café and the bakery downtown, Erica reached under Jillian's shirt and felt her girlfriend's breasts. They had been dating semi-secretly for three weeks. While at the bakery, they had each realized a sudden urge to take their relationship to the next level, and did not want to risk losing the feeling in the time it would take to walk back to either of their homes.

They had both lived in small, homophobic towns all their lives. After thirty-some years apiece of this, finding each other had been like finding a breeze of fresh air in a mineshaft; beautiful and refreshing, but with an immediate fear about stifling it if breathed too quickly.

In the bakery, Erica had, metaphorically, realized that she and Jillian were *not* as far underground as they had felt they were, and that breathing was actually okay.

JOKER

Jerret stood behind Ben while Ben drew a second chalk dick on the playground parking lot. As Ben worked on his hands and knees with his legs spread wide apart, Jerret kicked Ben in the balls.

4♠

In his living room, Mitchel set down his game controller and picked up his bong. As he smoked, he thought about maybe doing something later.

10♣

In her bedroom, Annita dropped her guitar pick onto the ground: she had always found the act of dropping her pick mid-song extremely freeing. With no pause in the beat, all five digits on her right hand began touching on the guitar's strings with masterful precision. She stopped imagining herself on a stage with

a band, and instead lost herself in the music for its own sake.

5♥

Through their shared wall, Devin listened to Annita play guitar, and wondered what the hell she was still doing in New Austin with talent like that.

K♣

After the family had eaten without Clay, Bob stayed at the kitchen table, reading through a hardcover novel he had picked up the other week. He stayed buried in the book until his older son had left to go meet with his friends, and his wife had finished with the dishes and had gone to the bedroom. Bob looked up from his book and glanced around, to be sure he was alone. Then he stood, went to the fridge, and grabbed the tupperware container of leftover spaghetti, as well as the pitcher of lemonade, which he poured a glass from and then returned to the fridge. With the spaghetti and the glass of lemonade, he made his way down the stairs into the basement to sneak Clay dinner.

“*Psst. Clay,*” he whispered on his way down. “*Hungry?*”

There was no answer.

When Bob reached the bottom of the stairs, he found that Clay wasn't there.

Bob sighed. He set the leftover spaghetti and the glass of lemonade down on the steps, where Clay would find it when he came back. Then he snuck back up the stairs, avoiding the parts of the stairway that creaked. In the kitchen, he continued reading his book.

J♦

Danny sat in his study, drumming on the edge of his desk with his pens. He'd never actually used a real drum set before. He wanted to. He *had* wanted to for a long time. But he really had no idea where he'd even find one of those.

K♦

Chris laid down on his stomach in the woods, trying to coax a rabbit towards him. He rubbed his fingers together in a rabbit-

gesture, and called lightly to it in a voice he imagined a rabbit would like.

Hesitantly, the rabbit came over. Chris pet it on the top of the head while it ate grass from the forest floor.

9♦

Carol laid on her roof, facing the sun. She smelled of sunscreen and oranges. She laid on top of a blue and white beach towel, which she had laid out over the roof's hot black shingles. She took a sip of water from her water bottle; the small pinch of salt she had added to the tap water really brought her back.

5♦

Angela and her dog Butch walked the sidewalk downtown. Butch was a dog who did not need to be walked often, if ever; though she hadn't measured him, Angela suspected that Butch was wider than he was tall. Still, she enjoyed walking around town with him, especially during the times of day when more people were out. Butch was ugly, but to her, he was a loveable ugly. And there was something she liked about showing off what conventionally, one shouldn't have been so proud of.

As she walked, she happened to glance into the alleyway between the café and the bakery, and saw two women making out between the brick walls.

Angela kept walking and, quietly to herself, she cheered for them.

2♦

Buck looked in his friend Shane's medicine cabinet, and saw that Shane had a prescription for... something. Buck could not read well. He opened the bottle of pills, swallowed two, and put the rest back where he found them.

3♦

Alec knelt in front of an overturned barstool, trying to identify where the wobbling was coming from. The bartender watched him as he worked.

After finding the source of the wobble, Alec hammered two

small nails into the stool, and stood it upright again. Perfectly sturdy.

The bartender handed Alec two dollars. Alec tipped his hat, and continued drinking his beer. He asked if the weather was always so nice in the south.

4♦

Tyrone skated down Marble street, with Ben, Jerret, and Gwenn trailing behind him. They were like a flock of birds in flight.

They weren't migrating north or south. They were migrating just to be migrant. Tyrone didn't ever want to stop. He'd probably stay out a long time after the others had gone home.

K♥

Stacey sat cross-legged on her bed, coiling the telephone chord around her finger. She was almost doubled-over in laughter. "For *real*?" she asked Mi Jin.

"*Right* in front of the pier," Mi Jin confirmed. "I don't even know how to describe the smell, but it was... Becky says it was like olives, but a *hundred* of them, all mushed up. I thought it was more like air freshener, but backwards."

3♠

Shane looked at the palm of his hand, where the outline of a five-pointed star was tattooed. He thought it looked pretty damn cool. He didn't know if he wanted more tattoos, or if it would be coolest to just have the one. Both sides of that dilemma had weight to him.

9♠

Todd, after eating a bar of chocolate with his lunch, wanted to brush his teeth, but wouldn't be home for another few hours.

4♥

Linda took her shoes off in the clearing beside the river. She knelt a while in the center of the clearing, clearing her head of all the day's stress as Kaufman's secretary: of screening phone calls;

of making empty small-talk with the clients in the waiting room; of all the dirty practices she had been privy to through Kaufman even before lunch. Linda, for just a minute, attempted to forget every detail of what her working life entailed.

Then she stood, and before her head could fill again, she sprinted at the river, and bounded across its choppy surface to the other side.

When she did reach the other side and realized what she had just done, she also realized just how beneath her Kaufman really was. Linda swam back across the river to get her shoes back from the clearing. She put them on, and walked—wet—back to her hybrid car. She did not drive back to Miss Kaufman's office to see out the remainder of her working hours, nor did she drive home. She drove straight to the highway, and then straight out of town.

7♣

Jory's mother smoked a cigarette as she watched birds fly over the apartment buildings.

10♥

Sean sat in front of his journal, tapping his pen against the blank page. He combed soft fingers back through his long hair, and considered whether or not he was just too boring a person to keep a journal. So far that day, he'd had no extraordinary experiences or noteworthy opinions. Sean set down the pen, picked up his steak knife, and drug the tip through his inner thigh until he was bleeding like a motherfucker. He stomped on the ground, swore, and remembered again—reassured himself—that he was alive, and that that on its own was a good thing. Cutting himself was the question: do you *really* consent to participating in this thing called life? And every time he'd done it, he had quickly remembered the answer, which was an emphatic *yes*.

His body was littered with question marks.

Q♣

Steven laid across a bench downtown, the back of his head cupped in his hands, staring up at the sky. He had been lying like this for quite a while when he was snapped out of it by the touch

of something wet and slimy to his elbow. He looked away from the sky, and saw a stout dog, panting in front of him.

Steven reached out and patted the dog on the top of the head, which it seemed to like.

Steven only then noticed that the dog had an owner, who stood behind it, trying to hold the dog back. He said hello to her and she said hello back, and then she managed to pry her dog away from the man lying on the bench downtown; she and her dog continued on their way.

After this interaction, Steven cupped the back of his head in his hands again, and returned to looking up at the sky.

7♦

Marty sat in front of his TV in his living room. He realized he had been watching commercials for so long that he had forgotten what show was on.

He turned the TV off. He put on his shoes, did a lap around the block, and then came back to finish the rest of his show, which returned just as he did. Overall, he felt refreshed for having gotten out.

K♠

In the café downtown, Alison Walsh sat with her coffee placed on the table as far away from her as possible. She was hunched over her notebook, which was filled from cover to cover in her findings.

She picked up a pen from the table, clicked it, and saw that it was the green one when she had meant to grab the blue. She scanned over her collection of writing instruments, until remembering that the blue pen was tucked behind her ear. She grabbed it, clicked it open, circled the word “MALLARD” seven times where she had found it at the top-right corner of a page, then went back to scanning her notebook from the start again.

She was going to uncover something, someday, somehow.

It started to get dark out.

J♥

At the police station, Mrs. Ford answered the emergency line.

On the other end of the line, Janis James said that her son Clayton had run away from the house when he was supposed to be grounded, and that he had been missing for at least four or five hours, and that she was concerned as it was getting dark and he still wasn't home. Mrs. Ford made careful notes of all of this. As a mother herself, Mrs. Ford found it especially compelling to do right when children were involved.

After getting off the line with Mrs. James, Mrs. Ford sent the message up the chain to the state police, and alerted all of New Austin's active units (Officer Marley) to the missing child. Officers Bowman, Gibson, and Summers, who all happened to be listening to their police radios from home, also went out patrolling.

8♦

Summers pulled over on the highway beside Gibson's grey car. The two of them stood between their vehicles as they exchanged notes; by talking to the businesses by the highway and reviewing their security footage, they could compile a list of every vehicle that had entered or left New Austin that day—ruling out those that had only passed through on the highway without stopping, or those that had only stopped for gas, and remained in the range of surveillance cameras all the while.

In all, there were three noteworthy vehicles. One blue car had arrived, and as best Summers and Gibson could tell, it had not left yet. One white car from out of town had arrived, been in New Austin for twenty minutes in all, and left again the way it had come. The last car of note, a red hybrid, belonged to Linda, and had been recorded leaving town earlier that day.

Summers gave Kaufman a ring, to see if the lawyer knew where her secretary was. Shortly into the conversation, it became clear that Kaufman did *not* know where her secretary was, and that this greatly frustrated her.

"Go ahead on Blue Moon and White Winter," Summers said, holding her cellphone to her chest as Kaufman ranted on the other end. "I'll figure out Red Rover."

"Ten four," Gibson said, and mock-saluted as he turned and got back into his car.

Summers spent what felt like the better part of an hour listening to Kaufman expound upon the criminal irresponsibility of her secretary. As Kaufman seemed to be cooling down, Summers prodded Miss Kaufman, until getting the lawyer to spill Linda's cellphone number. Immediately after getting the final digit, Summers wished Kaufman a good evening, and hung up.

After spending one minute on the phone with Linda, it became clear that the secretary had not abducted a child, but was chasing a realization that her life was bigger than the town of New Austin, and that she had so much more to see and do in her life that she had been neglecting to get to all these years.

Summers wished Linda a good evening as well. She then reported to the other units that Red Rover was not a likely suspect.

4♣

Gibson, after sharing two beers with Blue Moon, determined the northerner to be a perfectly respectable visitor. It seemed very unlikely indeed that someone so polite would be abducting children on the side. On his radio, he reported that Blue Moon was an unlikely suspect, and that if Clay wasn't still in town, White Winter was their culprit.

Q♠

Officer Bowman, after speaking with Mrs. James in person, learned that Clay *had* been seen earlier that day by Dr. Robinson, when the boy was supposed to be at home. Officer Bowman went to Dr. Robinson's house promptly afterwards to ask about it. The officer nodded as Dr. Robinson listed off the qualifiers to his statement.

"Human memory and perception is a very fickle thing," the doctor said. "So fickle that eye-witness testimony is not nearly as useful as you officers make it out to be—no offense intended, of course. But yes, earlier today, I did see a boy I thought to be Clay walking down the sidewalk, and at the same time, a white car I didn't recognize was parked outside of my house. Next I looked, they were both gone. And I *thought*—but my eyes may have been playing tricks on me of course—that I had seen Clay in the car's passenger seat. I only saw it for a moment at a distance: it may

have been glare on the window of...”

Dr. Robinson continued on, but that was plenty for Officer Bowman. After letting the doctor finish, Bowman wished him a good night. He then reported into the radio that Clay was potentially seen in White Winter’s vehicle, and that state troopers needed to be alerted to the severity of this fact immediately.

9♣

“Literally fuck the police, man,” Gwenn said.

Tyrone shrugged.

Gwenn and Tyrone skated side-by-side out on the highway. Jerret and Ben had both gone home. It was really, really dark out.

“Except your dad,” Gwenn added. “He’s like, cool about it. I guess the others are also sort of like... I don’t know.”

“You alright?” Tyrone asked.

Gwenn sighed. “Sorry. No. My mom got arrested again yesterday.”

The two glided to a stop at the New Austin city limits sign.

“I take back fuck the police. I take back fuck Jerret and Ben. I take back fuck the gas station. I didn’t completely *not* mean those things, but maybe the point I’m trying to make can’t be summarized as fuck this, or that,” Gwenn said. It was a sobering thought to her, given her black shirt with the red anarchy symbol on the front.

The skaters stood in silence at the edge of New Austin. Tyrone kept his hands in his pockets, and looked down at his board. Gwenn, arms crossed, kept looking at the city limits sign, trying to figure out why it bothered her.

A few minutes went by.

“I don’t think I like living in New Austin,” she said, eventually.

“Same,” Tyrone echoed.

Having shared this secret, the skaters went back into town.

HIDE AND SEEK

Janis got her first tattoo when she was ten. She and Tam were knelt in their mother's garden, digging up carrots. Tam had heard from a friend at school how to make a magic potion that let them see into the future. They had already collected water from a river in a pale. The second ingredient was carrots, which made sense to Janis and Tam, as they knew that carrots did improve your vision. They had heard they would only need one carrot for the potion, but because it was early in the season and the carrots in the garden were very small, they decided to get a few extra. Better safe than sorry.

Janis wondered how far into the future the potion would let her see. Seconds? Years? Maybe she would be able to see herself as a grown up. Maybe she would be able to see how she would die. This possibility fascinated her.

"I think we have enough," Janis said to Tam, who agreed. They dropped their infant carrots into the pale, two handfuls each. "What's next?" Janis asked her older sister.

"Something old," Tam said.

"How old?" Janis wondered.

“Lilly didn’t say,” Tam said. “Just something old.”

Janis and Tam discussed old things that they could think of. Their grandfather was the oldest thing that either of them knew, but they agreed that they wouldn’t want to put him into a potion, and that they might have a hard time finding a big enough pale, anyways, as their grandfather was fat. Rocks, they knew from school, were *quite* old, but they agreed that rocks were cheating. They eventually settled on their father’s bible. They snuck into the house, and very quietly ripped a page from the middle of it; Tam kept watch while Janis removed the page, trying carefully to keep the rip as far inside the book’s crease as she could, so that her father wouldn’t notice the missing section right away.

Next up were a variety of spices, which Janis and Tam took turns sneaking from the kitchen to their room. In alternating expeditions, they collected ginger, sumac, paprika, garlic powder, and salt.

When Tam came back with the shaker of black pepper, Janis asked what the next spice to get was.

“No more spices,” Tam said.

“Oh. What’s the next ingredient then?”

Tam leaned in close to her little sister, over the potion, and whispered the final ingredient in her ear. “*Blood.*”

“Oh.”

“It’s the one that makes it magical,” Tam explained, and that seemed to make sense to Janis.

“So whose blood?” Janis asked.

“Whoever’s going to drink the potion,” Tam said.

Janis and Tam played rock paper scissors, and when the decision was over, Janis made one last trip to the kitchen to get the knife. The second she reached for the drawer she was startled by her mother, who had just come around the corner.

“And what are *you* doing, young lady?”

Janis’ hands shot back from the drawer, and she clasped them tight behind her back. “Nothing,” she said.

“Right,” Janis’ mother agreed, and stared until Janis left the kitchen. Janis waited around the corner for some time, but her mother was cooking dinner now, and would be in the kitchen forever.

Janis did not want to return empty-handed, so she looked around the living room, and there she found a pen sitting on top of the newspaper's crossword puzzle. The end looked sharp. She took it back to Tam.

"Mom was in the kitchen, but I got this," the younger sister explained.

Tam examined the pen. "Are you sure?" she asked Janis.

Janis nodded. They had made this much of the potion, after all. She held the pen hard in her left hand, and jabbed it into her right palm. She winced, and then put the pen down, and held her palm over the pale. A few drops fell in.

"Enough?" Janis asked.

"Plenty," Tam said, and grabbed Janis' hand. She turned the hand over and looked at the palm. It *was* just a pock mark. There was one drop of blood still on it, like an opaque bubble. It was part red, and also part black, from the ink on the pen. Tam went to get a bandage from her desk drawer. While Tam's back was turned, Janis lifted up the pale, made sure not to breathe through her nose, and took a drink. She got three gulps down before accidentally smelling it, and then she gagged at the assault of conflicting spices, and slammed the pale down. Tam slid the pale away from Janis, and put the bandage on her little sister's hand.

Janis did not see the future that night. Not only did she not see the future, but in fact, she guessed a part of the future wrong: she imaged that the pock mark on her palm would heal and look normal again. But when it did heal, it healed black. Janis had, quite by mistake, given herself her first tattoo. She hated when she saw it. It was a dumb tattoo, she thought.

That was why, one year later when she noticed it gone, she was delighted. She hadn't even remembered, did it fade over time, or overnight? She was doing homework when she saw that her palm was plain. Tam was lying in bed at the time, reading a book. Janis went over to show her older sister.

Tam was very, very relieved to see that the damage had healed.

Later that night when Janis took a shower, she felt beautiful. She took off her clothes in flourishes, looking in the mirror and posing—most of the poses involved sticking her palm straight out

in front of her. In one pose—hands on hips, butt to mirror—Janis spotted something on the back of her thigh. She jumped and tried to swat it off, but nothing felt like it was on her skin there. She tried to find a pose where she could see it better, and spent a long time in the bathroom, contorting herself to see the back of her upper leg. She found, eventually, that by standing on the bathroom sink and bending down forward so her head was between her legs, she could see where she needed to, albeit upside-down. It was another tattoo. This one was a dog, sitting down. A golden retriever. Janis stared until she was sore from bending over so far, at which point she hopped down off the sink. She looked at her hand again, to be sure that the dot there was really gone, and it was. But now there was new ink.

In the shower, Janis tried to wash the dog tattoo away. It wouldn't budge though, and eventually, she was fine with that. It was a better tattoo than the last one, at least. She still didn't want *any*, but, this one at least was much harder for anyone else to see. Janis went about the next few days with a secret. She felt smug, walking around at school. She probably was the only one in her grade with a tattoo.

One day, walking home from school, Janis was standing at a crosswalk, waiting for a good chance to cross. And then, on the other side of the road, she saw the dog. A golden retriever, sitting, and looking at her. She looked around for an owner, but if the dog had one, they weren't nearby. Janis started walking across the street to it. The dog started walking too, and then it was hit by a car.

Janis pet the dog while its life seeped out onto the pavement in a blurry, dark, intangible fog.

The driver of the car had not stopped. Janis had seen them slow down after hitting the dog, but then speed away as quickly as they could.

When Janis got home, she went in the bathroom to look at her tattoo again. She twisted and turned all around, looking in the mirror in every way she could think, but the back of her thigh was bare. She wished she had known it would be bare. She would have looked at it much closer while it was still on her.

She felt bad that night, about the dog. She asked Tam if she

could borrow one of her books about dogs, and Tam said yes, and so Janis laid in bed, reading, trying to imagine the dog she had seen as the dog in the book, even though the dog in the book was described very different. Janis was two chapters in when Tam asked her, "What's that on your foot?"

Janis looked down at her foot, and saw nothing.

"On the sole," Tam clarified.

Janis bent her foot around and saw, in the small of her sole, a tiny house. Two days later, their mother announced to them that they were moving out of their house in New Austin, to a new house in Dallas. The new house would be smaller, but in a much better location, and their mother promised they would like it even more. Promptly after hearing this news, Janis went to the bathroom to look at her foot in privacy. The tattoo was gone. Janis contorted her body all around looking for the new one, until eventually discovering it on the back of her neck, right below the hairline. Janis promptly bought a book on yoga: she would need to be very flexible to continue finding these markings on herself.

