

SURRENDER AND LIVE

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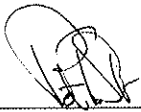
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ABSTRACT

Brothers Nathaniel and Nicolas have grown up like many children of migrant farmworkers — in the back of beaten pickup trucks, in the shady billows of cotton rows, in the corroded tin outbuildings that house both the weary laborers and monstrous machines that keep food on their tables. Neglected from the start, the two boys struggle to survive the harsh realities of migrant life, the abuses of both their keepers and strangers, and the supernatural events that at times shackle them and at times empower them. While their journeys into adulthood must be taken separately, a shared longing for their long-absent father brings them together for an encounter that seals their fates.

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PART I

THE CAT

Nathaniel and Nick fell heaving into the damp grass, faces down, sucking in air, tasting it, their muscles burning as if covered by stinging fire ants. It was how it always was. They always raced when they got back together. The boys lay splayed like dead men for a moment as the muscles in their legs and abdomens shuddered. But even winded, they let out the occasional cackle of delight. The West Texas sky was darkening and swollen. Every so often, the fish jumped in and out of the clouds -- like they would in the ocean or a river.

Nick rolled onto his side, leaning in toward Nathaniel's face, which was still pressed solidly against the grass and dirt. Nathaniel asked: "How was it at Grandpa's?"

Nick shrugged and then gave Nathaniel a mischievous look that Nathaniel knew all too well.

"What did you steal?" he asked in a mock scold.

"You know!" Nick said with a toothy grin, digging his hand into the front pocket of his blue jeans. His hand emerged holding a stubby red firecracker, which he dangled over Nathaniel's face, taunting him.

Nathaniel beamed, grabbing at it. "Let's set it off in some dirt and watch it blow up and kick dirt and rocks into the air."

"It's too wet. I've got a better idea." As Nick scrambled to his feet, Nathaniel rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow to take a good look at his younger brother. It'd been months since he'd seen him last, and he suddenly realized how thin Nick had become. His clothes were old and familiar, but they looked like oversized hand-me-downs now. And face had become more angular and leathery from the sun. Nathaniel got up and tried to wipe the mud off his clothes as Nick dashed ahead to the barn.

"What are you doing, Nick?" Nathaniel cried out, starting the chase again.

"Come on! He's over here."

"Who?"

At the barn entrance, Nick crouched down and peered inside. "Come here, kitty, kitty, kitty," he cooed. Nathaniel slowed to a creep and crouched down behind him. When the cat, obscured by the shadows of the dark barn, refused to come, Nick plowed into the darkness.

The black and white spotted creature squirmed in Nick's arms when he emerged again, and Nathaniel hoped silently that it was a skunk and would spray the shit out of his brother. "What are you doing?" he repeated.

"You'll see." Nick squeezed the cat's body and head under his left arm as it meowed and moaned. He held its hind legs from kicking and scratching with his left hand. He jammed the firecracker into the cat's buttocks with his right hand.

"Don't do that!" Nathaniel reached for the cat and got the backside of Nick's fist on his nose instead. The impact made him tear up and squint, but he heard the match head ride across the rough strip on the match box and could see a blurred flame toward his left side. He wiped his eyes and heard the fuse light. He started reaching toward the burning and sparkling, and it fell to the ground as Nick let it go. Nick was very quiet.

Nathaniel chased the glow and meows of the distraught cat into the now-dark field. When he got his hands on it, he could smell the burning firework and grabbed it with his right hand. He was seared by the fuse. He pulled the stubby little bomb out of the cat with the calm of a trained surgeon pulling a bullet out of a soldier. The cat thrashed and shrieked so loud Nathaniel couldn't hear anything else. It tore gashes into the boy's arm and -- POW!

Nathaniel was certain his entire hand was mutilated. He held it close to his body and wrapped his T-shirt tail around it, squealing in pain. Doubled over, pressing his hand deep into his stomach as if to envelop it with healthy flesh, he raised his head and looked for Nick in the darkness. Nick stood watching in silence, his smirk cloaked by the night.

The pounding of the music across the field beckoned to Nathaniel, who kept his hand wrapped tightly and lurched toward the lights. A gunshot echoed around him. As he approached the party he wondered if it was Nicolas following him or something more sinister, but he refused to turn around.