Janis lived, for years, knowing vaguely of big events that were soon to happen in her life. A tattoo of a knife behind her ear, and soon her older sister would cut herself in the kitchen. A tattoo of an anchor under her tongue, and their father announced the family was taking a trip to a friend's vacation home in Florida, right on the beach. One night Janis got vibrant red flames, licking up both arms from fingertip to shoulder. She woke her family and demanded they go outside. They watched from across the street as the firemen tried to put out the housefire. "How did you know?" Janis' father asked, many times over. "I just did," Janis said back. She didn't like talking about her tattoos. Often times, she wasn't sure what exactly to make of them, and didn't think she could read them reliably enough to convince anyone that they meant anything. But they meant everything to her. And secretly, she worried that if she shared them with anyone, the magic might go away. She felt warm when, after the fire tattoo, she found a tattoo under her chin of a familiar street corner in New Austin. Her family moved back there shortly after. Not to the exact same house as before, but one nearby it. Janis walked by the old one more often than she needed to.

One day, a senior in high school, Janis injured her back while looking for the next tattoo. She had been in front of the full-body mirror in her bedroom. She had her own bedroom in this house. She could normally stretch in front of her mirror to see every inch of skin, but in eagerness, she had not warmed up well enough that day. The back injury wasn't serious—she hadn't even gone to a doctor about it—but it did prevent her from bending or twisting for a week. Janis never felt more nervous. More unprepared. What if her tattoo, hidden lord knew where, was of a car crash? What if it was a bomb? What if, whatever it was, it was somewhere where someone else could see it?

That week, Janis feared for everything. In her art class, she painted a collage of certain doom.

“Woah,” said the boy sitting next to her, when he noticed what she was working on.

Janis had not drawn the boy on the collage, which, though less of a sign than she was used to, certainly couldn't have been a bad thing. The boy's name was Ben.

Shortly after Ben speaking up, Janis saw that on the tip of her pinky finger, there was a tattoo of a lipstick kiss. Janis deduced, then, that the tattoo she hadn't been able to see before was of him. She asked if he would have a minute after class. They made out in a woman's room stall for the entire next period, and afterwards, they exchanged phone numbers.

That night Janis tried looking for her next tattoo, but was still much too stiff. She checked as much as she could, but figured it must have been on her back somewhere. She felt giddy when she imagined having someone else to check her for ink.

The next day at school, Ben asked Janis out on a date. “My brother signed me and him up for this dumb cave exploration thing this weekend, but now he can't go. You wanna come with me instead?”

Janis accepted. After school that day, she sat down in front of her mirror, and spread her legs. She poked and felt and examined herself, wondering if she was ready. She squinted. There, on the inside of her labia majora, was the next tattoo. A condom. Janis got shivers, and went to go put some clothes on. That night eating dinner with her family, she still felt quite naked.

During the cave tour, Janis pulled Ben away from the group. They went spelunking down their own route, guided by the flashlight Janis had brought for the occasion. Ben had brought condoms. Janis held the flashlight for him while he put one on. They tried to stay quiet, so that the tour group wouldn't be able to hear them off the echoing walls. The loudest sound either of them made was giggling about their secret. They tied the condom off afterwards and left it on the cave floor. Janis examined it for a moment. She had an affinity for objects that had been her tattoos. She had thought about collecting them, but most of them were too fleeting, or too large, or too alive, or too strange. The condom certainly fell into some of these.

Janis' next tattoo was under her armpit, which she had started shaving. It was a pair of hands holding each other. One hers and one Ben's, surely. For the next two months, they dated and became each other's first loves.

Then one ordinary day, Ben wasn't at art class. He didn't respond to texts or calls. Eventually when Janis went to his house, his mother said that she hadn't seen him at all in the last few days, and that she had been trying to find Janis to ask if she had seen him. Janis went home and combed over every millimeter of her body for a second tattoo. There had never been a second tattoo before, but she wasn't sure what else to try. It took her a long time to notice that her existing tattoo—the one under her armpit of the two hands clasped together—was different: one hand was gone. Janis cried for a long, long time. She picked up the phone to call Ben's mother and apologize, but wasn't sure quite what she could say, and so she put the phone back down.

Janis checked her tattoo daily for the hand to return. Then every other day, paining herself each time she realized she had forgotten to check. But time slipped and Janis was graduating, having forgotten to check the tattoo for a solid two weeks before then. She stayed at her parents' house after high school was over. She hadn't planned ahead much, really. She supposed that she should look for a job and an apartment.

A month into the search, Janis had found nothing. She looked where she always looked for direction: herself. There she realized, to her bittersweet surprise, that the tattoo of the single hand was

gone. She began to comb herself over once again. It had been a long time.

The tattoo this time was hidden in her bellybutton, on the upper part. A miniscule river. Janis went to New Austin's river. She walked in, and swam to the center, and then floated on her back, drifting.

Eventually, her head bumped against something solid. She opened her eyes and found herself floating next to a canoe. She started treading water, looking inside the vessel. There was a man in there, maybe a little older than her. Beer cans littered the bottom of the boat. The man inside was sitting hunched over, snoring. Janis wasn't quite sure what to do next. She kept treading water beside the boat until the man woke up.

"Fucking mermaid!" he said, jumping back. The boat rocked while Janis giggled. She crawled up onto the other side of the boat, barely making it move. The man eyed her like she really was a mermaid: the scary, sailor-eating kind.

"Where you going?" Janis asked the man.

The man glanced around. "Just... going," he said, and shrugged. "Buddy's canoe. I put it in a few miles back."

The man's arms were very sunburned. He had been out for longer than miles, surely.

"What's your name?" Janis asked.

"Bob."

"Bob," Janis said. "I think I heard a joke about you in a canoe once."

Bob snorted, in a laughing way. He reached around the boat for a non-empty can of beer, and upon finding one, handed it to Janis.

"Thanks," she said, and opened it.

"What're you doing here?" Bob asked.

"Drowning myself, I think."

"Woah. Heavy."

They sat in silence for a little.

"I like your tattoo," Bob eventually said.

Janis perked up. She looked where he was looking: over on her forearm was a tattoo of a green truck.

"Looks just like my buddy's," Bob said. "He's picking me up."

Wanna see it?"

Janis nodded deeply. Hell yeah she did.

When they were done floating, Janis helped Bob carry the canoe up to the highway. Bob's buddy had agreed to drive down the road at sundown and pick Bob and the canoe up wherever. Janis' clothes were drenched, but she knew she would get a ride.

Sure enough, the truck came, and sure enough, the tattoo was gone the moment it did. Bob tried showing his buddy her ink, but Janis' arm was blank. She shrugged. Bob looked closer at her. The three of them loaded the canoe into the back.

Janis sat in the back seat, running a couple of fingers over the spot where the truck tattoo had been. Normal, normal skin. Bob and his buddy sat in the front, talking about people Janis didn't know. Janis half-listened, and half looked herself over idly, seeing if she could spot her new ink without removing any clothes. She turned her arms round and round, until on the palm of her right hand, she spotted a black pockmark.

Moments after she saw it, a searing pain shot through her arm: Janis' head spun, as she gathered that they were in the ditch, and had collided with another vehicle. The windshield was shattered, and a long, sharp piece of it had embedded in her hand, right, directly, over her tattoo, and clear through to her hand's other side. Janis yanked the shard out, breathing heavily as she looked at both halves of the wound on her palm, trying to wipe away blood to see ink. She looked all up and down her arms; yanked clothes off; got out of the car and looked herself over in the passenger-side mirror. On the side of the road, she pried herself open at every seam. Her tattoo was gone. She never felt more stranded.

When Bob came around to that side of the truck and saw her naked, he didn't seem perturbed. "You okay?" he asked, and then followed it with, "Jesus, show me your hand."

He sat down beside her, and looked over the deep cut.

"Hurt?" he asked.

Janis nodded. She grabbed her shirt, and wrapped it around the cut. She had more than half a mind to find a pen somewhere that she could jab into her palm all over again.

"Come on," Bob said. "Truck's totaled. We're gonna take the canoe down to the next town. Want a ride in the middle?"

Janis thought hard about that. And then, “Yes,” she said, and went.

GOODBYE STRANGER

Bob sat in his truck in the driveway, submerged in the hiss of an old cassette. There were good memories trapped in *Breakfast in America*. Bob wasn't getting out of the truck until he was done with his cigarette, and Supertramp was done with side A.

Bob blew smoke at the windshield. The memories had to be twenty years old by now. Bob hung his arm out of the truck window, face-up like he was getting his blood pressure checked, or having an IV put in.

Bob and Janis—his then-girlfriend—had been boondocking in Georgia, back when *Breakfast in America* was the newest of the three knock-off cassettes that they owned. Bob remembered trying to dance with Jan up and down their mobile home, bumping into things as they went and laughing, until bumping into important things and yelling at each other for the night. If there was one thing Bob did *not* miss, it was that. He wasn't sure if he had gone to bed sober once in that trailer. If he had, it was probably a night he'd worn ear plugs.

Smoking in his truck and thinking about Georgia, Bob's mind lit up with the memory of his good buddy Gabriel: just

remembering the *voice* of his old friend was like getting stuck with a cocktail of morphine and methamphetamine. Bob thought back to the night when he had met the crazy motherfucker.

It was at a card table in the basement of a bar. Bob didn't remember how he'd gotten his way down to the table, other than that he'd always had a hell of a knack for getting his way down to places where he hadn't planned on going. There were cards on the card table, but nobody was playing. The cards were mostly being used to dice up cocaine. Gabriel sat across the table from Bob. Halfway into the night, Gabriel was using an old tattoo gun they'd found in the basement to put a demonic black cat across Bob's stomach. Bob had nearly been evicted from his and Jan's trailer for that one. He spent the night on the doorstep—so to speak, anyways—getting eaten alive by the mosquitoes.

But the tattoo had only been the start of things that night. When the last of the cocaine was gone from the table, Gabriel was the first one to dip. "This way," Gabriel had said to Bob, tilting his head towards the stairs. Bob followed Gabriel outside. The two walked around out in the open Georgia night air, in the bar district of some town Bob couldn't quite recall the name of. There weren't many streetlights. It had gotten pretty dark.

Walking along the sidewalk, Gabriel reached into his coat and pulled out a carton of cigs. He gave one to Bob, took another for himself, and reached into his other pocket for a lighter. Then he patted the pocket down, and checked all of his others, but there was no lighter to be found. Bob patted himself down too, but came up blank. No lighter between the two of them. Bob vaguely recalled some conversation back in the basement about whose lighter they could rig up to make the biggest flame, and reasoned that both of their lights were left on the card table, as trophies for the bartender to collect later.

"Let's ask this chica," Gabriel said, gesturing to a woman ahead of them on the sidewalk. She was standing under the marquee of a local theater, which was closed for the night. Alone, she stood back in the shade a little. "Hey, mamacita!" Gabriel called.

The woman looked up at Gabriel, with his longish black hair, well-fitting black shirt, and frayed black jeans. "What're you boys

doing out so late?" she asked. The three stood under the marquee together.

"Hiding from the old lady," Bob answered, and cackled.

"Just a visit to some amigos for me tonight," Gabriel answered, and introduced himself.

"Cheryl," the woman said back, shaking his hand.

"Cheryl," Gabriel echoed. He pointed up to the marquee with his unlit cigarette. "Waiting to see a movie?"

She laughed once, and shook her head. "Just... collecting my thoughts. My boyfriend said he wants to break up. Is it weird I was relieved when he said so?"

Bob nodded.

Cheryl sighed, and nodded too.

"We should break in," Bob said, nodding to the theater's front doors. "Make some popcorn, get a movie running: have our own private screening."

"This is a smart guy," Gabriel chimed in, pointing over to Bob—again with his unlit cigarette.

"I think I'll pass on that," Cheryl said. She leaned back against the wall by the door. "Could you imagine though?"

Gabriel smiled at her, and held up his unlit cig high enough that she couldn't possibly continue to miss it. "Got a light?"

"Oh, of course," Cheryl said, and looked down into her purse. While she did, Gabriel grabbed her by the throat and slammed her back against the locked theater door, which shuddered behind her as she tried to break free. Bob jumped back. Gabriel held the woman's neck tightly until the locked doors shuddered less, and then were still, and Gabriel was hunched over the woman's sitting, unconscious body. Bob watched Gabriel—gentle as a father to a daughter—stroke a piece of hair out of Cheryl's face. And then he went in for the neck. Bob watched Gabriel eat, in gruesome fascination.

Once the deed was done, Gabriel stood up, turned to Bob, and wiped blood from the side of his chin.

"You still here?" Gabriel asked, smiling at his new friend. "Good on ya, wey. I like you."

That night while the mosquitoes were eating Bob alive on the doorstep of his trailer, Bob was in discomfort, but a justified kind.

He considered it paying back a tab. Putting blood back into the system.

He woke up the next morning to The Logical Song, coming from inside the trailer. He smelled bacon and pancakes. He hoped he wasn't dead. He was hungover, sore from a new tattoo, and itching everywhere from bug bites, which all suggested normalcy. But to Bob's knowledge, Jan had never made pancakes or bacon in her life. He walked inside to investigate.

There on the small table, Jan sat with a plate of eggs, a plate of bacon, and a plate of pancakes.

"Mad?" Bob asked.

"I am *beyond* furious," Jan said. Her pretty hair was snarled in its ponytail.

Bob sat down at the other side of the table, and picked up a piece of bacon.

"Careful," Jan said. "I put anthrax in those to poison you."

Bob took a medium-sized bite, decided it was worth it, and took a bigger bite to finish off the strip. Jan looked like she got happier, which worried Bob deeply.

As he moved a pancake onto his plate, he asked, "Did you ever have cats growing up?"

"Phantom," Jan said. "You met her when you came with to my sister's. Lives with her now."

"Oh yeah," Bob nodded. "Phantom. I liked her. I didn't know she was yours." As he spoke, he felt a wave of nausea come over him; he tried to gauge whether it was hangover, poison, or ass-kissing. He had a guess that they weren't sold separately.

Bob glanced around the kitchen for what he imagined a box of anthrax would look like.

"The food is fine, dear," Jan said.

Bob ripped his gaze away from the kitchen, lest he be poisoned for real the next time.

That night at a bar adjacent to the previous one, Bob and Gabriel ran into each other again. Bob, at least, was sober-er than before.

Bob noticed, this time, that Gabriel was a very sharp dresser. Everything black, coat to socks. Bob wondered how much of Gabriel's outfit was taken off the dead. He had a hard time

imagining any of it stolen, considering how well it fit.

Bob had gotten his own brown getup at a second-hand store. His clothes fit looser than Gabriel's.

Gabriel sat down next to Bob at the bar.

"Vampire?" Bob asked.

Gabriel held up one finger to the bartender. "Zombie," he said to Bob.

"Oh."

Gabriel patted Bob on the back. "Dead inside either way. Don't lose sleep over it."

The bartender placed a beer in front of Gabriel, and the handsome man picked it up and took a long, long drink. "Gah," he exhaled afterwards.

"So what do you do exactly?" Bob asked.

"Construction on and off. Mostly off. Robbery when I'm off."

"I meant as a zombie."

"Oh. Eat people." Gabriel pantomimed a person screaming at a monster.

Bob laughed, took the last sip from his most recent beer, and gestured to the bartender for another one, setting a few bills out on the bar.

"What do you do?" Gabriel asked.

"Music, when I can get a gig," Bob said, and shrugged.

"No like, as a human."

"Oh. Get drunk with zombies, I guess," Bob said. He wished the bartender would hurry with his next one.

"Hey forget about this place," Gabriel said, and stood up. "Follow me."

Bob thought about not doing that, but decided against it. He took his cash back off of the bar and followed the monster out into the night.

Outside the bar, Gabriel handed something to Bob. Bob looked down into his hand. Acid. He reached up to his mouth and put it on his tongue as they walked. When they passed under the theater's marquee, he felt a cool breeze, and made an effort not to shiver.

"You got a girl Bob?" Gabriel asked while they went along.

"Janis," Bob said.

“Would you cheat on her?”

“I would kill myself first.”

“Damn.”

“Well I would,” Bob insisted. “And I’d kill you too if you tried to... you know.”

Gabriel put his hands up in front of himself in surrender. “Wasn’t planning on it,” he said anyways. “Just feeling out what’s on the table. C’mon. I know a guy at the opium den downtown.”

Bob’s interest was piqued.

The next morning, Bob remembered having gone with Gabriel to a smoke shop, and then going up a rickety stairway to a second floor. He remembered smoking a hookah and sitting around a coffee table with his friend the zombie, a woman with the face of a badger, and a man who had antennas that Bob could see when the man turned his head to the side to face the badger woman. He remembered playing some kind of game with them that involved rolling dice and moving flat tokens across a colorful map. He remembered pieces of the conversation.

“...that I can. But it’s been a long time, dear,” the badger woman had said.

The antenna man was trying to crack a knuckle—the one at the base of his thumb. “Better lock pick than any of us,” the antenna man said. Bob remembered a slight vibration behind the man’s voice, like there was a grain of sand rattling in the back of the man’s throat while he spoke.

A while later, after a missing block of the conversation, Bob remembered Gabriel saying the name of a bank, and then he remembered the badger woman and the antenna man scoffing.

“You know a better place?” Gabriel asked. He leaned back in his beanbag chair, which made a hard clacking sound, like the orange vinyl sack was filled with marbles. Bob remembered moving around on his own chair, which creaked. “I’m all ears, mis amigos,” Gabriel prodded.

“Greenfield,” the badger woman said, and the antenna man nodded. “They collect rent in cash. This month’s rent is due tomorrow.”

Gabriel giggled. Bob took another breath from his hookah. On the exhale, he tasted the perfume of the woman from the night

before. That was the end of what Bob remembered from inside the den. He remembered that after leaving, Gabriel was drilling into his head the time and place to meet for the robbery. Bob sat in the mobile home's kitchen with a cup of instant coffee, smelling the thick, earthy heat coming off it, and fantasizing about what he would do with a year's worth of wages.

Probably overdose.

He heard Jan stirring on the bed behind him. He was gone before she was up. He walked into town holding a paper cup filled with hot coffee. He smiled when he saw Gabriel waiting outside the bar where they'd first met. Gabriel was standing there with a man and a woman, who looked familiar.

The four of them piled into a jeep. It took Bob a while into the ride to realize that these were the man and woman from the night before, sans their animal characteristics. The woman was named Shannon and the man was named Tommy. Cocaine was passed around. Bob had an easier time snorting it than he would've guessed in the back of a rattling vehicle. They killed a few hours around town waiting for the end of the business day, when there would be the most money in the safe. Weapons were passed around. Shannon and Tommy had two pistols a piece. Gabriel had a shotgun. Bob felt like he drew the short straw with a wooden baseball bat.

"Ey, aim for the head, hombre," Gabriel said, elbowing Bob and smiling.

Tommy, who was driving, came to a stop in front of the Greenfield office. Only two cars were parked in the employee spots beside the building. Easy pickings.

Shannon, Gabriel, and Bob stormed out of the car, while Tommy stayed in the driver's seat, ready to pull everyone out.

Inside was a man behind a desk and a woman cleaning. Gabriel yelled for the money. The man behind the desk pointed to a safe in the corner of the room, and said it was on a time lock. Gabriel shot the man in the chest, which exploded open like it had already had seams for the occasion. Gabriel got to eating while Shannon walked back to the safe. She unshouldered her lock-picking bag, took out her tools, and started working. Bob locked eyes with the cleaning woman. She was standing still, broom

dropped to the ground, hands high in the air. She started looking to the window. Bob pointed the bat at her, and gave her the eye-contact gesture with his free hand. She listened.

Bob called over to Shannon. "How's it look?"

"Easy as pie, man," Shannon called back. He could hear her smiling. He also heard wet eating noises from behind the desk. On Bob's stomach, the black cat growled.

"Got a name?" Bob asked the cleaning woman.

"No names!" Shannon yelled from the safe.

The cleaning woman started, "J—"

Bob poked her hard with the end of the bat. "No names," he reinforced her.

The woman's lips trembled.

"Got it!" Shannon yelled from the corner.

Gabriel popped up from behind the desk. His mouth and hands were both stained red, like he had been on a clumsy wine bender. Bob looked back to the cleaning woman, who looked like she had a mouthful of water and was trying to hold it in. Bob saw in his periphery as Gabriel walked over to Shannon and the safe. Sure enough, the safe hung open. Gabriel reached for a plastic storage box nearby, dumped out all of the papers inside of it, and started sweeping envelopes and loose bills from the safe into the container.