“Mijo, what have you done?” his mother asked disapprovingly, getting up from a lawn chair placed under Christmas lights strung from the back porch of the house to the travel trailer in the yard.

“My hand,” he croaked.

His mother ripped his hand from the T-shirt and held it up to the lights. “My God, you’ve gone and done it now.” Nathaniel wasn’t sure what that meant, and he couldn’t see through the tears in his eyes whether his hand was mangled or not. “You’re losing that fingernail,” she said with disgust. “Go wash it off and come back here. We need to make plans.”

Nathaniel went to the faucet on the dark side of the house and gingerly rinsed the blood from his hand. He gently touched around his thumbnail, relieved that the thumb was there at all. When he returned, Nicolas was standing by the fire, trying to act innocent and insert himself into a conversation with two cousins. Nathaniel sat down in a lawn chair across from his mother, who was leaning toward a woman Nathaniel didn’t know. “We won’t have room or work for him, and he came along last time,” she told the woman. Nathaniel hoped she wasn’t talking about him, but he was sure she was. He wondered where he’d be left this time.

EL MUDO

Sunlight sparkled in the morning dew. The truck made its way down the road, the passenger side dragging in the dirt here and there with the bumps in the road. As the truck came to a stop, Nathaniel's father, behind the wheel, looked across the cabin space at Nathaniel.

Nathaniel was allowed to ride up front because El Mudo was so big that both Nathaniel's father and Uncle Daniel had to ride on the driver's side just to keep the truck as level as possible, but they still weren't able to keep it from touching bottom now and then on El Mudo's side. So Daniel rode in the bed of the truck on the driver's side, backed up to his brother, Nathaniel's father, and Nathaniel rode in the cabin's passenger side, backed up to El Mudo. But Nathaniel was so light that when any strong winds were around he had to be indoors or tethered to something or within running distance of shelter.

The ride was bumpy and long, and while nobody else was as big as El Mudo, the others were big enough to be cramped, and everyone was restless, eager to get food in their bellies and a hot shower. Nathaniel's father put the truck in park, and the crew poured out, eager to stretch like waking dogs.

"If they ask how old you are, say fifteen not thirteen," Nathaniel's father told the boy.

The man from the cotton gin office wore a shirt that was too tight on his belly and was missing some of the metal snaps. He looked the crew over and glanced at the two remaining in the bed of the pickup.

"How many are you?"

"Six in all," Nathaniel's father replied.

The man looked at the boy and asked, "Is he old enough to work?"

"Yes, sir. He's been working a long time now."

Standing up tall, trying to look more like a man and less like a boy, Nathaniel had already been prepped for this kind of exchange many times. He rubbed his forefinger on the scarred lump on his thumbnail nervously, finding comfort in the repetition.

“All right then, get started tomorrow, and come here and let me know when you need something.”

The six of them went to eat at a restaurant near the cheap hotel where they’d gone to get rooms after getting hired. El Mudo and Nathaniel sat across from one another. El Mudo began to demonstrate a magic trick, taking a cigarette out of the pack he had in his flannel shirt pocket and laying it on the table. He lowered his broad shoulders over the table, and the boy watched as he willed the cigarette to move back and forth while holding his hands over it. He controlled just how far it went in each direction. The size of eggs, the calluses on his giant hands looked like crushed ice. Nathaniel turned to nudge Daniel, but he was already deep in conversation with a waitress on her break. Daniel made friends fast anywhere they went. Nathaniel knew people always liked to smoke his special-smelling cigarettes and jam to Mazz and Ozzy Osbourne with him.

The local man they’d met in the gin’s office had a wife he was going to pimp out to a few of the guys. Nathaniel went along for the ride – and because they were all taunting him. He refused to get out of the truck once they got there, though. So he rolled down the window and heard the exchange on the potbellied gin manager’s porch. He was working out all the details of the transaction. Nathaniel wondered if he always wore a shirt that was too small and missing some buttons or snaps.

Behind the portly manager, El Mudo's hulking body began making motions simulating how he was going to handle the man's wife. He had his hands around her imaginary hips as he thrust his pelvis into the air. He grunted -- it sometimes happened when he got excited -- and the man turned around and saw him in the middle of his crazy sex dance, still thrusting and pulling an imaginary wife down on his privates.

"You guys can all go, but not him. I'm scared he might break her or something."

El Mudo disappointedly agreed to spend the next couple of hours in the truck with Nathaniel.

About twenty minutes after the agreement had been struck, Daniel came out to the truck and told El Mudo that he had paid the wife and she said to bring the big man in from around back.

"We gotta go now man, come on."

El Mudo jumped out of the truck and ran off behind the house with Daniel.

A few minutes after they ran off, as Nathaniel was watching the fireflies around the house, he noticed the thunder. But it wasn't thunder; it was the sound of El Mudo and the gin manager's wife. They were wrecking the place. And when the furniture settled, well most of it, the guys went running back to the truck. El Mudo had his boots on and was carrying his clothes. He was grinning, looking a little crazed.

Nathaniel could tell his father was pissed the next morning when he found out they no longer had the work.

DEVEILED EGG

The lady behind the counter nodded knowingly at Nicolas' mother, gave the boy a mistrusting look and pointed across the dimly lit grocery to a crowded bookcase holding candles. Nicholas' mother navigated him hurriedly past a cooler chilling queso fresco and orange Jarritos and quickly snatched up a tall white candle in a glass jar with St. Michael the Archangel painted in magenta. As she searched through various vials of potions with words on them that Nicolas could not understand, he traced his small fingers over St. Michael's broad wings and then the face of the bad man he was holding down with his foot. Nicolas asked his mother what the bad man did. Annoyed, she yanked him toward a second cooler containing eggs and then took a carton and the candle to the counter.

On the counter sat rotting apples arranged in a circle around a photo of an old woman whose face had withered and caved in. Nicolas reached out a tanned hand to press on one of the apples' skin to see if it was mushy, but his mother batted his hand away as if the apple were filled with acid. She paid for their items with cash and gripped his hand tightly on the way out to the car, crossing herself as they stepped out of the doorway and entered the night.

A whole egg, carrying her hopes of healing the child, was swept over his body, but it left behind the bad things she didn't understand. She cracked it open and read it: He's cursed. The devil. Always blame the devil.

She drove the car away from the crossroads, and the yellow lines marked the pace with short dashes. She told Nicolas to get down and looked back into the darkness behind them in the rearview mirror. He turned to look forward, wide eyes eating through the looking glass and

devouring the surrounding darkness until the red glow hanging in the dimness marking the end of the car reminded him of the egg. He could see the scarlet seed, the cell, the embryo of his affliction splattered at the crossroad.

His mother glared at him and told him to lie down again, and this time he listened. He flattened his slight body against the seat cushion and listened to the road passing behind them, imagining the tires on the pavement making that connection and that sound. Lit by memory, his mind followed the yellow, dashed road stretching all the way back to the beginning. He saw the devil take shape out of the smashed egg and start running after him. The devil was as small as a baby bird at first but grew with every stride as if fed by the darkness around him and fear inside them. Nicolas screamed, “He’s coming,” and then froze in a sob. He watched the devil draw closer to the window, smiling, with the moon behind him.

MOTHER, MAID, MAGIC

Nick and Nathaniel stood on opposite sides of the kitchen island as Lupe stirred the pot on the stove. She'd been working and living in their home for only a few months, but they'd already grown attached in their own ways. Their parents were often away from the home, which was nice by the family's usual standards, and Lupe had become something of a surrogate.

They each had been tasked with finding her special ingredients for her witch's stew. Nathaniel had retrieved the lizard, and Nick had retrieved four slugs from underneath the stones that surrounded the garden. She dropped the items in one by one, careful to not interrupt the boil. Nathaniel studied her malformed hand.

"Why are you missing part of your finger?" he asked.

"Sometimes the devil asks more of you," she replied without looking up from the pot. "It depends on what you're asking for."

Nick piped up: "How do you call the devil?"

"You have to go outside after midnight and tell the devil that you want to see him. He'll come in the form of a dog – a big, vicious black dog – but don't be afraid."

Weeks after Lupe told the boys how to summon the devil, the pair came home from school and went directly to the kitchen to see her, as they usually did, but this time they were surprised to find the kitchen empty. Through the sliding glass door, they could see that their mother and father were arguing in the side yard with Lupe, and they rushed out to defend her, even though neither had any idea what was going on.

Nick immediately saw the hole in the ground by the tree. The hole was only about six inches wide and nestled in the roots of the tree. He then saw the jar in his father's hand. It held a figure of a man, wrapped in black thread, hanging upside down.