"Jackie," the cleaning woman blurted, thinking it would save her life.

Bob swung his bat. Hitting her head felt a lot like hitting a fastball. The robbers left with the money. Tommy drove fast, then when they were far enough away as to not look suspect, he drove normal. Gabriel told Tommy to pull over, which he did. Gabriel shot Tommy and Shannon and pushed them out of the vehicle, then climbed up front into the driver's seat and sped off, with Bob sitting next to the box of money in the back, wondering if Gabriel had forgotten to kill him too.

"I didn't like them," Gabriel said over his shoulder as they hummed along. He put his eyes back on the road, and then shrugged. "More for us. That's the same principle this whole robbery thing runs on, you know?"

"Yeah," Bob said from the back.

They were driving onto a backroad, leading into some swampy woods.

“We’re gonna put your half of the money here,” Gabriel said, “and you can come back for it tomorrow. As for tonight...” Gabriel rubbed his hands together over the wheel. “Let’s see what goodies the bro and sis left us in their den, eh?”

Bob smiled. He’d thought Tommy and Shannon were husband and wife, but regardless. Bob thought this plan made sense. He would be reeling if he got high and woke up the next morning to find several thousands of dollars just up and missing. But this way, he’d know where it was, easy. They found a suitable tree to stash his cash behind. After planting the money, Bob and Gabriel about-faced, Bob now sitting shotgun with the undead. Sympathy for the Devil devoured the speakers.

Gabriel parked the jeep a few blocks from the den, in case it was hot. They walked back-alleys to get to the smoke shop’s back door. Gabriel had his portion of the cash in a briefcase they’d found under the passenger seat of the jeep—class. Up in the den, the friends explored every notch, drawer, recess, and loose floorboard, until amassing a pile of drugs on the coffee table that was fit for a sultan.

They agreed to use it that night: everything.

That night, Bob died. Total lack of a heartbeat; no breathing; cool to the touch. Gabriel bit Bob on the neck, hard, letting his teeth sink into skin and letting blood fall out onto his tongue. It took everything out of Gabriel to stop there. He hotwired a car and drove a halfway-sentient Bob to the hospital, smelling blood every second of the way. When they arrived, he couldn’t ditch his amigo fast enough. But before that, he pulled Bob in very, very, close. “Be careful now,” Gabriel said. “Promise me...”

Bob tried to focus the mirage of Gabriel before him into a single clear image.

“AY!” Gabriel yelled, and whacked Bob on the head. The image got a little better. “Look me in the eyes and promise me you’ll go get your money, get your chica, and go far away.”

Bob answered with a heavy tongue. “Promise.”

“Bien,” Gabriel said, and opened the passenger door. Bob tumbled out. The hospital lights had tracers as his head spun.

“Until we meet next time, yeah?” Gabriel said, and ran a hand down his sweating face. “You’re my best friend, alright? I wouldn’t have done this if you weren’t. Adios, amigo.”

Gabriel drove off gently. Bob staggered inside, where he was spotted by a nurse, who brought him a wheelchair. They took Bob into a room where he was awake all night, getting injected and shocked, forced to give blood and to vomit, made to take IV bags filled with anything and to eat things that were bitter and vile. Bob had never seen a staff of doctors so openly afraid before. “Two and a half hours without a pulse,” was the quote of the night.

But they did get his heart to start moving again. Sluggishly, then frantic, *too* frantic, and Bob asked a doctor to get him his wife Janis.

‘Wife’ had been a slip of the tongue, but a telling one.

They took a long time to find her, on account of having no formal address, and the trailer having been parked very deliberately out of the way. By the time Janis arrived, Bob was stable. Stable enough to be without direct oversight from a medical professional. Janis closed the hospital room’s door behind herself, and closed the small curtain on the door’s window.

“Hey, mami,” Bob said.

Janis walked up to his bedside, reached down for the IV in his arm, and twisted it. Bob muffled his scream as she pushed it in, digging up Bob’s veins.

Bob didn’t push her away: not at any point did he tell her, even ask her, to stop.

“How much did you take?” she asked. “How much, and of what, and how much did this ER visit cost, and do you have *any* idea how much I can’t *stand* you anymore?”

Janis had let go of the needle. Bob took it out of the loose hole in his arm, and reached for some nearby gauze to wrap it up in. “You want to kill me?” Bob asked, as he tended to himself.

“*What?*”

“Do you. Want. To kill me?” Bob finished with the gauze, and taped off the wrap. Then he reached to the table of surgical tools that had been brought in. After feeling around on it for a second, he procured the biggest scalpel available. He handed it to Janis.

She took it. She held it over his bare chest, sharp end down. She looked at him head-on as she lowered the blade, millimeter by millimeter, until it was pressing against his black cat tattoo. The scalpel was very sharp: it cut into him sooner than she had thought it would. When she looked down and saw blood she started breathing much faster. She threw the scalpel onto the floor, gasping for breath. Bob wrapped his arms around her. He pulled her onto him, onto his cut, and asked her in the hospital room to marry him.

Janis said yes.

They were gone that day, with robbed money retrieved from the woods and hospital bills unpaid. Bob would certainly pay them back someday, when he could afford to. He would pay them back double. Triple. He owed them his life. But he had already owed that to Gabriel first, and so he had to spend some time playing catchup.

Twenty-some years later, Bob had never been back to Georgia. Had never seen Gabriel again. Had never quite found a new life like he was looking for. He sat in his truck, cigarette arm hanging out of the window like an IV, listening to Supertramp. When Goodbye Stranger came on, Bob closed his eyes.

Half his life now, Bob had kept a secret. After being bitten by Gabriel, Bob had become a zombie too. He felt the hunger for the first time in the hospital, and the next day while driving out of Georgia with his wife, and so on, getting hunger-pains that only worsened over the decades. But Bob never ate. For Janis, and their two kids, Bob did not give in to the hunger. He fought symptoms—yelled, broke things, left scars on people he loved, literal and symbolic—but for their sake, in the ways that it mattered, Bob went hungry. And in the driver's seat of his truck, in the driveway of his lovely home, listening to Supertramp on the radio and smoking his last cigarette, Bob finally, finally, starved.

When the body was found, the cigarette had already burned down to the filter, singeing the sides of the corpse's fingers. Supertramp was done with side A. The truck was quiet. It was Janis who found him. She called an ambulance and tried everything while it was on its way, but Bob had already been on a lot of borrowed time. The next week, after the funeral, she brought

a black cat home. When the cat spent nights outside, Janis stayed up. In the mornings she cooked her sons breakfast. She listened to Supertramp often.

THE GIRL WHO DROWNED

Lisa stood on the beach of Lake Rabbit. She stood *near* the beach of Lake Rabbit, anyways, and her heart *did* beat just as fast as a rabbit's would. This was the first time she had been back to the marshy body of water since it had swallowed her friend. Lisa had walked all the way from home, and down the sole forest road that led to this place—to this beach that wasn't a beach, but the mouth to a stomach. She came in a swimsuit, in case the mouth tried to eat her too. Her bare feet had been scratched up a lot from the walk. The day was overcast. It had rained a little bit on and off during Lisa's walk, making her swimsuit damp.

The beach she stood on was made of grey pebbles, not sand. It extended about a dozen feet, from the forest line where Lisa stood, to the water which lapped hungrily at the pebbles. Lake Rabbit was small. Lisa wouldn't be able to swim across, but she could probably row a boat over to the other side all by herself, even at her age. The trees that surrounded the lake all around were shaking in the wind like fists in the air, warding Lisa away.

Lisa would be *very* glad to be away.

In her hands, she held a book: a small, pink book. Janie's

diary. Lisa stood at the forest line, as far away from the beach as she could be while still feeling like she had truly still come here, and not chickened out. While Lisa arranged her words in her head, the wind pushed her long blonde hair back.

“I still didn’t read it,” Lisa finally yelled at the water.

Another gust of wind came. It cut hard against Lisa’s green one-piece, and she shivered.

“I just thought you’d want it back!” Lisa yelled back at the lake.

As hard as she could, she threw the book. The pages rattled in the air and the book twisted all-ways in the wind, until it landed halfway down the beach, spine-down, pages open. The paper rustled. Lisa looked on, eyes wider.

It wasn’t supposed to do that: it was supposed to go *in*.

Lisa ran out towards Janie’s diary. The trees shook harder as she went down the beach; the wind tried to push her back into town; the waves came higher and higher, ravenous. The grey pebbles on the beach burrowed into Lisa’s feet on each step, making her wince until the point where her vision was blurry. The beach was like quicksand: the further in she went, the harder it would be to get back out again.

When Lisa reached Janie’s diary, she bent down to pick it up, took a few more steps closer to the lake, and then heaved the book into the water where it was devoured: it sunk in an instant. A crack of lightning exploded in the distance, past the lake’s opposite shoreline. It started to rain again.

Lisa stood for a moment in a beautiful storm: trees forebode her; a lake reached out to snag her ankles and pull her in; cold pebbles swarmed below her feet, and far away, lightning crashed. Something inside of Lisa moved around just then: she glimpsed a life where she was not afraid of these things, but rather, where she was better than them; for a half a second, she was brave like Janie.

Then Lisa heard the thunder, and ran back home, her one-piece drenched by the time she got back. Her mother was waiting by the door. She knelt down to hug her daughter’s wet and trembling little body.

“I was just about to call the police you know,” Lisa’s mother said. As she hugged Lisa, she felt Lisa’s heart beating fast. “I’m

so glad you're alright."

They went up to Lisa's room, got her changed into dry clothes, and then got her all wrapped up in big, cozy blankets. Together they read a story.

The next year, Lisa came back again to Lake Rabbit. The trees still shook at her, and the waves still lapped, but inside, Lisa felt like they meant it less. She wore her normal clothes this time. T-shirt, shoes, jeans. Holes in the knees of the jeans, both as a fashion choice and as a reasonable outcome of roughhousing with her friends. She'd made friends with the older kids. Her own classmates had never seemed to like her much.

In her hands, Lisa held a soprano ukulele. She walked halfway down the grey-pebbled beach with it.

"It's the only thing of yours I had left," Lisa said.

The wind wrapped around the instrument, feeling it.

Lisa thought to say more, but felt strange, talking to a lake. She tossed the ukulele into the water. It splashed and bobbed a few times before the mouth of the instrument flooded with water, and sank.

Lisa sniffled, and walked away.

When she got home, her mother—April—asked how her day was.

"Good," Lisa said, reflexively.

April was at the table in the kitchen, looking over papers from her work. "Glad to hear it," she said, not looking up. Lisa headed up the stairs to her room. She closed her bedroom door, and waited to the count of five before being confident enough that she was alone. Pulse beating a little fast, she went to her bed and pulled the covers off on one corner. Underneath was a baggie of marijuana. She took it, put it in the front pocket of her jeans, and folded the corner of the bed back perfectly again. Then she opened her window—slowly, so April wouldn't hear downstairs—and climbed out. She started walking to Jerret's house. She was going to trade him: one baggie of marijuana for a doorknob with a lock. It felt silly, but Lisa wasn't sure how else to get one. Certainly not

from her mom or dad, who she was trying to lock out in the first place. Lisa knew she would be able to put the doorknob on, once she had it. She just needed to get all the parts first.

Lisa opened the door of her car and stepped out. The pebbles on the beach of Lake Rabbit pushed into her bare feet, and she pushed back as she walked forward to the shore. In her arms she held a cake. Chocolate. Five cheap candles stuck out of the top. Lisa had tried to find expensive cake candles, but nobody in town seemed to have them, and with that being the case, Lisa would not lose sleep over the cheap ones.

The sky was clouded over, and based on the smell in the air, it was probably about to rain soon. Lisa set the cake down, knelt on the beach, and pulled a lighter out of her back pocket. She lit the candles. Between candles, she wiped tears out of her eyes with the palms of her hands.

When the candles had been lit, Lisa sat down cross-legged in front of the cake and the water. The waves at their highest were still about a foot from Lisa's final anniversary gift to Janie.

Lisa looked into the water for a long time, waiting for a response. An angry gust of wind to blow the candles out; a crack of lightning before it had even started raining; hell, maybe a swan. Lisa would have taken a frog. But it seemed like this time, finally, Janie was dead.

Lisa broke the silence. "I'm not coming back," she said.

The statement was met with nothing.

Lisa wiped away another tear with her thumb. "I mean I'm sorry, but I won't."

Lisa thought about pushing the cake into the water, but she didn't. If Janie cared at all, she could come up and get it.

Lisa stood up, turned around, and got back into her car. She threw it in reverse, turned the wheel far left, and looked over her shoulder as her bare foot pressed down on the gas. Then she braked, put it in drive, and was leaving for good.

For very good.

Lisa hotboxed her car on her way back into town through the

woods. Her lungs and the air all around her became a homogenous ether. As she got out of the woods she rolled down her windows, letting the smoke and the smell of everything leave into thin air.

MONSTER IN THE WOODS

George knew a great many exact rhymes, as most bad poets did. He went through the woods bouncing syllables off of himself, and thinking he was quite clever. Thinking he might write a book of poems when he got home that day, if the mood struck him right. Also like most bad poets, he was a man of few words: a man of inspiration and muses and late-night cups of coffee and esotericism; a man of typewriters and quill pens; a man of bullshit. Today, George was out bullshitting that he was a hunter.

He had been at a gathering of bad poets. There were also a couple of good poets in attendance who had not yet left the group. They all sat in a circle in the local library, discussing their works and taking turns reading aloud—or *not* reading aloud for fear of letting their soul be too visible, as the case may be. George certainly fell into the latter category more often than not. His truest work—his best work—he kept all to himself. And he could barely bare to part with things as personal as he did share.

*When I want to be happy, I know just the thing
My heart is just like a salmon in spring*

*I swim back to where I first was born
 And there I do not feel like I have been forlorn
 But I drown there in whiskey dumped in the river, oh woe is me
 And from the poisonous alcohol dumped in the river, I long to be
 set free
 So I leave where I was born and return to the blue ocean
 Until the next time I seek to fulfil my homebound devotion.*

When George wrote that one, he stuck it in his pillowcase. It was certainly too personal to share with another living soul.

George, being quite confident in his command over the craft, was often quick to be the arbiter of quality when it came to the works of his peers. “Good job in the rhyming,” he would say, “I liked the ‘sight’ and ‘delight’ wordplay. But *perhaps*, you could change the scheme from AABB to ABABA.” After offering some such advice he would sit back and cross one leg horizontally over his other, and rest his hands on his now-suspended kneecap. He took careful mental notes of which poets did write down the critiques he gave, and which ones did not.

One day—a day when George had prepared yet another poem *far* too personal to share with the group—a poet named Henry read one aloud. It was a poem about a hunter and her rifle. The rifle’s name was Sarah, and there was some nonsense about ‘the spirit’ of the woods and the game. It was all George could do to not roll his eyes while Henry was looking (though he did sneak a few eye-rolls in for the amusement of the others in the group).

When the poem was over, the circle did their snaps—the poet’s applause, as the group had started calling it. Every poet applauded except for George.

“Beautiful, just beautiful,” said James, the librarian and so-called ‘discussion leader’. George thought James was a cock. James Gowald *littered* the library with little poems in his free time. He posted them as caution signs—*The floor is quite wet / and still will be, yet / until we are closed / so please watch your toes!* He stapled them to the bulletin board, to announce upcoming events—*On the next All Hallows, we’ll celebrate scary / Come by for some candy, dressed as mutant or fairy!* But most egregiously, James left poems on the bookmarks in the children’s section of

the library, no-doubt jotted onto the paper slips with any cheap pen that he happened to be holding when he thought it up. George sat down and looked through the bunch one day, tutting at each one as he flipped through. *Wouldn't it be sad, / if you lost your place? / Put this in your book, / and a smile on your face!* Not even an end-rhyme on sad or book. George, as a man who knew *many* end-rhymes, found it sad indeed how James had given up so easily on such a simple scheme as ABAB. How distraught the children must have been when they saw that. How *not-glad*. How *mad*, even.

So in the circle of poets, when James called Henry's poem about hunting "Beautiful," that was when George knew for a fact that the poem had been quite dreadful. The damned thing hadn't even rhymed once. At least James Gowald, the cock, *attempted* rhyme. At least James Gowald, horrible as he was, could be called an *aspiring* poet. (George himself was well beyond 'aspiring', and in fact fancied himself quite an expert. "A living rhyming thesaurus," the others called him, when they were being nice.)

"George," James continued, 'leading' the discussion. "You look like you have something on your mind. Would you like to share?"

"Rubbish," George said, moving his eyes off of James to do an ocular loop up to the ceiling again. When his eyes came back down, he was surprised to see the group not nodding vigorously with him.

"What do you think isn't working?" James prodded.

"Everything," George said, and folded his arms together over his chest.

"I'm sorry to hear it didn't work for you," James said, in his too-soft librarian's voice.

"Well I thought it was wonderful," said an imbecile, and some other imbeciles nodded in agreement. George was unphased. He stayed in his corner of rightness for the rest of the night, not sharing his thoughts on the rest of the poems, since obviously none of the others were intelligent enough to understand.

That night in his apartment over New Austin's slaughterhouse, George drank coffee. He sat on the stool by his window, looking out over the New Austin forest. Cool, forest-

scented air blew in through the window, billowing the curtains. He imagined deer prancing around in the dark. George reached for the leather bound notebook on the windowsill, and the quill pen, and the ink well, and the candle, and the matches. By the time he had collected everything, his muse had left him. Well, damn it all. This was no state to be writing in anyways: his caffeine buzz was long-since gone. Nobody on earth could be inspired under those conditions. George, quite fussily, stood up and went to his kitchen for some bourbon. Perhaps his muse would return to him drunk. Like taking a cock in the ass, George's poems often flowed better when they were well lubricated.

George poured himself a drink. He dumped it out into the sink when he deemed it to have a poor amount of ice, and poured another one, deeming this one to have the correct amount. He returned to his windowsill, where the candle was lit, the matchbook put away, the leather bound notebook open, and the pen sitting ready in the inkwell.

George set to work inscribing his soul into the immortal word.

When the fall air comes in from the east

The candle was melted down to the bottom of the candleholder by the time George had gotten this far into the poem. George sighed loudly—pointedly—out the window. He imagined his muse prancing with the deer instead of with him, and hung his head. He had tried, at least. How Ironic, he thought with a capital I, that he was unable to write a poem about his muse leaving him, on account of said muse having left. He crawled into bed. His pillow and the mattress crinkled from all of the poems he had placed under them. A disproportionate number of these poems started with the word *when*, or on special occasion, *whenever*.

The next morning, George brushed off the poems that had stuck to him in his sleep and got out of bed. He went to his windowsill and looked down at his open leather bound notebook. There the one line sat, staring back up at him.

When the fall air comes in from the east

He flipped to the adjacent pages in the book: perhaps he had blacked out and written more.

No. This was all. George closed his book and ruffled his beard.

What *did* happen when the fall air came in from the east, George wondered.

He had never been much of an outdoorsman. He was quite content to stay inside, in libraries bars and coffee shops, staring down at leather bound notebooks. He had never been hunting at all. Never seen a deer in person. He was... *fairly* certain that they lived in the woods surrounding New Austin. George stopped ruffling his beard and went to get ready for his job at New Austin's ammunitions factory.

For eight eye-glazed hours he sat in front of a conveyor belt, folding the tops onto cardboard boxes of .223 ammo.

When George got off work, he decided to go investigate the woods. First he stopped by his apartment to find a suitable outfit for the occasion, and to borrow a hunting rifle from his neighbor. George had seen his neighbor at the store on the weekends, purchasing the same kinds of ammo that George packaged on the weekdays.

"Whajuneeanor?" George's neighbor asked. George's neighbor was a severe alcoholic.

"For hunting," George answered. George spoke alcoholic in all dialects and 200 proofs.

"Geh," George's neighbor said, and wobbled his head and left. He returned to the door moments later with a map, a hunting rifle, and a box of ammunition. He handed the items to George. "Avun," George's neighbor wished, and closed the door shut.