"You don't know what she's doing," the boys' mother said angrily. "You see this?" she asked pointing at the jar. "She's trying to hurt you."

After Lupe was gone, Nick and Nathaniel were lonely. One night, their parents never came home, and an uncle came by the next day to get them.

"I guess you guys are going to hear it from somebody. Might as well be me," he told them. "The police are looking for your folks."

Neither Nick nor Nathaniel responded. They'd heard the white gold jokes.

"Nathaniel, you're going to North Carolina with me. Nick, there's a place for you near Crosbyton."

MR. BLACK

At eight years old, Nathaniel was shimmying through tin piping, crusted in burnt-red, used throughout the cotton gin. It was always dark inside and often covered with crud – charred cotton, sticks, and carcasses. Sometimes, while he was pulling things off the walls, something would crawl over him, and he would shake it off if he could, blow it off if he could, and sometimes he just had to shimmy right out. If he'd been a fatter kid, he wouldn't have been used for that kind of work.

All the praying his mother did finally paid off. His father was able to stay on at the Southlawn Cotton Gin doing repairs and maintenance. Nathaniel spent the school seasons in the fields and at Southlawn. He spent the summers at different gins in Texas, Alabama, Georgia and North Carolina mostly. But the gin yard at Southlawn was home base. To be clear, Southlawn was a gin, not a town or a place.

A stray dog came up to Nathaniel in the gin yard one day. He had been cleaning the debris and whatever else out of the suction pipes, which sure beat having to keep moving. It sure beat the onion fields and whatever else the families still following the work were up to. The dog was all black and thin like the boy. Nathaniel called him Mr. Black. Once the kids from the barracks were gone, Mr. Black was a godsend for Nathaniel. They had so much fun together. Mr. Black would go with him to feed the animals in the morning, which was a good thing once Nicolas stopped going with him because he found out the family had been eating “his” pig. That Mr. Black was really good about staying out of the way while everyone worked at the gin made Nathaniel proud. The mutt was good at keeping the rabbits out of the garden, too. He earned his keep, and he got scraps before it went into the slop.

One day Nathaniel noticed the mutt was missing. He'd had a playful morning running back and forth in front of the pig pen while Nathaniel collected eggs. Mr. Black was nowhere to be found when Nathaniel was getting ready to go and pick up the lunch tacos from his mother. Nathaniel delivered the tacos back to the gin and said he was going to eat his taco while he went to look for Mr. Black. "Hurry up, we need you to crawl into the dryer," he was told.

Nathaniel went to check behind the barracks, because he knew Mr. Black liked to lie in the shade under the cotton trailers. The boy heard the two stragglers who had been left behind at the barracks. While Nathaniel's family could help them out during the ginning season, it had come time for them to find work somewhere else or starve.

The two guys were speaking nicely to Mr. Black, and Nathaniel crawled under a trailer to watch from the ground, on his belly, with his taco in his hand. He didn't really know anything about those two, but he was pretty sure they didn't like Mr. Black, because they'd made jokes about how ugly he was. And yet there they were, being nice to him, giving him something to eat behind the barracks. One of them even petted Mr. Black while the other balanced his weight against the barracks with a metal pipe about three inches in diameter and maybe two-and-a-half feet long.

Nathaniel's taco was half-eaten, and he didn't understand what he was seeing until it was too late. While Mr. Black had his head down in a bowl eating, one of the men hit him in the back of the head with the pipe. Mr. Black crumbled into the ground, and his right hind leg started spasming. It was moving like he was running while blood pooled around his head, which had fallen on and tilted over the bowl.

That night, while the family ate, Nathaniel's mother mentioned how quiet he'd been. She asked about "the dog." She never called him Mr. Black. Nathaniel didn't say anything, not in English or in Spanish.

"Here," his mother said, handing him a plate of leftovers. "Take it to the two men still in the barracks."

A SLIPPERY TALE

Nicolas' hands were small, and they felt like sandpaper. He kneeled in the new mud, his knees digging into the rim of a tractor-tire puddle. Tadpoles were everywhere.

He'd already carried slop to the pigs and collected eggs from the hens. He'd always done those things, as long as he could remember. But the tadpoles were new. Nicolas knew he'd be gone the next morning.

As the tadpoles darted about the cloudy water, Nicolas tried to grab them, and when he caught some, he held them in his hand. They were soft like Jell-O, and they bounced in his palm. They made him think of science lessons at school.

He couldn't remember playing with tadpoles before or anything ever being so fascinating, except maybe the horny toad he once found in the field outside the playground. He had been eating a bologna sandwich in the school yard and decided once he'd gobbled up the last bite to run off to play by himself in the field outside the playground and past the tennis courts. That was where he'd found the thorny thing. He'd picked it up, shaken it and licked it, just like his friend Scott had told him to do with toads. Scott passed on a good deal of information he gleaned from his older brother. But the tadpoles were new.

Back at home later that day, while his mother talked on the phone, Nicolas made himself a sandwich for the next day.

"I don't know why this always happens to me," she told her friend in Spanish. "He's not even Catholic. My grandkids won't be Catholic." She started to weep.

Nicolas spread the mayonnaise on the soft bread in his hand, but the bread tore against his coarse skin. Afraid to ruin it further, he slapped on the bologna and folded up the sandwich,

shoved it in a brown bag that he'd been using for a while. A half-dozen wrinkled but neatly folded paper bags sat piled in front of a history textbook on the counter.

His mother continued, "I didn't do anything wrong. I don't deserve this."

Just before dawn Nicolas prepared to crawl out of the window in the room he shared with his older brother, Ricky. It was dark with barely enough light to go around. But Nicolas could see Ricky's pocket knife on the stereo and imagined dangerous encounters to come, so he took it. He thought back to killing a snake once at Scott's house. They had used a pocket knife to cut off its head.

Climbing out of the window was particularly difficult, because Ricky's bed was by the window, and Nicolas had to crawl around him. Ricky was heavy, his man-sized body sunken down in the middle of the mattress, and Nicolas was afraid he'd be sucked in because he knew he was too skinny.

Nicolas leaned toward the wall as much as he could, and he made sure to touch it, using it as a guide. He felt in his legs his brother's gravitational pull, and he pushed forward until he got his fingers to the sill and pulled himself to the edge of the bed, beyond the force of Ricky's weight. Nicolas slid the window up, hopped out like he and Nathaniel had done many times, and closed the window behind him while standing on a bucket he had placed beneath the window earlier that day.

He ran away from the house as fast as he could, stopping once to be sure he hadn't been seen. In the distance, the house was perfect, like a photograph, the way it never was when he was there, inside, but the way he imagined it when he was sent away. He had to be far enough away

to be unrecognizable, an outline in the night. He headed to the nearest highway toward the rising sun.

Two months before, Nicolas had watched his parents argue when his sister Sarah disappeared on a hot June night. She was sixteen and hadn't come home. Her absence had stopped the routine. Suddenly, his parents were around, talking to each and newly concerned with what the children were doing. The next day they found out that Sarah had run off with David Atkins, who had been a senior at school and the son of Mr. and Mrs. Atkins, who were cotton farmers and not Catholic. That's when Nicolas learned what "elope" was. He began to have thoughts he'd never had before. He started thinking about running away.

By midmorning, Nicolas was hot and saw a big tree casting a shadow across the dirt road from Old Man Tucker's house. He lay down next to a ditch, across the street from the tree, near the ditch and in the shade, flattening himself so that he couldn't be seen from across the way. He pulled five marbles from his pants pocket and rolled over to his belly, kicking his legs up behind him. He took out his sandwich and made sure to only eat half. He watched down the road for a search party, but nobody came.

As the shade from the tree moved, Nicolas moved with it. But the shade eventually was gone from his side of the road and was only on Old Man Tucker's side. Nicolas realized he had to keep going toward the highway and considered his options. He could cut across Old Man Tucker's property, following the shade, and hope that all those stories Scott told him about Old Man Tucker and the ghosts weren't true. Or he could take the long route toward the highway on the Kings' property.

“Old Man Tucker's place is haunted,” Scott had told Nicolas when he'd once suggested taking a shortcut through his land. “At the very least, he'll shoot you.”

“Just for cutting across?” Nicolas had asked, wide-eyed.

“That's why that mechanic at the co-op is missing part of his leg. That's what my mom says.”