George went back to his own apartment and spread the map out over his coffee table, brushing aside a pile of books he had never opened to make room. The map was hand-drawn. On the bottom part of the map (others besides George might call this part 'the south'), there was the slaughterhouse. George deduced that the line going up (north) from the slaughterhouse must have been the road, which did indeed lead into some woods just beyond the slaughterhouse's property, as George recalled. He confirmed this by looking out the window, at where the road was eaten by the

woods. He felt cocky in his cartography skills as he walked back from the window to the coffee table.

The road led up to Lake Rabbit. (At the bottom of the map was a scale that George could have used to determine just how long the road went before coming to Lake Rabbit. He ignored this scale as decoration, just as he had ignored the compass rose beside it.) Near Lake Rabbit, a small line parted from the big road line. The small line (a trail) continued into the woods, bending around and around, forming a small loop through the forest. (The loop was actually quite large). Before the loop even forked off into two separate paths (five miles east of the road), there was a spot on the path that had an X over it, and the word 'Deer Shack' written beside that.

George left his apartment with the rifle and the ammunition. He left the map behind, as he had memorized it. (He had not. He was lost in less than an hour, clobbering through brush that bore no semblance to the trail that he thought he was on.)

As the sun was setting, George felt a rumbling in his stomach. He decided he would pause his excursion to the hunting cabin and hunt right in the spot he stood at. Then, he would cook his hard-earned venison over the fire he was incapable of starting, and appreciate his hard-earned meal. (He had, in his brief and unproductive time in the woods, grown quite fond of the term 'hard-earned.')

He sat down at the base of a tree. There, he smoothed down his grey jacket, tucked down his grey cap, and straightened his grey-green scarf. He sat cross-legged with the rifle in his lap, looking out at the woods.

He sat at the top of a hill. Or, looking at more of his surroundings, he sat at the cusp of a bowl: the landscape sloped downwards, forming a sort of woodland basin. George found this geometry (geology or geography) interesting. On all sides, the slope was quite steep: it was almost the curvature of the inside of a shot glass. The basin as a whole was somewhat larger than New Austin's bar. Slightly larger than New Austin's library as well. Within the basin, there was low flora: bushes, grass, and weeds, all staying close to the ground and the edges of the basin. Though trees surrounded the basin, there were no trees inside of it.

While George looked at all of this, he noticed that it was getting to be dark out. He had never been in the woods at night—he had scarce been in the woods at all. He supposed that he had two options: he could return home to his apartment, or he could stick it out in the woods at the deer shack. There were merits to either option, to be sure. And George had not forgotten why he was out here to begin with: there was an injustice in the poetic world; a rubbish poem in the library's weekly poetry meetings that the others in the circle had thought was good, because they had never seen a *truly* good poem about a huntsman and her gun. (All members of the poetry circle, including George, had read *My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun*, by Emily Dickinson. But George had forgotten it.) It was George's burden, he was quite sure, to write them the first good poem about hunting that they had seen. And to do that, George would have to write what he knew. And to write what he knew, George would have to know what it was like to take the life of a woodland animal. He would honestly take a squirrel. George walked off towards the deer shack to spend the night. He supposed (correctly, for a change) that the deer shack would be stocked with some foodstuffs and bedding for an overnight stay.

As he plucked through the woods, the sounds of his feet snapping twigs and stomping leaves filled his ears. The darker it got, though, the more attuned George became with the *other* sounds that the woods were making. A swarth of bird- and bug-calls, which George pretended to be able to name. Some wind passing through the trees. Far away, wolves called to one another. (Given that George was the one distinguishing them to be wolves, there was in actuality an equal chance of them being wolves or of them being a collection of New Austin's many domestic dogs. On this particular night, it happened to be both.)

George stopped to listen. Then he nodded, took out his pocket-notebook and a pen, and began to write. He spun stanzas about the baying wolfpacks, couplets for the birds calling to one-another, quatrains on chittering rodents, odes to the rustling leaves and snapping branches on the forest floor nearby, and quite a compelling sonnet indeed regarding the *true* 'spirit' of the hunt.

As he read back over his work, he was still unaware of the

fact that there were footsteps coming towards him. This fact only dimly dawned on him by the time he had closed the pocket-notebook and begun walking again.

The reason he had closed his notebook—as he could have quite contentedly spent another hour staring at his own writing—was because it had gotten too dark to read. George could no longer see much of the forest in front of himself at all: it was like fumbling around his bedroom at night in search of a light switch, except here, the light switch was a building situated one mile away. After getting caught by low-hanging branches one-too-many times, George started walking with his hands out in front of his face.

While he walked, George whistled a tune to himself. He wasn't much for music, as he found that most of it clouded his literary creativity, but every now and again he did indulge in some death metal. He realized, as he *was* alone in the woods, that he had no reason *not* to do the vocals at this moment.

In his best low voice, he rumbled out the lyrics to his favorite piece.

And behind him, something in the dark growled back.

George spun around. There were an abundance of shadows in the forest, stretching all the way from the ground to the sky among the trees. George held his breath as he scanned around for a shadow that growled. But he found none. The entire woods had gone silent.

When George started walking again, he did so slowly, self-conscious of the noise he was making as he pressed his feet into the foliage. All of the birds and bugs and even the winds from before remained silent.

No matter how quietly George walked, he was the loudest thing.

George ran a hand along the rifle he held; brushed his thumb against the smooth metal parts; slid his palm over the biting metal corners; teased the trigger with his index finger. In his head, George had begun imagining scarier things in the woods than deer.

He stopped walking.

The footsteps behind him stopped a hair of a second later.

George spun around again, and shouted: “If you don’t—”
BANG!

After accidentally pulling the trigger, George saw the monster for just a moment in the muzzle flash: a tall, muscle-bound brute, covered in grey hair from head to toe. It had had claws and teeth, and its eyes reflected the flash of the gunshot like two full moons.

In his quick wit, George pulled the trigger a second time. But in his poor understanding, the gun did not have a round in the chamber to fire.

George felt his shoulder jostled by a clawed hand.

When George put his own hand to his shoulder, he found it wet with his own blood. In fact, it was only then that the pain hit home: George howled a death-metal roar, and swung the rifle like an axe at the darkness in front of himself.

The hit landed, hard enough that it knocked the rifle from George’s grip. There was a dog-like whimper in the dark.

George began to run. He made it a very short distance before flying over a steep decline in the ground; he fell through the air first, and then tumbled down the steep hill, breaking one ankle on the impact and twisting the other while rolling. Alone in the woods with a monster very nearby, George found that it was impossible for him to get up and run any farther, or even to stand. There was an invisible line between his gouged shoulder and his broken ankle that felt like a seatbelt made of fire, holding him to the ground.

George looked up from the ground at his surroundings. The hill he’d fallen down turned all around him. It was the same pit in the woods that he had stopped to rest at earlier: George was at the bottom of a bowl.

At the lip of the bowl, George heard the woods being trampled as the creature neared. The poet felt around in the brush for something to use as a weapon. There were only roots and dirt. He held onto those tightly as he writhed.

As the werewolf crawled down into the bowl, George fixed his last thoughts on a handful of lines that he liked a lot.

*flesh covers
the bone and the*

*flesh searches
for more than
flesh.*

He couldn't remember who wrote it. Someone important. But as he was eaten, George distracted himself from the monster by wondering whether it was gaining more from his body than he ever did.

WEREWOLF

“I am dating a werewolf,” Jenna said to herself (and secretly to Dexter) as she looked at the beard hair in the sink. It was not a figure of speech, but a literal statement of fact. Jenna had learned on their second date that during every full moon, her boyfriend turned into a hairy monster. This didn’t concern her so much: she had her own faults too, after all. When he had admitted to his lycanthropy, she had admitted to a habit of biting her nails when she was nervous, and tapping her foot when she sat for too long, and smoking cigarettes a few times a year. “Nobody’s perfect,” she told him. “It is only during the full moon though?”

He said that it was, and she told him that that was perfectly fine then, as long as he was careful about it, which he assured her that he was.

Jenna was beginning to suspect, though, that there were effects beyond the monthly unholy transformations. Dexter grew—and shed—body hair faster than any normal human being possibly could. His apartment’s bathroom was a burly farm of curled black hairs that Jenna just couldn’t stand to be in any longer: she walked out of the bathroom, brushing the hairs off the

doorknob before turning it.

Dexter sat on his couch, twisting a rubix cube.

“You ever play with one of these things?” he asked. (He was not, at present, a creature of the night. He was a man with a thick moustache, as well as stubble that had grown even thicker while Jenna had been in the bathroom. His hair was loosely curled, with a bald spot at the top. Secretly, Jenna loathed his bald spot. She hadn’t seen it at first, but on their third date when he had jokingly knelt down to kiss her hand, she got a glaring eyeful of baldness on an otherwise too-hairy man. She wished so much that she could pick the bald spot up and move it somewhere else, like to his chest or groin. On their fourth date, which had been last night, Jenna had had all of her fears about his pubic hair confirmed.)

“Sorry, what was your question?” Jenna asked, blinking at her boyfriend on the couch.

“Rubix cube,” Dexter said. He tossed it straight up into the air with a spin, and caught it when it fell back to him. “Ever solve one of these?”

“Never touched one,” Jenna said. She went and sat down on the couch.

Dexter handed her the cube. She twisted it around. “Ooh,” she said. She actually liked the thing a lot. She would have to phone her sister and say that she wasn’t upset with her nephew anymore for playing with one of these all through thanksgiving dinner.

“There’s a trick to solving them,” Dexter said. He scooped closer beside Jenna on the couch, and looked down at the cube with her. “But I threw the manual out with the rest of the packaging by mistake.”

“It comes with directions on how to solve it?”

“Mhmm.”

“Pff. That’s dumb.”

“Shyah,” Dexter said.

Jenna laughed. She liked the beach-bum lingo that still clung to Dexter, even after his years of being away from the ocean.

Dexter and Jenna kissed. His lips were stubbly.

Jenna turned the rubix cube a couple more times. She had solved the green side, but wasn’t sure how she was supposed to solve the rest of it without messing up the greens all over again.

“Hey, Jenna?” Dexter said.

Jenna looked up from the rubix cube. Dexter sat on the other side of the couch with his knees tucked up into his folded arms. He sat with his back against the couch’s opposite arm, facing her.

“What’s wrong, Dex?”

Dexter ran a hand back through his hair. Jenna imagined his fingertips sliding against the smooth skin of his bald spot. He said something, but she missed it, on account of suppressing her gagging. He looked at her hopefully.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I killed someone during the last full moon, Jen.”

“Oh. Oh, my.” Jenna hadn’t fully remembered that werewolves did that.

“I don’t know how I got out of the garage,” Dexter said—he had explained previously that during full moons, he had a close friend named Lysander lock him in a garage for the night. “I think he must have not put one of the chains on right. I don’t know. But it’s been eating me up inside, and I had to tell someone.”

Jenna nodded.

“Are we okay?”

Jenna stayed perfectly still.

“I’m sorry if that was too much,” Dexter said, and hung his head. Jenna closed her eyes to avoid seeing his bald spot, and shuffled closer to him on the couch. She put an arm on his back, rubbing in small circles.

Soon she found herself just stroking his back from top to bottom, like she was petting a wolf.

“I want to see next time,” she said.

“Mm? Jenna, I don’t know if that’s—”

“No. If this is something you are... I need to see it.”

“Okay,” he said.

She kissed him. He slid a hand down her back. They made love on the couch.

Back in her car, sitting out in Dexter’s apartment’s parking lot, Jenna looked at her phone. She’d found an app that tracked the moon cycles. The next full moon was not that night, but the one after it.

Jenna reached into her glovebox and took out the pack of

cigarettes and the lighter. She sat in her car in the parking lot, window cracked, daydreaming. She daydreamed about introducing Dexter to her parents, and what they would think of him. She would *certainly* not mention the fact that he was a werewolf to *them*. No, that wouldn't go over well with her parents at all, who were Christian, and most likely considered werewolves unholy.

She reached around herself and put a hand on the small of her back, rubbing a place where he'd scratched her while they were making love. It still stung. Jenna took her hand off of the scratch, and glanced at her fingers. They were a tiny bit redder than normal. She brought them under her nose and smelled. It wasn't blood, at least. Probably just redder fingertips from rubbing them against herself. Still. What an *animal* Dex was.

She sat parked in the car until she'd finished her cigarette. When it had burned all the way down to the filter, she eyed the rest of the pack sitting in the passenger seat. A part of her did want a second cigarette, but a much, much bigger part of her was repulsed by the idea. She wasn't a smoker—not really. But every few months, it was hard to help herself. Something overpowered her, compelled her to do something for a while, and then afterwards she felt repulsed, but better.

On her way back to her townhome, Jenna listened to the radio. Once parked in her driveway, she took out her phone, put her earbuds in, and sat for a long time in the car looking through her music before settling on Billy Idol's *Dancing with Myself*. After hitting play on her phone, she turned off her car radio, took her keys out of the ignition, and walked inside. She took off her shoes at the door, walked into the kitchen to grab a snack—chips and a bottle of lemonade—and then walked into her living room and turned on the TV. Once the TV was on, Jenna turned off *Dancing with Myself*, which had almost been done playing. Jenna rewatched two seasons of *Scrubs* on Netflix, and in the end, managed to fall asleep on her couch before having the time for another real, intimate thought that day.

When she woke up, she had a missed call and a text from Dexter. He said he'd be by around 5pm to pick her up for dinner, and then after that they would go to Lysander's if she still wanted

to.

She did still want to, she was pretty sure. It was eleven in the morning, so she had plenty of time to decide.

Jenna sank back into her couch. She reached for her laptop, which sat closed on the living room floor. She opened it, and rested it on her stomach as she typed *werewolf* into Google Images.

She scrolled through pages and pages of images of moonlit monsters. A lot of them had a silverish aura about them, and snarled. Jenna tried to imagine Dexter as any of the pictures she was looking at, but had a very hard time seeing it.

She had a very hard time feeling *anything* as she looked through the pictures.

Before she could explore that thought, she reached for her phone and put the end of *Dancing with Myself* back on.

She didn't know, until the song started playing again, that her phone was set to repeat. On the second listening, her living room was a new-wave dancefloor as she lip-synched, pointed, and pumped her hips at an imaginary crowd.

The imaginary crowd was *super* into it. She blew them a kiss, and paused the song so as not to ruin the afterglow by having it play over again before the right time for an encore. She waved and struck poses for her audience. She did a Karate-Kid style crane-kick—and her earbuds fell out. And even though they hadn't been playing anything anyways, Jenna was slammed back into her living room, alone, with the thought that had been bugging her for a while now:

She wasn't attracted to werewolves. Not in the fucking *slightest*.

She tried escaping back into her music, but her real thoughts had strong-armed their way through the door.

Dexter was charming enough. He was enjoyable to be around: had a way of making Jenna smile and feel cozy. But all the excessive hair, and the idea that he was part wolf, and to top it off, the fact that he couldn't help himself from *killing* people? Those were *not* attractive features. She didn't care what the teenagers reading the sexy werewolf novels thought. They were wrong. Wolves—even dogs, to a large extent—were a little bit disgusting.

The thought of making them *erotic* made Jenna queasy.

She went to find something to eat. Something to settle her stomach, and to take her mind off of Dexter. She would see his transformation for herself soon enough. And then she would know what to think, and she would be able to decide what to do from there. In the meantime, she occupied herself running errands around New Austin. She had a couple of books to return to the library, and a check-engine light that she'd been told was probably fine, but which she did want to get looked at.

On the library's bulletin board she noticed a flyer with a man's photograph printed on it, asking if anyone had seen him, or heard anything about where he might be. The man's name was George. Jenna stood for a while at the bulletin board, arms crossed over her chest, looking at George, whose life her boyfriend had probably taken by mistake a month ago. Jenna wondered if Dexter had even remembered what George looked like.

As Jenna returned her books, the librarian said that he'd noticed her looking at the flyer, and asked if she knew George at all. She said she didn't, and he nodded.

In the waiting room at the mechanic's, Jenna leafed through magazines.

When her car was checked out and given the all-clear, Jenna headed home. The time was coming sooner than she hoped it might. Some part of her definitely felt like she should be doing something meaningful while she waited? But *meaningful* was difficult to unpack in the face of disinterest. It wasn't that she *hated* werewolves. There could easily be something meaningful in *that*. Instead she sat in a chair in her room, a pen in her mouth, damn-near comatose.

She put more mental energy into figuring out where the pen had come from than she did thinking about what tonight would bring.

By the time Dexter rang her doorbell, she was very sure that she'd taken the pen from the mechanic by mistake, and that she might return it later if she was out. She didn't suppose the mechanic would care, really. But she would a little bit, and it wasn't like she was doing much that was all that important.

Dexter had to ring the doorbell another time before Jenna got

up out of the chair and walked to the door. She grabbed her purse, put on her shoes, and stepped outside.

Dexter hugged her at the door, and she hugged him back. They walked to his car. It was a nice day out. In New Austin, according to most people who lived there, a ‘nice’ day was a cool day. It was normally very hot. The people of New Austin were especially happy when it was overcast, or even better, raining.

That day there wasn’t rain—the sky was bright blue and cloudless for as far as Jenna could see. There was a breeze though. And it was a really, really nice one.

Jenna sat down in the passenger seat of Dexter’s car. She noted that the driver’s seat was all but upholstered in his hair, but that there was a very short half-life of hair beyond that—the passenger seat was quite thankfully clean.

Dexter buckled his seat belt. “Where do you want to eat?” he asked.

“I don’t know if I’m really hungry,” Jenna said.

Dexter put the car in drive. “Yeah, me neither actually,” he said. “Should we just go straight to Lysander’s then?”

“I’m down.”

“Gnarly.”

Lysander’s house was a little ways out of town: one of the last properties in New Austin, down a long dirt driveway into the woods off of the highway.

Lysander’s house was almost exactly what Jenna expected: something that resembled a two-story tall shack. The dirt driveway looped into a ring in front of the house. Dexter circled around most of the ring and then parked, so the car was facing back away from the house the way they had come. There was a truck parked in the lawn. A car was parked in the lawn as well, but considering the paint was all gone and the roof was rusted clear through, Jenna didn’t suppose that the car was working at that time.

Dexter and Jenna walked up to Lysander’s front door. Dexter knocked.

From somewhere far inside the house, there was a howl in response.

Jenna looked at Dexter.

Dexter rolled his eyes, and knocked again.

The front door opened, revealing a (human) man with a short blonde beard, a fauxhawk, and a multitude of facial tattoos. With a grin, looking at Dexter, the man let out a much quieter howl.

“You know,” Dexter said, “you *can* pretend you’re *not* excited to see me here.”

“Most excitement I get all month,” Lysander said. He turned around and walked inside, beckoning Dexter and Jenna along with a *c’mon* gesture over his shoulder.

The two followed him in.

The inside of the house was *also* almost exactly what Jenna expected.

“Didn’t think you’d be here for a while yet, but I’ve got things mostly set up in the garage,” Lysander said. His voice had a scratch to it. It was *somewhat* like a heavy smoker’s voice, but Jenna barely smelled cigarette smoke in the house. She wondered whether he’d had a bad throat infection at some point in his life, but knew that asking would be rude.

Lysander lead the way to the back porch, where a fold-out table sat. A deck of cards was on top of it, and an ashtray, and a mostly-empty beer bottle. They found card games that all of them knew how to play while they passed the time talking.

Jenna learned that Dexter and Lysander had met online, and that Lysander was a Satanist, which was wholly unsurprising. The inverted cross tattoo on his right cheekbone was one giveaway. His taste in décor was another, right down to the cards that they played with, the suits of which were goats, pentacles, demons, and 666s. Having a suit that was also a number was less confusing than Jenna initially thought it might be.

“You never told me how you got turned into a werewolf to begin with,” Jenna mentioned, making conversation. They were playing golf—the card game golf—at that particular moment.

“Didn’t I?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Hm, yeah, I guess not,” Dexter said. He thought for a second, flipped over one of his cards, and then continued as Lysander played. “I was in California—this was during my beach days—and me and some people were spending the night on the beach

around a campfire.”

“Was Chuck there?”

“Nah.”

“Dave?”

“Nah.”

“Did you know *any* of them?”

“Naaah. We were all *hoa* on the beach.”

Jenna laughed, and shook her head. She *liked* surfer-Dexter. The same surfer-Dexter who she’d picked up some Hawaiian from, including *hoa*, which meant friend. Hearing the things she had about his old life, she was a little surprised that he didn’t call the other beach bums *ohana*: family.

“But that night there was this one chick. *Man*.”

Lysander interjected, gesturing to Jenna and saying, “Careful this one’s not the jealous type.”

Dexter looked to Jenna, who waved the comment off, and told him to keep going.

“She was *sexy*,” Dexter said. “Tribal tattoos, piercings, dyed hair, the whole thing. I hadn’t ever seen anyone pull the look off quite like she had. There was a realness to how she rocked it, which in hindsight maybe makes a whole lot of sense. But I was cool with her and she was cool with me, and we got to talking. We ended up snaking off under the pier, and one thing lead to another... and she bit me. And that was the start of it.”

“She turned into a werewolf right there on the beach?”

“Man, I never saw her as a werewolf *ever*. I didn’t know *I’d* turned into one until the next full moon. That kind of thing happens, apparently. I... I spent a long time looking for her again. Just for closure, or... I don’t know. But that was her. Beth. Fun times.”

Jenna leaned over and kissed Dexter.

When it was getting dark, the three headed into the garage. There, there was a cage. It took center-stage on the cement floor, and chains were fed into it from the outside like dungeon party streamers.

Jenna asked, “How much of this did you have *before* knowing Dexter?”

“Just needed to resize some of the cuffs,” Lysander said,

smiling. He picked up the biggest cuff, which Jenna guessed was Dexter's collar. The Satanist slipped it over his own head and slid it back off again, demonstrating the necessity of the resizing. "My sub was *pissed* when she found out I got a new pet."

At that Lysander ruffled Dexter's hair. Dexter pushed him away, huffed, and combed his hair back down into place with his fingers.

"Bad dog."

"*Fuck* off."

Jenna crossed her arms, watching the two get ready. Dexter stepped into the cage. Lysander locked it. Dexter stripped out of his clothes, and handed them out through the bars to Lysander, who placed them by the doorway into the house. Inside the cage, Dexter put his arms, legs, and neck through the appropriate cuffs and collar, lying down. Outside of the cage, Lysander secured the chains to their metal anchors embedded into the garage's cement floor. The further into the process they got, the more it occurred to Jenna that Dexter wasn't happy to be there—that he didn't get a sense of joy from this transformation, just as much as she didn't.

"Dex?" she said.

"Yeah Jen?" Dexter responded. Through the cage bars, she saw that he looked unwell. There was a lump in his throat, and he was sweating a bit, even on the cool day.

"Thank you for showing me this."

Dexter nodded, and then doubled over. As he clutched at his stomach, one of his arms came out of its cuff, all of which were still quite loose on him.

"Hey!" Lysander shouted, and banged on the cage with a police baton—by this point, Jenna had half expected Lysander to be dressed in black leather. "Arm back in the cuff, Dexter!"

Dexter drug his legs back and forth on the floor, grinding them into the ground as he twisted around. He worked his hand back into the cuff, all the while letting out a moan. He grabbed a chain, and clenched it in a tight, tight fist.

Jenna had a compulsive drive to help him. To stop his pain. But she knew that if such a thing was possible, he'd have done it years ago.

Dexter's moan shifted pitches like a cracked voice screaming,

until the creature inside of the cage was howling. Grey hair covered his elongated face and enormous body. The werewolf stopped writhing, and stood.

When he did, Lysander yanked on two of the chains, pulling the werewolf's arms taut to either side, suspending Dexter on an invisible crucifix.

"Easy, boy!"

Dexter roared at Lysander and lunged, but the chains held strong.

Lysander let go of his chains. Dexter lunged again, but again, the chains held, this time on their own. Tentatively, Lysander stepped back. He stood beside Jenna, hands on his hips.

"Well, you wanted to see it," Lysander said. He gestured. "He'll be like this all night. Normally I make sure everything's set up right and then I go have my own fun until morning, but on account of what happened last time, I'm going to stick around. If you get bored, you're welcome to sleep on the couch."

Jenna walked up to the cage's bars. The werewolf inside snarled at her, and its muscles flexed like it meant to grab her, but couldn't move. It was *very* hard to see any trace of Dexter in the monster in the cage. They both had a lot of hair—after that, the resemblances were over. Jenna walked around the bars, looking at the beast from all angles, until she came to the conclusion: twenty-nine days out of the month, Dexter *was* human after all.

She thanked Dexter again before leaving the garage, though she was uncertain that her boyfriend could really hear her. She went out front to the ring-shaped driveway, where it was dark now, and just laid down in the grassy center of the ring, looking up at the stars and the full moon. A cool breeze fell over her like a blanket.

She had a dream where she was surfing, and the water was made out of hair, and as long as she rode the wave and stayed above it, everything was fine.

She started awake when there was a metallic *bang* that came from the garage. It was still nighttime when she awoke. She started walking towards the house, but froze in her tracks when she heard another bang, and saw the garage door shudder.

From behind the garage door, there was a howl.

Jenna heard Lysander shouting her name inside the garage, telling her to run and hide.

The werewolf banged on the garage door again, this time making it buckle outwards.

Jenna looked to Dexter's car, which she knew was locked. The keys were inside the garage, sitting in the pocket of Dexter's pants. Jenna ran into the house, clearing the front door just as another *bang* erupted from the garage door. She ran up the stairs, into a bedroom, and closed and locked the door behind herself.

In the bedroom, she looked out the window, down at the ring driveway. With one final bang, the garage door fell down, and the werewolf bounded out. He stayed a moment in the driveway at the grassy center of the ring, where Jenna had slept.

Then he lifted his head up to the moon, howled, and bounded off into the forest.

Jenna stayed in the bedroom until the sun rose. Once it had, she went down into the garage. There, Lysander stood inside the cage, leaning forward against the bars. "Any sign of him?" he asked.

Jenna shook her head.

"Good," Lysander said. He turned, knelt down, and picked the keys to the cage up from the ground. Then he reached through the bars, and unlocked the door. He stepped out and sighed. "I don't know if I can keep doing this for him. It's fun, but... fuck this one was close."

"Are you alright?"

Lysander nodded. "If he scratched or bit me, I wouldn't be here either right now. Goddamn son of a bitch."

"So is he going to come back here, or..."

"Last time he got out, he went straight home. If he does come here I'll call you. You can go. Thanks for being smart and not trying any Beauty and the Beast shit."

"Yeah, and thank *you* for... well, thank you for trying to keep him safe."

Jenna picked up Dexter's clothes, took his keys out of his pocket, and headed out to his car. His driver's seat, still covered in his human hair, squeezed Jenna out. But it wasn't nearly as big of a thing as she'd thought it was before.

She went back to his apartment to check if he was there. He was not. She left his car in the parking lot, and walked back to her townhouse.

There, she spent months waiting for her Dexter to return. Which he didn't.

HUNTER

I. Scab

Clay was out at night looking for something that, at the age of fifteen, he was not going to find: freedom. He glided over Sakura Street like a phantom, on a board that he had modded and wrenched on until it approximated silence. The Hover Board. It didn't fly, but when he was skating on something that barely even hummed, it sure felt like flight. He was dressed head-to-toe in black and wore a mask of eyeliner, so that he felt invisible. He had not felt invisible at the supermarket in the makeup aisle, but for this invisibility at night, it was worth it. A rustle in shadows; a hum among crickets; an undetectable fifteen-year-old boy. He had always had a thing for disappearing.

Sakura Street was the street Clay had been kidnapped on, close to a decade ago. He remembered it in a series of stills and motions, but mostly as a taste. He remembered so cleanly the taste of the kidnapper's blood as he bit his arm. Clay could never be a vegetarian after tasting something like that. That was for damn sure. Clay turned off of Sakura Street, and onto Marble. He kicked

and pushed, and was gliding at a good speed again.

As he went, he rubbed a scab on his palm. It was right over the meaty part of the hand, between the wrist and thumb. New, hard, bumpy skin, that didn't bend like the rest of his skin. It didn't feel like a part of himself yet.

He brought his hands apart momentarily to kick and push again. As he did, he felt the lighter in his back pocket press against his ass. He didn't smoke, but he thought it would be cool if he did. Feeling cool was why he had the folding knife in his other back pocket. He'd never *really* had to use it, but he felt secure just having it.

He went back to rubbing at his scab, finding the edges now, where the skin did bend. Clay thought about skating out of town. He thought about going down a road, forever. There wasn't a lot he would miss about New Austin. His friends, maybe. They would get over him. He made a turn off of Marble, down another road that connected in a few blocks with the highway.

Clay looked down at his hands and saw red coating his fingers and palm. His scab had come off, and he was bleeding again. He raised a finger to his mouth and sucked on it as he skated, smelling and tasting the iron of blood. He skated until he was at the highway, and he kept going. The highway was very, very long, but he pushed back any doubts about whether he could make it to the next town at least, which was only a twenty-minute drive, through woods and fields. There weren't any cars out. Apparently nobody else was trying to escape.

Clay did feel trapped by New Austin, but not in the sense that New Austin was a cage. Clay felt like New Austin was a meteor, and that he was the only man standing on it: separated from everyone else on the planet, and crashing. He skated faster and faster as he got further from town: gravity pushed him forward firmly by both shoulders, like getting a push on the swings. Clay kicked, and pushed, and kicked harder, and pushed harder, and kicked harder, and then he fell off his board and tripped into the dark and it really did feel like falling into outer space. Clay stuck out a hand as he fell, bracing for impact.

He landed on something bad.

Clay yanked back his hand. He sat up on the side of the road

in the moonlight, looking down at his arm where a long, flat piece of rusty metal stuck out of his wrist. He gaped at it. He reached to pull it out, then second-guessed himself, feeling how deep it was. He looked closer. He tried to convince himself that at least some of the blood was from the scab he'd opened earlier, but that was a lie. He'd already licked his hands clean of that. This blood was fresh and oozing, flowing down to his elbow as he held his forearm up for examination. *Motherfucker.*

He looked around. He was at a bend in the road, in the woods. There was stillness. No life. Not even the sounds of birds or frogs. He really might as well have been on mars.

Clay took a deep breath, and took a hold of the metal. He decided to wiggle it once, just to see how it might feel to pull it out.

He saw a bright flash of white, and winced. It felt a million times worse than when he'd been pushed to the ground yesterday by Jory, and scraped the meaty part of his palm on the asphalt behind the school. Jory had called Clay a faggot before pushing him, which was the part that caught Clay off-guard: he didn't know how Jory knew that.

Clay clenched his teeth and yanked the metal out of his arm, and then screamed—*howled*—into the abyss. He clutched his arm against his chest while he kicked hard at the road, cursing whatever shit-for-brains had left sharp metal out in the woods to rust.

He wondered if he would have to get tetanus shots. Fucking likely.

When Jory had called Clay a faggot, Jory hadn't *really* known that Clay was a faggot. That much was obvious to Clay in hindsight.

Clay looked around for his board. Of course the thing was *somewhere*. But *somewhere* became a lot emptier in the dark. Clay stood up and started pacing around, head-down, scanning the ground for his deck. He held his wrist tight against his chest while he walked.

It hadn't been Jory *calling* Clay a faggot that messed with Clay. Genuinely, Clay didn't give a shit what Jory said. But when Jory said "faggot," Clay's brain had internally responded in a

microsecond: “Yeah, that’s me. What’s up, fucker?”

Before then, Clay had been on the fence about homosexuality. Most guys were probably curious about each other in the same way he was. Most guys probably daydreamed about handsome dudes.

But getting called faggot was an awakening. As he sat on the ground in front of Jory, it wasn’t the scrape on his hand that hurt, or even the skinhead’s derogatory sting. It was the realization that the skinhead was fucking right, and that right then and there, Clay had to come out to himself: Yeah. Gay. Huh.

He wanted to fight about it. He stood up and got in Jory’s face. Jory’s bald head reflected the sunlight in a way that was kind of blinding. Clay clenched his fists. For a few carnivorous moments, he pictured how fun it would be to strangle someone. But then, Clay saw over Jory’s shoulder that others were watching now. Maybe they had seen Jory make the first push, but maybe they hadn’t. Clay walked away.

As he did, Jory yelled after him, calling him a queer. Clay had no objection to that. It felt needless of Jory to even bring it up, frankly. Clay bit his tongue, but on his walk home, he played out alternative scenarios, imagining how he could have responded.

“Yeah. I think dicks are great. I’d *really* like to suck one.”

Mostly, Clay was very glad that he’d held his tongue.

Eventually in the dark, Clay found his board. It had rolled to the other side of the road, silently. He stepped onto it, and started skating home.

On the way, he kept his cut pressed hard to his chest. He wanted to look at the wound. To dig into it and feel around, and understand the root of the pain he was in. He was hella curious. He also wasn’t stupid. He knew that if he lost much more blood than he already had, he would pass out—he felt lightheaded as it was. Part of him wished that his board wasn’t silent, but loud: loud enough to keep him awake no matter what. Loud enough that someone would hear him out here.

Clay was a virgin. He thought about that while he skated. He thought about how he might die without getting to fuck.

Then he thought about how he might die.

He had always imagined it would be suicide. Now with a cut

wrist, it would look like suicide to anyone who found him. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

He came around another bend in the woods, and in the distance, he saw the red glow of a stoplight. He skated past the sign that said New Austin City Limits. It always seemed off, calling the town a city, even if technically it might have been.

Clay hoped, suddenly, that his last thought would not be about the town.

Clay's eyes were heavy. His eyeliner pulled down on him, making him stumble on his board a couple of times. He was glad he had found the board, at least. He wouldn't have made it nearly this far back without it. One last ride. Clay breathed the nighttime air like a drug. It tingled on his tongue.

Coming up the road, Clay saw headlights.

He blinked, and then there was a grey car beside him, with the driver getting out and asking what was going on here, how did this happen Clay, is there anyone else hurt. The driver was someone Clay knew from school, kind of. He tried to remember her name.

She drove back into town like a stunt driver, blowing stop signs and doing almost a hundred through a thirty. Clay sat upright in the back, trying not to bleed out on her seats.

"I didn't try to kill myself," Clay asserted to Lisa. Lisa. "I know how it looks."

Lisa said she believed him, and kept driving to the hospital.

Clay didn't entirely realize that he was lucky to be alive, until he heard one of the doctors say so, and then he was scared.

II. The Crew

Lane's eyes were bloodshot as he roved through the high school parking lot in his truck. He hadn't slept at all the last night. His dog, Jennifer, had kept barking at something nonstop. Vicious barks aimed out the front door. Lane had seen his dad glaring at Jennifer from the living room couch like an angry ape, and so he took Jennifer up to his room. As he led her up the stairs by her collar, she barked the whole way, trying to fight against him and run back to the front door. Lane had to pick her up and bring her

to his room in his arms. She was a big dog, but Lane was strong enough to heft her up the stairs.

In his room, she barked at the window.

Lane opened it, hoping she would smell whatever it was she was barking about and get over it, but she didn't. She kept barking out at the dark woods around the farmhouse. Lane looked hard into the trees, but he didn't see much of anything at all.

At one point Lane did try to sleep. He put a pillow over his head, and with a muffled voice, told Jennifer once again to shut the hell up.

Her barks became whinier. There was a slight howl in them. A baying. A crying.

Lane got out of bed, grabbed his pillow and blanket, and laid down beside Jennifer Lawrence. He pet her. She didn't stop barking at the window, but she did bark a little quieter with Lane lying down beside her.

"It's okay girl," he told her through the night. "Whatever's wrong, you're fine."

In the morning when the sun came up, Jennifer stopped.

"Y'alright?" he asked.

She put a paw on Lane's shoulder, pinning him down while she licked his face.

"Good girl," Lane said, turning his head to avoid getting kissed on the mouth. He got up, unlocked his bedroom door, and the two of them walked downstairs. Lane was rarely up before his dad, but it seemed he and Jennifer had the first floor to themselves that morning. Lane ate quick and got the hell out before the old man stirred.

Lane let Jennifer outside. She followed him to his truck, and sat watching him while he buckled in. He sat for a second, looking at how awake she was. Tiredness clung to Lane's body like the heaviest static electricity in the world. Jennifer looked how she did any other morning. Her tail wagged in the dirt driveway, and as she panted with her tongue hanging out, it looked like she was smiling. Lane shook his head, told her she was a good girl one more time, and drove off.

During first period Math, Lane watched his teacher transcribe hieroglyphs onto the whiteboard. In his Spanish class, he was

scolded for nodding off. The teacher made a joke that the kids who understood Spanish laughed at. Lane was convinced the joke was unfunny. He shambled through the halls between periods. Before the start of third period Health, he put his head down on his desk, and folded himself into a pillow of his arms.

He tried to zone out everyone talking around him.

“...and I saw him *yesterday*, and he was talking to...”

“...then I told both of them, hey, I ain’t...”

“...oh my god, and she...”

“...don’t know, but Dan said...”

“...hear what Clay did?”

Lane perked up. There was only one Clay in New Austin, and he was Lane’s best friend in the world.

Lane kept his head down as the girls in front of him went on.

“Lisa found him out on the highway last night with his wrist cut open.”

“No way.”

“Yeah. He wasn’t in History today. He’s still in the hospital on life support.”

The other girl made a noise like she was watching a baby fall over as it tried to walk.

Class started. Lane didn’t hear anything the teacher said. Class ended, and he went outside to the spot where he and Clay and Brandon ate lunch every day, and he waited.

—

Jennifer laid in the driveway at the edge of the property, chin on her dirty paws and eyes on the road, facing the direction where Lane usually came home from school.

—

After he finished sucking Ian’s dick, Brandon left the men’s room to meet the crew outside for lunch. He would’ve gladly stayed and cuddled on the floor of the handicapped stall, but Ian didn’t seem like the type. At all.

Brandon tried to smell his breath discretely as he walked out

of the restroom. Really, he needed to start bringing mints to school, or gum or something. He was very sure that his breath smelled like cum. He stopped to take a drink from the drinking fountain, pulling his hair back behind his neck, like he'd first seen the long-haired girls do, before he had long hair himself. He liked doing the feminine thing. He stooped to drink from the fountain like he was curtsying. The halls were almost empty, compared to how crazy-full they were between class periods—Brandon curtsied to an empty court.

Mouth rinsed, he left through one of the school's back doors.

The air outside was so much better. Brandon was sensitive to that kind of thing. Inside the air had felt rubbery, like the O2 version of fast food. When Brandon stepped outside and inhaled, it was like an electric recharge. He wasn't a hippie, but he was very sure that the air inside the school was toxic. His favorite teachers were the ones who let him open a window.

Behind the school was a drainage lake. Brandon and his friends ate lunch on the big concrete pipe that fed the reservoir. It was way better than the school's actual lunch room, which never had enough seats anyways. Never enough seats for Brandon and his friends, at least.

Out on the concrete pipe, Brandon saw Lane sitting alone. Lane sat on the top of the pipe, his legs hanging off of the front.

When Lane looked back and saw Brandon, he waved. Brandon gave a wave back.

"No Clay?" Brandon asked, sitting down next to Lane.

Lane stayed quiet for a second, looking out at the lake.

Since it *was* a drainage lake, and not spring-fed, the water level changed every day. On that day, because it hadn't been raining lately, the reservoir could hardly be called a lake at all. It was a muddy valley. The sounds of bugs buzzing and chirping was a rural tinnitus. Garbage stuck up out of the mud, from plastic bottles to an old refrigerator door. Sometimes during lunch, they talked about dredging through the mud to see what kinds of relics they could find. They were just shooting the shit. The lake was garbage all the way down. Sometimes Brandon really did wonder what the craziest thing out there was though.

Lane swallowed. Eyes still glued to the lake, he let Brandon

into his head for a second.

“Clay tried to kill himself last night.”