Nicolas counted his marbles and put them back in his pocket and assessed the sky. Dark clouds were approaching from behind him and he imagined the rain at his house and thought back to the tadpoles from the day before. He had cupped his hands into the muddy water and sifted for softness, feeling it between his fingers, knowing his hands were rough against it. He had laced his fingers and begun putting the tadpoles in the egg bucket as it started to rain. He took the eggs and tadpoles home. He was careful to take the eggs out and wash them.

Nicolas figured that he should go by the field that bordered Old Man Tucker's property and the Kings' property because of the stories about Old Man Tucker always sitting on his porch with his shotgun and because even grownups stayed away from him. He knew he'd have to walk by the cemetery on the edge of Old Man Tucker's land but decided it'd be OK if he just stayed on the Kings' side.

He got a running start to jump over the ditch and crossed the dirt road, collecting rocks perfect for throwing in case he encountered ghosts. He wasn't sure you could hit a ghost with a rock, but he wanted to have them just in case. He patted his pocket to be sure Ricky's knife was still in there.

When he passed Old Man Tucker's property line, he followed an irrigation pipe in the Kings' field toward the highway. He thought he saw an animal but wasn't sure what kind. It could've even be one that was still undiscovered or visiting from another planet.

He pulled out a couple of the rocks he'd picked up and declared war on the creature:

"Surrender and live!" he yelled out into the field.

Nicolas thought back to that time with the skunk. The sun had gone down, and in the light of the full moon he mistook the skunk for a cat. When he got close enough, he was sprayed, and his sister had to bathe him in tomato juice and scrub the stink off. He wondered what it might mean to never see her again.

Determined to track the mystery animal down, Nicolas squinted to make it out but he couldn't see it. He knew he needed glasses. The school nurse had said so. Hot from running in the sun, chasing the thing for hours, he decided to eat the rest of his sandwich. It was smashed, the bread even more torn, but it tasted good and salty. When he finished, he folded up the bag and put it in his back pants pocket for safe keeping.

Nicolas continued a long distance along the pipe and saw the mystery animal again. He gained on it and almost caught it, whatever it was, but it was fast, and he was growing tired. The heat radiated from his arms and face. He knew he should have worn long sleeves. Parts of the irrigation pipe were covered in dirt, and the parts that weren't covered shone in the setting sun. Midway down the pipe, he saw a blur at the far end. As he continued to walk, he could hear the animal inside the pipe. He heard it getting closer.

"You are surrounded. Come out slowly."

The animal stopped and doubled back.

Suddenly, a giant drop of rain burst into droplets on the softer outer side of Nicolas' hand. He studied the residue of the drop as more came down. It felt like someone had put the fire on his body out. Still being pelted by the rain, he realized that he was being struck by falling tadpoles as well. He could hear the rain pick up as it drummed the irrigation pipe -- tadpoles and water droplets.

But before he could begin to worry about the tadpole rain, the mystery animal reemerged, dashing out of the end of the irrigation pipe, now just a few feet away from Nicolas. But the critter wasn't what he thought it was when he finally got close enough to see it clearly. Nicolas kept still, the hair on his body electrified. Even the hair on his head stood up. The electricity made his body pale and cold to the touch. Terror.

Nicolas had never seen a lechuza before. But he'd been told many times about them, and he knew that this had to be one. The lechuza was a white blur in front of him and took on a more definitive shape as it neared. He knew it was too big to be a normal owl. As it swept toward him, Nicolas felt as if he was floating backward, even though his legs also seemed somehow frozen and locked.

The lechuza sent a shrill whistle through the wet air. Nicolas thought that if he didn't whistle back at the lechuza it couldn't harm him -- one of his cousins had said that. But the lechuza came closer, so he continued to back up.

"But you're not supposed to harm me," he said timidly in Spanish, "if I don't respond to your whistle."

The lechuza repeated its whistle, only it was harder for Nicolas to hear because the rain had become violent and full of falling tadpoles and frogs.

Nicolas turned around and ran. He imagined the lechuza closing in on him. Every time a frog or a tadpole hit him, he was sure it was the lechuza, and he screamed but kept running. His body ached from the impacts. When he finally arrived back at the dirt road, he dove into the culvert across from Old Man Tucker's place.