Brandon fought against believing that.

“He’s in the hospital,” Lane said. Then he stood up. “Fuck school. I’m gonna go kick his ass.”

Lane started walking, and Brandon followed. They rounded the school to the parking lot in the front. On the way, Brandon asked, “How do you *know* he tried to kill himself?”

“Lisa found him out on the highway last night with his wrist cut open.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Long-way too, not just across the wrist. He fucking meant it.”

“But why would he—”

“Because he’s an emo punk bitch and he needs to man the hell up,” Lane said, and hopped in his truck.

Brandon’s mind went briefly to his curtsy at the drinking fountain. He walked around the front of the truck and got in the passenger side. The truck banged to life, and the two rumbled out of the parking lot. Brandon had never skipped school before. He’d skipped classes—mostly for dick-sucking reasons—but he’d never actually left the building.

It turned out that ‘actually leaving’ was easier than it had been portrayed as in his head.

Brandon thought about the last time he’d seen Clay. It had been at lunch yesterday. They were eating inside the lip of the concrete pipe, talking about how modern music sucked, and then trying to justify to each other how they weren’t hipsters. And to be fair, they really weren’t. American hipsters were from the East Coast or the West Coast, or if they weren’t, they at least tried to sound like it. Lane was a redneck, Clay was an emo/rube half-breed, and Brandon was just an old-fashioned southern belle. They couldn’t even be hipsters if they wanted to.

Brandon hoped to god that those hadn’t been his last words to his friend.

At lunch, Lisa found herself at the center of a flock of vampires. They all wanted to know how Clay killed himself. They sucked details from her neck. She swore that they wanted him dead: that that was how they would retell the story soon, because it would sound better that way to their friends. Lisa excused herself to use the restroom. Two girls who she didn't know got up and followed her, asking what she was doing anyways, out driving in the middle of the night.

Lisa steeled herself before she juked them, heading for the school's front door instead of the bathroom. "I was trying to get the hell away from creeps like you," she said, and left. She walked by Clay and Brandon on the way out. Passed through their radar like a spirit.

She drove away from the school, around a few blocks, and pulled over on the side of the road. She was parked next to the muddy lake: she could see the school across it, looking almost clean against the grunge. She took the keys out of the ignition and set them on the passenger seat. Then she reached under her own seat, and came back up with a joint. She lit it and smoked for a while, looking at the school while she did. The building was like a supercomputer that produced hurt. Whatever was the worst thing it could think about somebody, it would find out, sooner or later. As Lisa's brain simmered in marijuana, she wondered how long it would take for the school to think that she had tried to murder the freshman. The worst part was when she realized, correctly, that they were already thinking it before she'd even left. She wanted to walk onto the muddy lake like Jesus. Except she wanted the mud to rise up between her toes; she wanted the grime to grab her ankles, and embed itself in her leg hair. She opened her car door, and stepped out. She imagined the mud sliding up past her thighs; past her waist, caressing her hips. She found herself walking past the grass, and onto the sludge. The sludge that would consume her stomach and her breasts, feeling her up; kiss her chin, her lips, her nose, her eyes, her brow, her forehead, her scalp, and wish her a long goodnight.

In a blink she found herself standing on the center of the lake. She breathed deeply through her nose. It smelled vile, but she kept sucking the air in like it was an oxygen mask that she was strapped

to. Flies buzzed at decaying refuse. Looking one way, Lisa saw the school. Class was still in session: the machine was still thinking, tumbling over the details of how the junior had killed the freshman. Looking to the other side of the lake, Lisa saw her car. Above her the sky was cloudless: it hadn't rained in weeks. The mud under her feet was hard. Cracked. Solid. The surface of a drying iron was wetter. She walked tall back to her vehicle, got in, and left for home.

In her room at home, Lisa browsed the web for apartments in town. It was really time that she got her own place. Just one place in the *world* where she—and she alone—could think. Clear her head. That would be really, really nice.

At the hospital, Clay sat on a bench outside. Bandages were wrapped around his left arm. They felt snug. Verging on uncomfortably tight, but mostly snug. On his other arm was a plastic wristband. His real, full name was printed prominently on it, along with some medical facts. Age, weight, height. No known allergies. Blood type AB: universal receiver. That had been *very* fortunate for him.

Clay fanned air into his t-shirt. Looking across the blacktop parking lot was like looking through a funhouse mirror: the sun poured over New Austin, and everything black radiated. Clay almost—almost—regretted his head-to-toe black wardrobe. A nurse had come in and offered him a clean white set of clothes to change into. He thanked her, set the clothes on the bedside table, and left them there. Like hell would he wave a white flag now.

Earlier in the day, a doctor had come in and said that physically, Clay was fine to leave the hospital. However. The doctor had talked to Clay's mother—something Clay had *not* done yet—and she and the doctor had agreed that more professional help would be good. A therapist would be driving in to New Austin, arriving that afternoon. Clay was to stay at the hospital, away from home and school, until then. Home and school were often trouble areas.

Clay was fucking fine, obviously.

He thought about leaving, like anyone would stop him if he did. Then, as if he had summoned it, Lane's truck came up the road, with Brandon in the passenger's seat. Clay smiled.

Lane parked, and walked up to Clay. Clay stood up, and asked Lane how it was going. Lane looked Clay up and down once before punching him in the stomach, making the emo punk bitch stagger back.

Clay coughed as he regained his balance. "The *fuck*, man?"

"The hell you think you were doing last night?" Lane asked, and took another step closer.

Clay made fists, and gave Lane a left cross: Lane caught it like Clay had tossed him a can of soda.

Lane held onto Clay's hand, squeezing it tight. He lifted Clay's hand up so that he could see the bandage around the arm.

Clay looked at Lane dead-on, daring him to figure out what had actually happened.

Lane looked back at Clay, then at Clay's arm again. "How?" Lane asked. He let go of the hand.

Clay rubbed the backs of his knuckles. His wrist, where he'd received thirty-seven stitches, tingled. He wanted to rub that too. He just didn't want to test his painkillers: so far, they were working.

"I was out skating and I fell on something in the dark. I skated a long way back to *not* be dead."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Fuck up your board?"

"Heh. Not yet."

Lane gave Clay knuckles, and Clay pulled Lane in for a bro-hug.

Clay, Lane, and Brandon stood outside the hospital in a circle. Brandon had his hands in his front pockets. Moving them to his back pockets, he asked, "How's it look though?"

Clay held his arm out in front of himself, palm-up, for the others to see. With his good hand, he traced an invisible line over the bandages. In his mind's eye, Clay saw every red, glistening detail of where he'd been sewn back together. But when he got to the other end of the wound, he shrugged. "I mean, I'd still fuck

me.”

Brandon’s face lit up. “Okay for real though: would either of you have sex with yourselves?”

Lane took a step back from the group, waving his hand in the negative. He and Brandon looked to Clay.

“I mean... yeah,” Clay said.

“Yeah, me too,” Brandon affirmed.

“Well of course *you* would,” Lane noted.

“Okay, fair. But you really wouldn’t?”

“Fuck no.”

“Why?”

“Men do not attract me?”

“Yeah, but it’s *you*.”

“Okay. If you have two of the same magnet, right—”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “You wouldn’t even jack yourself off?”

“Why the hell would I even need to bring in a clone for that? No, I’m not touching any dick but this one. Now if it was me but as a *chick*—”

“Oh your gender-queer motherfucker—”

“Hey,” Clay interjected.

His friends both turned to him.

“...I love you guys.”

At that moment, another vehicle rolled into the parking lot. A driver got out. The group watched him the entire time he approached. A middle-aged man with glasses and a briefcase walked across the lot, taking a long time; slow, purposeful steps in the radiating heat.

“Clayton James?” he asked them when he arrived.

Clay raised his hand, showing off his wristband.

“I’ll be right back,” Clay told the crew, and followed the psychiatrist inside.

Outside, Lane and Brandon stood side-by-side, facing the parking lot.

Lane shuffled a little bit. “I kinda wanna go look for where Clay ate shit.”

“Right?”

And the two of them went. They weren’t a mile out of town

before Lane pulled over on the side of the highway. Brandon asked what was wrong, and Lane held up a sushing finger as he stepped out of the truck. Brandon got out too, and walked around the truck to see Lane crouched over a bit of black against the grey pavement.

“This the place?” Brandon asked.

Lane licked his thumb, pressed it down against the black spot, and then licked it again.

“Oh. My god.”

“Blood,” Lane said, in his best Transylvanian accent. Still crouched, he looked up, scanned the road ahead, and then pointed. Brandon followed to where Lane was pointing, and saw nothing. Lane crouch-ran a few dozen feet, until he was bent over another spot. Brandon followed. Sure enough, there was another spot of blood.

Lane stood upright and looked both ways down the highway, stroking his chin. “He wasn’t lying,” Lane said. “About the fact that he was moving, I mean.”

Lane stroked his chin more intently. He envisioned Clay skateboarding at a great speed between the two points. Kick, glide... kick, glide...

“He was skating too,” Lane mentioned.

“Yeah, Sherlock?”

“Yeah,” Lane nodded. He pointed down at the spot of blood they were standing on: “Kick.” Then he pointed a line between the spots: “Glide.” And finally, the next spot: “Kick.”

Looking down the highway farther, Lane was pretty sure he could see a lot of places where Clay had kicked. Lane and Brandon set out farther out of town. At regular intervals were the places Clay lost blood.

But eventually, there was one big spot. The crime scene.

“Don’t even tell me,” Brandon said, as he saw Lane piecing the events together.

Lane wanted to explain his reasoning as he went, but he kept it to himself. He followed the bloody blotches, streaks, and footprints, all over the road. Clay had done a number. Eventually, Lane stepped off to the side of the road. From the grass, he retrieved a long, triangular piece of metal. Dried blood was

embossed on it. Lane let out a long whistle.

If Clay was going to cut himself, he would've used his pocket knife. Lane carried the scrap metal as they walked back.

They returned to the hospital as Clay was checking out. Outside, where they had been standing earlier, Lane offered Clay the scrap metal as a trophy. Clay smiled deeply. He took it and looked at it from all angles, nodding. Then he walked over and threw it in the trash, and the three of them left the hospital. As they got into the truck, Lane told Brandon to make sure that Clay didn't fall on anything while they drove. And so, Clay and Brandon shared the back seat.

Clay rubbed the scab on his palm. It was a different kind of scab than before. This one was thinner: more normal-skin-like. The kind that *was* still a scab, but grew over the spot where another scab had already partially healed the skin.

"Hey," Clay said to Brandon. His heart beat pretty damn fast, and he was worried that Brandon might be able to see it. "Wanna spend the night?"

It was a school night, and Brandon normally would have said no. But by leaving the school earlier, he had been pretty dissuaded from the idea that school was a rigid, unmovable structure. He agreed.

Lane, as though he had been invited, said that he had important stuff to take care of at home. He always did. He dropped Clay and Brandon off at Clay's place.

Clay and Brandon walked around to the back of the house. After his father's death, Clay had stopped using the front door. His father had died in the pickup truck in the driveway, and because Clay had loved his father, he considered the spot where the truck was once parked as sacred ground. Instead of the front door, Clay typically climbed down into an egress window around the back, which lead straight into his room in the basement. He used the real staircase down into the basement so infrequently that he'd gotten a screwdriver and moved the door's bolt from the outside to the inside, and left it barred always unless he was explicitly going upstairs for something. He was thirteen when he moved the lock around, and effectively, he had been living in his own sublet household since then. Free food and wi-fi. Not a great

view, and he did have to do everyone's laundry since the machines were in his room, which he never let his family into anymore. Overall though, he didn't consider this to be a bad setup. Brandon followed Clay down into his abode.

Often during sleepovers, Brandon and Clay sat side-by-side on the foot of Clay's bed, facing the CRT television that was on a stand against the wall. Already, Brandon was poking through Clay's collection of games, which sat in a few orderly stacks under the TV. Clay stayed back by the window. He closed it and locked it shut, sealing himself inside.

"Brandon?"

Brandon turned around, and looked up at Clay.

Clay scratched the back of his head, rustling his hair. "I like... *really* like guys."

Jennifer stood up when she saw Lane's truck coming up the road. Tail wagging, she ran alongside it down the driveway, and met Clay as he opened his door. He knelt down and pet her, rubbing her along her back and on her head.

Lane headed inside, but was blocked at the door by his father, who stood in the doorway with his arms crossed.

"School called said you left early."

"Yeah. My friend Clay was..." Lane trailed off when he understood that his father didn't care.

"You leave school early, you come back here and get to work early."

Fuck you, Lane imagined himself saying. But he did not imagine it loudly enough for the words to even be glimpsed on his lips. "Alright," was the end of it. His dad went inside. Lane went out to tend to the horses, and Jennifer followed.

That night, Lane was making a sandwich in the kitchen when Jennifer started barking again. Again, she stood at the front door. But this time the hair on the back of her neck was raised. This time she snarled while she barked. Lane dropped his ham and cheese, and grabbed a steak knife on his way over.

He knelt down beside Jennifer, looking out into the dark yard.

“Who’s there, girl?” he asked.

Lane saw nothing, but continued to examine every shadow, until he heard footsteps coming down the house’s stairs.

Lane stood, and turned. His father stood on the other side of the living room with a bottle of whisky in-hand. The look in his father’s eyes spelled scorn: scorn for the barking, and also scorn for Lane making the school call home, and scorn for the knife in Lane’s hand, and scorn for things that Lane couldn’t fathom anger over: Lane looked into his father’s eyes and felt nothing that the old man did. The space across the room between them was completely disconnected.

And that was a moment when Lane understood something pivotal. This man was *not* his father; certainly not in spirit. They shared a house; they shared blood; they shared hardly anything else.

Lane set the knife on the counter, and grabbed instead his keys off the rack by the door.

Into the darkness, with Jennifer, he left. The headlights skewered demons while they rode into town.

He parked outside Clay’s house on the street. From the truck, he looked at the house’s dark windows. Jennifer was laid curled on her side in the passenger’s seat. Lane thought about how he would tell Clay what had happened.

He couldn’t find words good enough to warrant waking his friend up in the middle of the night.

He put the truck back in drive. At the 24-hour gas station by the highway, he used the ten and the five in his glovebox to buy plastic water bottles, a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and a small bag of dog food. Jennifer wagged her tail when he came back to the car. She sat upright in the passenger seat while he drove out into the woods, and found an out-of-the-way place to park for the night. Lane couldn’t remember the name of it, but there was a lake just down the road. As he fell asleep with Jennifer in the bed of the truck, he could smell the lake water. Distantly, he could hear dogs howling. He knew Jennifer heard them too: even in her sleep, her ears perked up when they called.

Lane knew where he was. He had lived in New Austin all his life. He had been down this road often, and swam in the lake, and

walked in the woods. He could drive or walk back to the highway with his eyes shut.

He felt lost.

Brandon and Clay slept tightly curled together. They had found each other.

III. Cabin

In the morning, Lane woke up to Jennifer licking his hand. When he opened his eyes she stood up, wagging her tail. He reached up to pat her head. The two of them jumped out of the truck bed. Lane poured some food out onto the ground for Jennifer, and made a peanut butter sandwich for himself, washing it down with bottled water.

When they had finished eating, Lane lead the way down the road. Jennifer walked beside him until she saw the lake, at which point, she ran straight ahead: she leapt into the water with a big splash, and started paddling out.

When Lane got to the beach, he walked it back and forth, head down, looking for skipping stones.

“Hello?” Lisa said. She stood in the office of the Fernleaf apartment complex—or rather, she stood outside it, with her top half leaning into the doorway.

“Hi!” a woman behind a desk said. “What can I help you with?”

“I was wondering if I could see one of your Reed Studios.”

“Oh, of course. Come on in. I’ll let Brenda know you’re interested. Can I have your name?”

“Lisa,” the girl said. She stepped inside, and let the door close shut behind her. “Your name?”

“Kim,” the woman said. Her smile was off-putting. So bright that it felt out of place.

Lisa stood by the doorway. She flicked the corners of her mouth upright for a second to match Kim, but it felt as fake as it was.

Kim, unphased, turned and went to grab Brenda from another room.

Lisa took deep breaths. She'd left her driver's license at home, as well as any other form of ID that would say she was anything less than eighteen. They had no reason to know she wasn't supposed to sign a rental agreement. And she wasn't going to—there was nothing at all illegal about looking.

Two women—Lisa thought they were twins for a moment, based on their identically plastic smiles—stepped back into the waiting room.

Brenda (Lisa guessed it was Brenda, though was not completely sure) walked around Kim's (?) desk, hand outstretched. Lisa went to shake it. The woman's hand felt like rubber, which matched her otherwise synthetic appearance quite well.

Brenda led the way back out of the office. As the two of them walked towards the model apartment, Brenda asked Lisa questions.

“First apartment?”

Lisa wondered if she should lie already, but didn't. “Yes. It would be.”

“That should be alright. What made you interested in us?”

Smallest security deposit in town. “Seemed like a nice location.”

“Oh, it's lovely. Do you live in New Austin now, or are you just arriving?”

“Lived here all my life.” *Not quite sure why.*

“Do you work?”

“Yes.” *Drug dealer.* “I help out at the library after hours.”

This interrogation continued all the way into the model Reed Studio. The space was mocked up with a loft bed, and a desk underneath: the loft and the desk framed the apartment's window just-so, making it feel a bit like the entire wall behind the loft was made of glass. Opposite this was a kitchen in one corner, with a vase of plastic flowers on the counter. In the closet were colorful

t-shirts hung from hangars, and blue jeans folded on a shelf.

Lisa would move right into this staged life in a heartbeat.

“About the security deposit,” Lisa said.

“Yes?”

“Is cash alright?”

“Unfortunately we only accept checks and credit.”

“No exceptions at all?”

“Sorry hon.”

Lisa slumped her shoulders. “It’s alright.”

She followed Brenda back to the office, only because her car was parked there. If she had walked, she would have left right then.

After being denied an honest place of her own, Lisa drove across town to a road that led into the woods. She parked a ways behind a truck that was parked out on the same road, and then went into the woods with two joints in one pocket and a lighter in the other. She was pretty sure that if she got lost out there, it would be for the better. It felt impossible to end up somewhere worse.

—

Lane walked through the woods along a trail. Jennifer trotted beside him, sometimes scouting ahead down the trail, and looping back through the woods towards him again. Always back to him; if Lane had raised a dog that *wanted* to run away, he believed that the dog would be well within its right to do so. Jennifer, even away from shelter, looked nothing but happy to be with her boy. He felt pretty damn good about having her with him for all of this.

Lane had been down this trail before, hunting. Only ever got squirrels. That day, without a gun, Lane was out just because. Just because there wasn’t anything else to do. Just because it was nice out. Just because he needed to stop skipping rocks after a while, and find something else. Just because he didn’t want to sit still a minute, and think about what would happen when his and Jennifer’s food ran out, which would definitely take less than a week.

Jennifer stopped scouting ahead, and walked close beside Lane.

Through the woods, Lane noticed a hunting cabin.

He turned off the trail to go check it out. He was pretty sure he remembered which one this was.

Jennifer stayed on the trail as Lane went ahead. She sat, tail flat on the ground, whining at him.

Lane looked back at her. "Alright," he said. "You can stay there. I'll be right back."

She barked at him when he turned and kept walking up to the cabin.

The cabin did look familiar. 'Cabin' might have been too good a word, but it was what Lane was used to calling them. The corners of the building were thick wooden pillars, between which, plywood walls had been fitted, along with a plywood door. The cabin was taller than it was wide. It was more of a hunting tower than anything: Lane would be shocked if inside, there wasn't a ladder up to the roof, atop which somebody could lie down with a gun and wait for deer.

Lane remembered, then, that he *had* been in this cabin before. It was owned by one of his dad's friends, Mr. Risch. The three of them—Lane, his dad, and Mr. Risch—had gone out here once to replace one of the plywood walls, which had rotted through.

Lane looked at the plywood door. Instead of a handle or lock, there was a bit of twine fitted into the door, which was wrapped around a flagpole bit mounted into the wall. Lane untied the twine from the bit, and pulled the door open.

It smelled musty as hell inside. Lane walked up into the cabin—behind him, Jennifer hadn't stopped barking.

In the cabin, when Lane's eyes adjusted, he saw many wooden fixtures. There was, indeed, a wooden ladder, which lead up to a plywood trap door in the ceiling. All along the walls of the cabin were wooden shelves, with a wooden workbench against the far wall. The workbench was roughed up quite a lot. The shelves were stocked with canned goods and a few tools. On the floor under the workbench were empty cans, piled upright on top of each other.

Lane knelt down and looked closer at the trash. The empty cans didn't smell moldy at all—not more moldy than the rest of the plywood cabin. The cans were probably left there not too long

ago.

Then, on the floor in front of the cans, with the light that bounced in from the open door, Lane saw a hair. It was short, curled, and black, and once he had seen it, his eyes were opened to the fact that this cabin was *covered* in hairs: the floor, the workbench, and the shelves all had little black curls lying atop them. Lane scratched his head. The hair *looked* human. Individually. But there was a *lot* of it there.

Lane glanced out of the cabin's door and looked both ways into the woods. Jennifer still sat on the trail, barking at him. Otherwise, the woods were clear. Lane turned back inside and looked at the shelves of canned goods. There were baked beans, soups, and meats. There was enough that he could *definitely* take one or two cans, and Mr. Risch wouldn't notice.

But Lane wasn't a thief.

He walked out of the cabin, closed the door, and got to retying the twine to the flagpole bit. He turned back to the trail. As he did, a woman appeared around the corner of the cabin and screamed at him. Lane jumped back. She looked like she had been crying. He wondered if he was somewhere he shouldn't be.

Lisa clasped her hands over her mouth. She backed up, ran her hand over her eyes to wipe away some tears, and then shoved both hand into her pockets. "Hey," she said.

The boy she'd run into was blurry. She wiped her eyes again, and looked back down at him.

"Oh," she said. "You're one of Clay's friends, aren't you?"

"Yeah," the boy said. "Lane."

He stuck out his hand. Lisa looked down at it, trying to think of what he was getting at. Images of that night driving Clay to the hospital flashed in her head. Along Lane's extended hand, she imagined all of the blood that she'd seen on Clay's.

She took a step back.

Lane lowered his hand. He supposed a girl crying in the woods might not want to shake hands with a stranger.

Behind them, Jennifer continued to bark.

Lane turned back to her, and he and the girl both looked at the dog. "That's Jennifer," Lane mentioned. "Something's gotten into her lately, but she's friendly."

Lisa sniffled. "Can I pet her?"

"Course."

Lisa walked up to the dog. Lane accompanied her. When the two were both back on the trail Jennifer stopped barking, and practically wagged her whole body back and forth as she gave Lane's hand kisses.

Lisa stuck her hand out for the dog too. Jennifer sniffed the hand, and gave it a few licks. Taking that as a good sign that the dog really was friendly, Lisa started petting Jen's back. Her coat was very smooth.

Lisa sat down on the trail beside the dog, and kept petting her.

Lisa had never been allowed to get a dog, but she liked them so, so much when they were nice like this one.

Jennifer laid down on the trail. Lane sat down as well. The two humans sat on either side of the dog, each of them petting her in different places as her tail occasionally gave a few wags.

"How's Clay?" Lisa asked.

"Oh, fine, I'm pretty sure," Lane said. "I picked him up from the hospital yesterday and dropped him off at home with another friend."

"Was he acting... alright?"

Lane nodded. "Same as ever. Maybe weirdly happier about something. He didn't do it on purpose though, if that's what you're getting at."

Lisa breathed out a sigh of relief—her breath smelled like something Lane had never smelled before. It was skunky, but not in a terrible way.

"Glad to hear he's good then," Lisa said. "I was afraid for him. It looked *really* bad."

Lane cocked his head at her.

"Oh. My name is Lisa. I'm the one who found Clay on the road and brought him to the hospital Wednesday night."

Lisa offered Lane a handshake.

Lane took her hand, and yanked her closer into a hug.

"*Thank you,*" he said in extreme earnesty, and then he let her go.

Lisa smiled as she went back to petting Jennifer. Instead of looking down at the dog as they talked, Lisa looked up at the boy.

“Honestly I think we should just get married already,” Brandon said.

Neither he nor Clay had left the bed all day. They stayed on it like it was their own desert island—an island where there was no food, which would *eventually* be enough of a problem to coax them off of it. But for the time being, they both acted like they weren’t actually starving. Neither could get enough of the sight of the other one naked.

“I’m *way* sure we’re not allowed to do that,” Clay said, in response to Brandon proposing to him. “This state is homophobic as *fuuuuck*.”

“Fine, let’s go to another state then, I don’t like it here anyways,” Brandon said.

“We’re fifteen.”

“*Fuck* society,” Brandon jeered, throwing two middle fingers up at the basement ceiling.

Clay kissed Brandon, threw one of the blankets over him, and snuggled up close to his boyfriend. He hadn’t been *sure* about calling Brandon his boyfriend, but now that they were apparently fiancés, he had no problem with boyfriend whatsoever.

“I’d marry you though,” Clay said, holding Brandon.

“Good. Cause I fuckin’ love you,” Brandon cooed.

In the happy silence that followed, Clay heard Brandon’s stomach gurgle.

“Let’s go eat, man,” Clay said.

“I don’t wanna get up.”

“We’ve been up for three hours.”

“I don’t wanna get out of bed.”

“Well I don’t want my boyfriend to die of hunger.”

Brandon continued to bitch and moan while trying not to smile as Clay dressed him and dragged him up the stairs.

They sat at the kitchen table, eating cereal and toast side by side. Clay’s mother was surprised to see Clay anywhere but the basement.

When she walked by the boys to get a meal of her own from

the kitchen, her nose crinkled at the thick odor of sex that hung around her son and his friend. She grabbed a box of graham crackers as fast as she could from the cupboard and quick-walked it out of there, simultaneously disgusted by the smell and happy for her son for finding somebody.

Lane and Lisa walked back through the woods. They had gotten to talking about Lisa's search for an apartment, and the fact that cash wasn't accepted as payment at Fernleaf, which was bullshit.

"I can write a check," Lane offered.

"Seriously? You would?"

"I mean, as long as you give me the money of course, but definitely. Least I could do after you saved my friend."

"Wow. Thanks."

"It's nothin'."

At that moment, it *was* nothing: Lane's bank account had a balance of zero dollars and zero cents in it. He and his father had gone to the bank to set it up when Lane had complained once about not having any money to spend. He had assumed that the account would come with some money *in* it, for all the work he did around the farm. He'd assumed very wrongly. The account came with *no* money: just the slap on the back that his dad gave him when he said that Lane could go get a job any time he liked, now that he had a bank account they could pay him through.

Between schoolwork and the work he did at the farm though, he had no time for a 'real' job anyways. And his dad, the prick, knew it.

But if Lisa gave him cash, they *could* go to the bank and put it in the account, to be written back out as a check.

Lisa took fifty dollars out of her back pocket and handed it to Lane. She'd come ready to buy the apartment on the spot, before they could have time to find out she was underaged.

Having made their way back to the dirt road that lead to Lake Rabbit, the two of them got in Lane's truck, and drove down to the bank. Jennifer sat in Lisa's lap. On the way, Lisa and Lane chatted about how much they each needed to move out of their

parents' places.

At the bank, Lane acted like he wasn't out-of-place talking to a teller. The woman behind the counter was very helpful in finding Lane's account and depositing the money.

"After adding fifty dollars," the teller said, "you now have a total of twenty two thousand, nine hundred and sixty eight dollars, and two cents in your account."

Lane's jaw almost dropped off of his face and onto the counter.

"You... look very surprised, Lane," the teller said with an amused smile.

"I... um, yeah. Can you see where that came from exactly?"

"Of course," the teller said, and reached for her computer mouse.

Lane glanced back at Lisa, who was standing by the bank's glass door. He held up his index finger, in the 'just one minute please' gesture.

She gave a thumbs up, turned around, and walked through the door to go wait outside.

Lane turned back to the teller, who was still fiddling with the mouse.

"I don't *quite* know how you're surprised, sir. No offense," she told him. "In the two years you've had this account, you've never made a single withdrawal, and it *looks* like you have a fulltime job: you've been receiving payments every week from one Adam DeCroix."

Lane's father.

Goddamn.

Lane thanked the teller, and left.

Outside, Lisa was standing beside the passenger's door of Lane's truck; Jennifer had her head out of the window; Lisa had her hand held up for Jen to kiss while she pet the dog's head with her other hand.

Lane crossed the parking lot, hopped in the driver's side, and unlocked the other door for Lisa.

"Everything go alright?" she asked.

"Yeah," Lane said, putting his truck in reverse. He looked back over his shoulder out the rear window as he backed out of

his space. “We just have to stop by my place, if you don’t mind. My checkbook is in my room. I haven’t touched it in... ever.”

“Mind stopping by my place too?” Lisa asked.

She needed to grab her fake ID that said she was older. This was happening.

IV. Guttled

As Lane drove, he zoned out the radio station that Lisa had picked. He wondered what, if anything, he needed to say to his dad. A thank you? Sure as hell wasn’t like his dad had given him the money for nothing. Sure as hell wasn’t earned overnight. Sure as hell would’ve been nice to know that he *had* that kind of money to begin with. Overall, it was pretty damn likely that his dad had paid him all this time for no other reason than to snidely spite his son with some hardass lesson that wasn’t a lesson at all, it was just his dad being an asshole like he’d always been.

As Lane pulled off of the road and started down the long driveway, he just hoped that his dad would be elsewhere. He hoped he could run in and run out and deal with all of this another time.

Lane reached the end of the driveway, parked, and walked up to the house while Lisa waited in the car. Walking up to the front door, Lane saw the house he’d lived in all his life defiled in a way that made him feel hollow for a moment: the kitchen window, beside the front door, was smashed. Blood stained the remaining glass shards red, and streaked down the wall under the window in narrow lines. Grey fur was bunched together along the glass’ sharp edges. It looked like a goddamn pack of wolves had tried to squirm through the hole where a window used to be.

Lane unlocked the front door and rushed inside. Bloody pawprints—*massive* bloody pawprints—tracked from the window, out of the kitchen, through the living room, and up the stairs. Lane swore, grabbed the butcher’s knife from the kitchen, and ran across the living room to the staircase. He followed the prints upstairs, keeping an ear out for anything moving. At the top of the staircase, there was a splattering of blood and fur on the carpet: the wolf-thing had been shot there. Lane gave a small fist-

pump for his dad.

After getting shot, the beast had stopped walking and started bounding: it leapt down the hall to the master bedroom, and—based on the smattering of bloody pawprints piled in one place—it had struggled for a while to break open the master bedroom's door.

Lane walked down the hall as quietly as he could, holding his breath, listening: trying to *see* the room ahead of him using his ears alone.

When he rounded the corner and really saw his father's mutilated corpse for himself, he turned away and slammed the meat cleaver into the battered bedroom door. He *screamed*. He fell to his knees, gripping his head, trying to squeeze his father's gruesome death out of his mind.

Eaten. Lane couldn't think of a goddamn worse way to go.

He stood up, took the meat cleaver out of the door, and walked back downstairs. Using the phone in the kitchen, he called 911.

As he sat in the kitchen waiting, he stared at the bloody pawprints on the floor. They were *huge*. Bigger than any animal that lived in New Austin.

Lane went to the window, and took a clump of bloodied grey fur. He stared at it.

He would find whatever this monster was.

—

Clay and Brandon entered the bathroom together, and each took a turn showering while the other sat on the floor outside the curtain.

While Brandon showered, Clay sat thinking about whether or not he should tell his mom that he and Brandon were dating. It seemed weird to hide it, but it seemed weirder to tell her, since he probably wouldn't say anything if he'd started dating *anyone*, guy or girl.

He tried to think about the last time he'd talked to his mom period.

It hurt a lot to realize how many weeks it had been, and how superficial their last chat was.

After their showers, they each dressed in a fresh set of Clay's black clothes, which they'd brought with into the bathroom. Then, they headed back towards the stairs to the basement.

On the way though, Clay grabbed Brandon by the arm, and pulled him into the living room. There, Clay's mom Janis sat on the couch with a bowl of soup, watching the TV. A gameshow was on. Clay was pretty sure she wouldn't mind if he interrupted it for this.

"Mom?" Clay said.

Janis reached for the remote, and muted the TV. She looked up at him.

"I'm gay. Brandon and I are together."

Janis smiled. "Aw. If you two want to come up for dinner tonight, I'm making ham and green-bean casserole."

Only then did it dawn on Clay just how many times his mother had invited him up for dinner, and how long it had been since he actually sat down with his mom and brother to eat.

"Sounds good," Clay said.

"Love you two," Janis told the boys.

For once, instead of going back down to his room, Clay decided to stay upstairs. The three of them sat on the couch watching the rest of the gameshow, laughing at the contestants' blunders, shouting out what the obvious answers were, and imitating the host. When the show was over, Janis went to the kitchen and started preparing dinner. Clay and Brandon stayed on the couch in the living room in the sunlight, lying down on it together, eyes closed, warm together, listening to the sounds of food being made in the other room.

—

The police came, and were openly as horrified as Lane had been. Somehow, Lane had expected them not to be. After he had told them all he knew, he sat outside with Lisa, at the far edge of the house's lawn.

Lane wanted to apologize to her for roping her into this, but really, he couldn't bring himself to apologize for finding his father's dead body.

They sat facing the house. Two police cars were parked outside, for a total of five officers combing over the property.

Lane was pretty sure his dad hadn't committed a crime in his life that wasn't drunk driving: there was nothing to hide in the house. Nothing that would sully anyone's name. Still, Lane felt like the officers were morticians pulling open a cadaver. He wished they would hurry.

Jennifer laid in front of Lane, looking at the house too. She looked like she felt about the same way.

"Hey," Lisa said.

Lane kept looking at the house. He sat with his legs tucked up to his chest, hugging his knees.

Lisa went on. "If I can get that apartment, and if you need a place to stay for a while... I don't think I'd mind you and Jennifer crashing with me for the first few weeks."

Lane perked up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm trying to move out of my mom's place because I want to live on my own. And I still do want that. A lot. But... it doesn't mean as much to me as this."

Lane, for the first time in quite a while, looked up to someone.

Dexter ran through the woods, eyes dodging back and forth along the trail, keeping an eye out for anybody at all.

He'd killed someone. *Again*. And this time it hadn't even been a full moon.

Paperwork signed and check handed over, Lisa was given the keys to her new apartment. For the moment, she didn't care at all that she was *probably* committing a felony. As a dealer, she'd probably committed those before on the regular.

Lisa, Lane, and Jennifer walked across the apartment complex to unit 350.

The apartment was completely empty when they entered, and Lisa couldn't have been happier about that.

Lane said he'd give her some time to have the place to herself, and that he was going to go walk Jennifer for a while.

In reality, he was going to go enlist the crew to help him go hunting.

Dinner with his boyfriend, his mom, and his brother was the best meal that Clay had eaten in a very long time. He realized he might have to start eating with them more often.

Presently, he and Brandon were back down in his room, playing a video game. Clay laid on the bed as they played, and Brandon laid on top of Clay. Sometimes Brandon would take his eyes off of the screen to look down and kiss Clay on the top of the head, or take a hand off of his controller to pinch him.

Clay, who was better at the game than Brandon, knew better than to distract himself.

Not that he minded.

When there was a tap at the window, Clay slammed the pause button and spun around under Brandon, who managed to stay on top of Clay like a rodeo rider.

There at the window was Lane. Clay squirmed out from under his boyfriend to go open the window. Brandon stayed on the bed. Lane was barely inside before he asked, "Do I even want to know what you two were doing?"

"We're boyfriends now," Brandon said from the bed. He sat with his legs crossed.

Clay hopped back to the bed, kissed Brandon on the top of the head, and sat down next to him, draping one arm over his significant other.

Lane looked down at the both of them. "Oh. Gay. I need your help going hunting."

"Wh—" Brandon began, and then started again, his voice immediately more flamboyant as he got indignant. "I'm sorry, don't you care that—"

"No. I'm happy for you guys. Have fun gaying out. Now I *really* need us to get going somewhere. C'mon."

Clay and Brandon glanced at each other. Clay shrugged. They

all crawled out of the window and headed towards Brandon's truck.

"So what exactly are we doing?" Brandon asked as they rounded the house.

"Like I said, hunting," Lane reiterated. When they reached the truck, he hopped into the back and knelt down. Brandon heard the plasticky clicks of something being opened, and then Lane stood up in the bed of the truck with a shotgun in each arm, posing like some kind of Rambo. He hopped out of the bed, opened up the doors, and threw the shotguns into the back. He made a noise at Jennifer, who hopped into the back as well. Lane walked around the truck and hopped in the driver's side, leaving Clay and Brandon the passenger seat.

Brandon sat in Clay's lap. Clay buckled the seatbelt over the both of them. As they headed through town, Lane didn't waste any time before he started explaining.

"My dad died today," he said.

"Oh my god," Brandon said, covering his mouth with a hand.

"He was killed by some fucking monster from the woods that broke in and got him. We're going to go track it down, because I just can't live with myself if I know it's still out there. I don't care if that makes sense or not."

"Jesus," Clay said. "Monster like a bear, or—"

"Bigger than a bear. Eviler. A *monster* Clay. Trust me, you'll see."

"Okay," Clay nodded. He believed Lane, sort of. This wasn't a thing Lane would fuck around about.

As they drove, Brandon held Clay's hand.

At Lane's farmhouse, they all dismounted from the truck. Each of them approached the house with a shotgun. Jennifer prodded along with them.

"*Fuck*," Clay said, looking at the front window. It had not been cleaned up in the slightest since the police investigation. Lane would have to get a tarp over it pretty soon, he figured. But in the meantime, he illustrated with words what had happened.

"Came in there, bloodied itself to hell getting through. Chased my dad upstairs. My dad shot it twice: once in the upstairs hall, once in the master bedroom. But it got him, ate him, and left

through the bedroom window. Jumped down, ran off into the woods behind the house.”

As Lane reported all of this, he kept his head up. He was saying *terrible* things. He didn't care. He didn't care about shit right then except the hunt. He wouldn't leave the woods until the monster was as gutted as his father had been.

V. Tracking

The three boys stomped through the woods, all of them armed with Lane's father's guns. Two of them wore black. The third, Lane, wore the same blue jeans and green t-shirt he'd been wearing for days now. Lane followed the footprints of the creature along the forest floor. Jennifer, having hunted with Lane in the past, was all too happy to help find the way.

The tracks became less bloody as they got farther out. Where before it had nearly been a puddle in each step, it had gone down to a slight tinge of red on the occasional trampled leaf.

As they went onward, Lane noticed something about the tracks that he wasn't sure what to make of: the footprints got dramatically smaller.

“Hold up,” Lane said to his friends. He turned around, and jogged back a little ways. Two dozen feet back, he looked down at the tracks: *much* bigger than normal wolf-prints, by the looks. Slowly, he walked the tracks forward, tracing his work through every one of the monster's footsteps, making sure that he hadn't gone onto another trail by accident.

But he was absolutely sure: in the course of two dozen feet, the footprints changed from wolf to human.

He called Clay over, to triple-check.

“Holy shit,” Clay said when Lane had shown his work.

As they continued on, Clay kept an eye on the tracks as well. Neither of them *said* the word ‘werewolf.’ For two people who had never been believers in the supernatural, it had taken very little to convince them otherwise: touches of blood on some curiously trampled grass, and just like that, there were honest to god monsters in the world.

Up ahead in the woods, Jennifer started barking. She stood

with all four feet planted to the ground, hair on her back raised, facing the hunting cabin. From inside it came a repetitive hollow banging.

Dexter laid on the floor of the cabin, kicking the wall. It was already coming on again: he was changing.

But he was stuck. His bones had half-stretched; his hair had half-greyed; his mind had half gone feral: he shared his headspace with a desire to eat the living that shadowed over every pillar of morality that he thought he had known so firmly.

It was going to crush him.

Outside, he heard barking.

Inside, the wolf called out a response.