The lechuza made its way to Nicolas, who was hunched down in the ditch and shuddering, but the bird couldn't seem to see him. It had been raining hard enough and long enough to cover Nicolas up with water, tadpoles and frogs. The amphibian projectiles continued to pummel the lechuza, and it eventually fled. Nicolas stayed in the ditch, clinging, head just above water and covered with mud, fingers still jammed into the soft earth like eagle talons in flesh. After a long while, the storm passed, and he crept out of the ditch. The lechuza was gone.

He began the long stretch home in the night, checking over his shoulder every few steps. He ran most of the way, holding Ricky's pocketknife firmly in one hand and pebbles for throwing in the other. He had seen the lechuza get hit in the face by frogs bigger than fists repeatedly, so he decided to be on the lookout for someone with a bruised face.

When Nicholas finally arrived at the front door of his house, he could hear his parents, Ricky and Nicholas inside talking about the strange shower of tadpoles and then frogs. Then he heard Sarah's laugh erupt.

"It was a sign, I tell you," his mother insisted as Nicolas stepped inside the house.

"Everything's a sign with you," Sarah replied.

Nicolas took out his damp paper lunch bag and placed it with the others on the counter. He then went to his shared bedroom to return Ricky's pocketknife to its place on the stereo. He closed himself up in the small bathroom the family shared, stripped off his filthy clothes and

filled the sink with warm water. He listened to his family's chatter and occasional laughter and wondered only for a moment about the miracle of Sarah's return.

He scrubbed his skin, careful around the parts bruised by the falling frogs, with a blue cloth still stiff from hanging on the clothesline earlier in the week. The water in the sink became cool and cloudy like the rain-filled tractor-tire tracks in the field. He sifted for tadpoles in the sink with his fingers, but there were none.

PART II

THE WOODS

In Houston's New Chinatown, Nick sipped his well drink while Quan sang "My Way" with the on-stage karaoke machine. Nick could smell his own breath, which made him think of his grandfather and the steel hook that replaced his grandfather's hand after he'd lost it while drunk and cleaning his shotgun. The hook could split and clasp around things. His grandfather sometimes used it to pinch Nick's dick.

Once Quan finished his Sinatra set, Nick paid the tab, and the two headed out of the busy nightclub and toward the parking lot. But before they got off the sidewalk and into the lot, a yellow Civic pulled up and three men in white T-shirts and jeans climbed out.

Nick and company recognized the rival gang, and those who hadn't already done so drew weapons, and those without dodged for shelter in and near the cars where their weapons were. The rival gang started shooting. Windows shattered. Nick fired back. As the shooting tapered off, people were out of breath and nobody wanted to be around for the cops. Nick spotted Quan ducking next to a Celica. Encouraged by the silence, he stood up to go and meet Nick so they could leave before the cops showed up. Nick saw the silver Colt .22 in a rival gang member's hand disappear behind Quan's head just before he heard the gun fire. Blood and shattered teeth ripped through Quan's lip and flew through the air. He fell straight down. Nick unloaded the rest of his magazine where Quan's head and chest had been, as his aim followed Quan's shooter to the ground.

Nathaniel had a deer within distance for a kill shot. The tension in his bow was a constant reminder that the only thing keeping that deer alive was his discipline and a couple of fingers.

Nathaniel had been staying with the Smiths in North Carolina. Mr. Smith had taught him to hunt. He had already got a deer earlier that season -- it was going to supply the Smiths with enough meat to last the winter. They were a hardworking family, but times were tough and one good-sized deer would go a long way. Satisfied enough with having had the deer in his sight, Nathaniel packed up his gear and silently headed back home.

When Nick showed up at the cotton gin the next day, Nathaniel barely recognized him. He had filled out, and he was paler than Nathaniel had ever seen him.

“You look like something straight off MTV,” Nathaniel told him as they embraced.

“And you look like I thought you’d look,” Nick replied.

AN APPLE AND A PEAR

Nathaniel watched the rising sun light the dew on the grass along the roadside ahead. He noticed Barbara rub her thumb nervously on the steering wheel as she navigated the Honda Civic through the fog.

“Thank you for making the trip with me.”

“I wanted to come. He was my friend, too,” she said, taking her eyes off the road for a moment to smile at him and pat his knee.

Clearing his throat, he said, “I guess I mean, thank you for driving.”

“Just glad we’re doing this together.”