The boys heard a howl from inside the cabin. The three of them grouped together. Clay and Brandon, shoulder to shoulder, stood right behind Lane.

The cabin's door slammed open, and out shambled a creature made of twisted limbs, too tall and thin, a mat of grey and black fur covering it in some places, leaving other places on it entirely bald. Its face was *almost* human, but drawn out; in its snarling mouth were toothy skewers.

In a town as small as New Austin, folks came to recognize one another. Lane, aiming his shotgun, recognized who this monster was: Dexter. He worked at the grocery store. Lane had seen him on-and-off for all fifteen years of his life.

The monster took a step towards the boys, and then a half-step back. It fought itself. It growled, and in a voice caught between a human shout and a feral whine, the monster bade them, "*RUN.*"

Lane did not run. Lane walked forward. Brandon grabbed Lane's shoulder to hold him back. Lane spun around and made like he was going to drive the butt of his shotgun into Brandon's

nose, and the kid jumped back, letting Lane go.

Clay took Brandon's hand and squeezed it, hard. They watched their friend approach a monstrosity.

Lane aimed his shotgun where any goddamned human's heart would be and fired.

In a mighty boom, Lane's job was done. Dexter collapsed to the ground.

Lane unsheathed his hunting knife and walked forward. At the beast, he kicked the carcass over so that it laid on its back. He knelt down on it, digging a boot into its dead neck, and reached into its mouth with a bare hand and a sharp blade. With the knife he sawed and stabbed at the monster's gums, saturating his hands in blood, until he was able to rip out one of its teeth.

He kept the tooth. The rest of the body, he left behind.

Lane, Clay, and Brandon walked back through the woods in silence. Lane lead the way, trophy clutched in a fist as he went.

Back at home, Lane washed the blood off his hands in the kitchen sink.

VI. Then

After the events of that day, Brandon and Clay were dropped back off at Clay's house. They two of them laid on Clay's bed, not kissing. Not even really thinking about touching one another. They each had a feeling in their stomach that there was something deeply wrong about what had happened.

"Could he have gotten better?" Brandon asked, referring to Dexter—they had all known it was Dexter.

"How the hell would I know?" Clay asked. He stewed on it. Then he added, "It didn't *look* like a thing you get better from."

"No, it really didn't," Brandon affirmed.

Clay sank down further into the bed.

He sighed.

"Say it really was just an animal," Clay said. "A bear or something. And we all went out, and Lane shot it. Fine?"

"Of course."

"Now say it had been murder," Clay said. "Maybe it *was*, but let's just say for now that Dexter was still completely a human,

and as a human he killed Lane's dad, so then Lane killed Dexter. Would *that* be wrong?"

"Yes," Brandon said.

"Oh."

Brandon gave Clay a light slap, and rolled over on the bed, facing away from his boyfriend.

Idly, Clay looked down at the bandages around his forearm, where his wrist had been cut open by a piece of metal by the side of the highway. He wondered if he could kill himself by unwrapping the bandage and ripping apart the stitches by hand: no knife, gun, or overdose required.

He had absolutely no intention to find out. But those were the kinds of things he asked himself a lot.

He looked over at the back of Brandon's head, and wondered whether their thoughts were similar, or if Brandon was just a better person. Clay, personally, had taken it as assumption that if Lane had murdered a human Dexter in vengeance, that that was a moral draw: not the *most* good way that things could end, but overall, better than nothing.

"Do you believe in the death penalty?" Clay asked, before he could think better of asking.

"No," Brandon said. He rolled over in the bed. With his face half-sunken into a pillow, he looked over at Clay. "You?"

Clay held his tongue: the truth hung on his lips for a moment. He could have grabbed it, and pulled it back in. But instead, it toppled over the edge. "I was kidnapped when I was seven. And raped. A lot. The person who did it was sentenced to prison and got killed behind bars. I felt better about the world the second I learned he was dead. My opinion hasn't changed. I hope he's in Hell."

"Jesus. Clay, I had no idea—"

Brandon had reached out to rest a hand on Clay's shoulder, and Clay flinched.

Brandon stopped himself, and took the hand away.

Clay reached out, pulled Brandon closer, and kissed him. "I'm not *stuck* on it," Clay asserted—he almost whispered it into Brandon's ear. "I'm not great. But most days it doesn't even fucking cross my mind. So you don't have to treat me like I'm

fragile.”

Brandon looked into his boyfriend’s eyes, and then hugged him, tight. They laid together in a ponderative silence.

Brandon had never been capable of anger, to the point where it might have been a psychological condition; he could be disappointed, or snide, but he never understood *anger*. He had never felt it. Even when learning what had happened to Clay, Brandon did not feel any kind of hidden boiling rage. But *something* stirred inside of him. For the first time, through Clay, Brandon glimpsed what it meant to hate: he hoped that the rapist was burning in Hell too. He hoped that the person who’d hurt Clay was also hurting forever.

Brandon didn’t know how he felt about feeling that way.

As Lane drove to Lisa’s apartment, with a mattress for her and a couch for him stuffed into the bed of his truck, he noticed a scratch on his hand. He took the hand off of the wheel and looked closer at it for a second. It wasn’t a deep cut by any means: the thinnest scab in the world was already formed over it. Most likely he’d gotten it while ripping the monster’s tooth out.

Lane considered this such a small price to pay that by the time he arrived in the apartment’s parking lot, he’d forgotten his flesh had been pierced by a werewolf’s tooth at all.

Brandon and Clay went out skating. Clay was pretty sure that he’d never brought someone with on one of his late-night outings before. He liked the company. They glided around New Austin, the black streets under the dark of night akin to venetian rivers reflecting the sky. Silent on his modded board, Clay felt like an unseen satellite to Brandon, whose board rumbled as they went.

They passed by Jory’s house—the skinhead who pushed Clay over the other day. Clay thought about stopping to make out with Brandon on Jory’s doorstep. It’d be fun. But they went on, around the town, until landing at the concrete remnants of an abandoned

waterwheel by the river. The two of them climbed over the rubble of the fallen rooftop. They laid inside together, looking up at the night sky. It was almost a full moon. It made Clay feel fierce. He turned away from the sky, and climbed on top of Brandon.

VII. Next of Kin

On Monday, Lane didn't show up to the usual lunch spot. Clay and Brandon cut school to go find out why. Even if Lane *had* been there, they might have cut anyways: with the deaths and disappearances happening around New Austin lately, the school was in a frenzy over Clay, who so far was the only one to reappear from any of it. Clay *deeply* hated being seen so much. Cloaked in black eyeliner, he escaped with Brandon, and the two of them started skating for Lane's house.

It was a longish trip by board—and by foot, once they hit the gravel roads. On the way, Brandon asked about Clay's wrist.

"It's healing alright," Clay said.

"Have you looked at it?"

Clay shook his head. "Nah. But I can feel it healing."

"Really?"

Clay nodded. "It hurts. But in a kinda cool way."

"Hey how'd that talk with the psychiatrist at the hospital go?"

"Heh, fuck off."

"Love you."

"You too Brandon."

The two of them had turned off of the road, and were heading through the forest down Lane's long driveway.

Coming down it the other direction, they saw Jennifer: she bounded towards them, barking, her tail wagging furiously behind her the whole way. When she reached them, Clay and Brandon both knelt down to pet her.

"Is Lane home?" Brandon asked her, in between telling her exactly how much of a good dog she was.

The three of them walked together the rest of the way to the house, with Jennifer trotting slightly ahead of them, urging them along.

At the house, they saw Lane out front, hanging a blue tarp

over the broken kitchen window. When he heard them coming, he turned and waved. Clay and Brandon waved back from across the yard, Clay doing so by holding his board-hand up over his head.

Ten feet before reaching Lane, Jennifer stopped, sat down, and whined.

Clay and Brandon walked past her, and stood with Lane face-to-face.

“Least you two aren’t afraid of me,” Lane said, glancing past them towards Jen. He shrugged, and turned to look up at his handiwork with the tarp. “Picked out all the broken glass, and cleaned off the blood, which took... a while. Gonna see about getting the glass replaced, but in the meantime...” Lane gestured up at the tarp. “Still don’t fully know what the damage is inside. Probably gonna have to rip out the carpet or... I don’t know.”

“Want help?” Clay offered.

Lane shrugged. “Not gonna make you. My house, my burden.”

Brandon’s head snapped back. “Wait, this place is *yours* now?”

Lane, arms crossed, nodded. “Once I’m eighteen, anyways. Technically my aunt’s ‘til then. But it ain’t like she’s coming anywhere near here in the meantime.”

“Huh. Cool.”

Lane didn’t comment.

The three of them went inside, and started cleaning up the kitchen. Brandon, very shortly into the cleanup, felt sick. He went outside, and stayed there with Jennifer. Lane and Clay, who were extremely less averse to blood, kept on.

They made short work out of the kitchen, and by the time it was late, they had cut the bloodied parts out of the living room carpet.

Lane invited them in to spend the night, if they wanted.

The couple took him up on it.

They all sat in the living room around a coffee table, playing a board game and chatting.

“Goddammit,” Clay said towards the end of the game, flicking his piece off the board. He had been the steady loser the entire time, but Lane and Brandon had been easy on him. For a

while. “Good move,” Clay said to Lane.

Lane smirked.

Out of the game, Clay looked up from the board for the first time in a while. He noticed that Lane was red-faced, and sweating. It *was* warm in the room.

Still.

“You hot?” Clay asked.

“Smokin’,” Lane said. “Brandon, keep your boyfriend on a leash, he’s hitting on me again.”

Clay looked at how tightly Lane was gripping his cards.

“I’ll duel you over him if you make me,” Brandon said. He threw a card on the table, and moved his piece. “Fencing swords or old-west revolvers, you name it.”

“Oh, revolvers, no question,” Lane said. “I could—”

Lane doubled over, knocking the board game onto the floor. He started trembling.

Clay stood up and pulled the coffee table back, giving Lane plenty of space on the floor to writhe without hitting anything. “Lane,” Clay said, “Ambulance: yes or no?”

Lane said something, and at first, Clay mistook it for the sound of Jennifer whining.

“*Help me.*”

Brandon stepped forward and reached down towards Lane, but Clay held him back; he held Brandon tightly, and watched Lane very, very closely.

And sure as shit, Lane was changing. Hair on his arms and face was growing. The shape of his body was becoming more stooped and gnarled.

Clay pushed Brandon back and leapt onto Lane. He pinned his friend down on his back, resting all of his weight on Lane’s shoulders. They stared at each other eye to eye. And Clay had no idea if he was looking at fear, or sorrow, or hunger. But he knew that the eyes he looked into, with a yellow seeping all through the white parts, were not human anymore.

Clay looked down at Lane’s scowling mouth, and saw long, pointed teeth.

Lane tried to sit up and bite Clay, but Clay held down the half-changed werewolf.

Clay got up, pushing Lane down into the floor as hard as he could, and sprinted off towards the front door, snagging Brandon on the way. Clay and Brandon grabbed their skateboards as they left. They ran down the yard, spotting Jennifer, who stood in the center of the gravel driveway, letting out a series of deep barks. She had squared her stance towards the house. The hair all down her back was raised.

As they ran by, Clay stooped down and grabbed Jennifer by the collar, yanking her out of her stance and away from the house. He tried to run forward with her, but she scratched and bit at him; as they wrestled, he felt the stitches in his arm being tugged.

He scooped Jennifer up off the ground completely, and just barely able to carry her, started running forward. She squirmed in his arms as they went down the driveway, surrounded by woods on either side.

Behind them, they heard the crashes of a werewolf tearing its home into even more pieces.

They stopped at the end of the driveway. Clay set Jennifer down, and had to hold her by the collar to stop her from running back to Lane.

On his arm, Clay noticed a dotted line of red along the length of his white bandage.

"I'm calling the police," Brandon said, and reached into his pocket for his cellphone.

It sure as hell wouldn't have occurred to Clay to call the police on Lane. But he didn't disagree with the idea.

As Brandon was flipping open his phone, Clay was flipping open his pocket knife.

Probably wouldn't do shit against a werewolf. But it was all he had.

As Brandon told the police what was happening, Clay found himself listening more to the barks coming from Jennifer. She was barking at the top of her voice, trying to call all the way down the long dark driveway to her master. And Clay wondered *why*. What was the *reason* Jennifer wanted to be heard by Lane?

And it kind of dawned on Clay: it was because she was trying to *tell* him something. To tell *him* something—she still thought it was him in there.

Jennifer continued to bark.

Down the driveway, at the house, there was a howl in response.

Jennifer stopped barking; Clay had to hold her back less.

Whatever they had wanted to say to each other, they'd said it.

Clay closed his knife, and set it down in the grass. He stood up and started walking forward, towards the house again. Brandon asked what he was doing. Clay didn't say. He kept walking forward.

In the dark, a dozen feet down the dark driveway, Clay saw Lane's reflective, yellowed eyes.

Jennifer, seeing him too, barked once.

Lane roared down at her.

Jennifer stopped pulling forward; Clay let go of her collar, and stood up.

"You're better than this," Clay said, raising his voice to cover the distance.

Silently, the werewolf lumbered forward.

"Lane," Clay said, with as much firmness as he could find—already, they were close enough that he didn't have to raise his voice at all. "I trust you."

The werewolf did not stop approaching: it reached out to scratch Clay.

Clay didn't let it: he jumped forward and tackled the werewolf's chest, biting down on it, tearing off a chunk of skin and fur above its sternum.

The werewolf let out a howlish scream—Clay bit down again, this time on the wrist of the arm that it had used to slash at him. Blood filled Clay's senses: he could hardly *stop* himself from devouring.

The werewolf, with its free claw, ripped at Clay's back; Clay bit deeper into the werewolf's arm, chewing apart muscle and tendons, scraping his teeth against wrist bones.

Clay was buried in ecstasy. But behind him, he heard Jennifer and Brandon calling to him and Lane to stop.

Clay wasn't sure if he could. He wasn't sure *why* he couldn't stop himself from eating—he had never known that his father Bob was a monster too. All Clay knew was that he would have a harder

time falling upwards than he would have not taking another bite. Finished with the werewolf's forearm, he pulled himself up towards the werewolf's face. He tried to take a bite from the werewolf's hairy chin, but the werewolf pulled away.

And it took Clay until then to realize that the werewolf was trying to escape him.

Clay rested his teeth over the werewolf's throat.

He couldn't back away.

But he could hold still at least, and let the werewolf go.

When he released it, it bounded off into the night, whimpering.

Clay stood for a second, breathing heavy, letting the taste and smell of fresh blood wash through him. Never before in his *life* had he felt so at one with himself.

He turned to Brandon.

Brandon punched Clay in the jaw, knocking Clay back off his feet: he fell hard onto the bloodied ground.

He felt something on his tongue, and spit it out into his hand. Looking down, he saw that it was a tooth. He grunted, stuck it in his back pocket, and stood back up.

Brandon stood a couple paces away, holding his skateboard ready to swing.

"Brandon," Clay stuttered. He reached out a hand.

"Don't touch me," Brandon warned.

"You saw what he was—"

"Oh I saw what *both* of you are," Brandon said. "Just because you're lucid about it and he's not doesn't make you *better*, Clay."

Clay disagreed, but said nothing.

"The police are coming," Brandon said. "Are you going to run?"

"Did I do anything wrong?"

"*Stop.*"

"He was going to—"

"Clay if you take one more step—"

"I was just—"

Clay was struck across the head by Brandon's board. He collapsed onto the ground.

He came-to to the sound of sirens, and the flashes of red and

blue lights cutting through the forest.

He was put in handcuffs, and forced into the back of a police truck with no windows or lights.

0. Exit

When the door to the police truck opened hours later, Clay was greeted by the sight of four armored men. They entered the back of the truck, warning Clay not to move. Clay cooperated as a bag was placed over his head. He was walked out of the truck and brought briskly through many loud doors and checkpoints. At the end of the walk, Clay was sat down in a chair, and the bag over his head was removed.

He sat at the center of a room the size of a gymnasium. The floor, from wall to wall, was grey concrete. The walls were concrete as well, with large yellow stripes painted down them. Clay wasn't sure about the ceiling. He wasn't sure if above the ceiling there was sky, or if there was a hundred feet of dirt.

He sat on a wooden chair at a wooden table, just large enough to not be able to grab the person on the other side of it.

The person at the other end of the table was leaned way back on their chair, using one steel-toed boot to push back off of the table's edge. He had a green mohawk and a black goatee. Clay thought he might have been Chinese, but having grown up in an almost entirely white town, Clay was bad at telling. The man rested an assault rifle over his shoulder, and with his other hand, he held up the sheet of paper that he was reading. As he read, he rocked back and forth.

The four guards who had escorted Clay in stood to either side of the table: two of them loomed close, while the other two were each positioned a dozen feet back. They wore what looked like SWAT armor, but as Clay looked closer at it, he saw no lettering to indicate any kind of group.

"Clayton Gabriel James," the man at the other end of the table said, and then looked up at Clay. He set the paper on the table face-down. He had an accent like he was from some part of America other than the south. His voice echoed through the massive room. "Hell of a birthday for you, huh?"

Clay nodded. He felt hungry. It was probably a bad time to mention it.

“What are you Clayton?” the man asked.

“Clay,” Clay corrected.

“You’re clay?” the man asked. He stopped rocking back and forth on his chair, and raised an eyebrow. “Can I mold you? Carve you? Throw you? Stick you in a kiln and *fire* you? Or are you the kind of clay that *explodes* under fire?”

Clay’s hands were cuffed behind the wooden chair’s back; he wished he could cross his arms. “My *name* is Clay,” Clay said, and rolled his eyes instead.

The man reached up to his assault rifle, pulled back the action, and let it go, so that it slammed back into place. “Watch the body language.”

Clay swallowed, and nodded.

“Lane Elise DeCroix,” the man said. “Know him?”

Clay nodded. “One of my best friends.”

“*Really?*” the man asked. He planted all four legs of his chair on the ground and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “One of your best *friends?*”

Clay nodded again.

“You’re *digesting* him,” the man told Clay.

Clay, piecing the night back together, felt his stomach turn.

“According to *my* sources—and I apologize if yours right now are better, really—his arm has been amputated below the elbow on account of how somebody *ate. it.*”

Clay tried to speak up, but felt that he was going to puke.

“Brandon Clarke Taylor,” the man said. “Know him? Know what *he* tastes like?”

“Boyfriend,” Clay managed to choke out.

The man pointed up to one of the guards. “Put that down as a ‘yes.’”

The guard didn’t move. He continued to stare down at Clay from behind a tinted visor.

“Where are we?” Clay asked.

“Far away.”

“Where are Brandon and—”

“Far away,” the man asserted. He leaned farther over the

table.

Clay could smell his flesh.

“I asked you a question first,” the man said. “And we’re going to answer it. What are you?”

“Goth.”

“*Not* what I was looking for.”

“... White?”

“Two strikes.”

“I... I don’t know,” Clay said. As his eyes watered, the man in front of him blurred. “I thought human.”

The man leaned back, and nodded. “Okay. We’ll figure you out. After we do, one Lane Elise DeCroix and one Brandon Clarke Taylor are interested in seeing you.”

“How are... how are they?”

The man reached down and picked up his paper from the table. He held it up as he read. “It looks here like they have both expressed an explicit interest in ‘murdering the fucking shit out of that emo motherfucker’, which, I presume, is you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, maybe they don’t mean it.” The man dropped the paper onto the table again.

Clay glanced around the room one more time. “What is this place?”

“Far a—oh, *what* is this place. I can answer that one. You ever get the strange vibe in New Austin that things aren’t *right* there? That there’s something just *wrong* with the town?”

Clay nodded.

“Yeah,” the man said. “It’s not just New Austin: the whole world is like that. And you’re one of the few people who acts on it. This is a base of operations,” the man said. He leaned forward once more, smiling.

Clay noticed then that the man’s canine teeth looked long, white, and incredibly sharp.

“The world is full of monsters,” the vampire said. “But some are more well-meaning than others: we want you to come help us fight the *bad* ones.”

One of the guards walked behind Clay, and unlocked the kid’s handcuffs.