But it didn’t feel like together to him. Nothing in the world felt *together*. Nathaniel wanted to feel as close to Barbara as she felt to him. Ever since he’d gotten word of Rufus’ death, whatever had tethered Nathaniel to his orbit had been severed. He kept thinking about the phone message he’d left inviting Rufus out on New Year’s Eve and the call he received a couple of days later from Rufus’ mom. He listened for matter and space tearing, but all he could hear was the tires on the road.

Barbara put on some music, and Nathaniel knew it was because she sensed he was far away and that she’d soon start singing. He liked that about her – how she’d sing along no matter the occasion, be it shopping or a funeral.

“It’s bad news from Houston, half of my friends have died,” she sang, quite a bit off key, looking over at Nathaniel.

“Sing with me.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

As the Civic approached the steep and crumbling Trinity River bridge, Barbara noticeably tensed up. Nathaniel saw her tighten her grip on the wheel and look ahead, determined to be brave. She'd never had a real reason for disliking bridges and had told him many times, "They're just fucking scary." He listened for her to exhale once on the other side.

"Remember how you and me would take Rufus dancing with us at all those Spanish rock clubs? We all had good work then," she said. "You know, Rufus and I were initially nervous and felt a little out of place – I was like the only white girl, and he was like the only black guy – but we ended up really having fun. Remember how Rufus would dance?" Barbara took her hands off the wheel, keeping the car straight with her knees, made soft fists, and bobbed the top half of her body.

"I remember how many times we were turned away at the door because he never could find nice enough clothes that would fit," Nathaniel said, unable to stop himself from smiling. "And I learned not to walk behind him after that one girl turned around and slapped me."

"Oh, yeah, he did like to grab ass," Barbara said, laughing. Nathaniel recalled Barbara and Rufus singing a song in Spanish with him at a discoteca – enjoying themselves, making up words as they went since neither spoke Spanish very well. They would all jump and sing as if they were themselves Spanish rock stars. They wore joy all over their faces – the kind of happiness you can't fake.

"Oh, my God. What about that time he grabbed that pierced girl's ass at the Howard Dean rally? And she went off on him about her being a lesbian! Now that shit was funny," Barbara said. "I guess it would have been OK for me to grab her ass."

"That was so fucked up."

“I know. And here we are today. All grown up. No more liberal bumper stickers,” she paused. “All I know is if it were me and Rufus driving to your funeral, he’d sing with me.”

Nathaniel acquiesced and quietly began to sing along: “*I’m going out on the highway, gonna listen to them big trucks whine.*”

He looked at Barbara, imagining them both younger, dressed for a night of Latin dancing and having sex on a parking garage roof.

He continued to sing: “*And that white freightliner is gonna steal away my mind.*”

To Nathaniel, the road passing beneath them was the equivalent of some small piece of white space on a printout of a map and directions in his lap. He tried to find a way to measure it, watching out the window at the passing white lines. For a moment, he remembered being 10 years old, hanging his head over his father’s truck tailgate, trying to count the lines as they passed behind. Twenty years later, those dashed white lines from his childhood were colliding with the dashed white lines of his present, and he wondered if his life had become all about that stretch of white.

Behind the trees were swamps. Rufus came from near Louisiana. Nathaniel knew they were nearing the turn.

“Isn’t that where his mother works?” Barbara asked, pointing across him to a little building. “The chicken shack?”

Nathaniel recalled being in there with Rufus, on the way to gamble on a little bit of money, trying to turn a bit of good fortune into more. They’d driven over to Lake Charles, in Louisiana, with less than \$100 apiece. Rufus lost his. Nathaniel came out with enough for the next semester’s tuition. On the way back, they stopped at the chicken shack, where Rufus’ mom worked. The shack served as a gas station and restaurant. It had one table with two benches,

snack stands, and a wall of freezers for beer and soda. There was a small kitchen. From the highway, it looked like a place that nobody stopped at unless they were running on empty. I-10 brought customers even to the swamplands and ghost towns of Texas.

Rufus had been dead almost a year. Nathaniel sat at the bar having a cigarette, a habit he quit a few years back. He noticed his reflection in the mirror, but it was too far away to show any detail. It could have been the reflection of anybody.

“Hey,” the waitress, Sway, said as she put her thick, roller-derby body between him and the reflection of himself. “Shiner, Hefeweizen.” She set the beer in front of him. “What time is Barbara getting off today?”

Nathaniel knew that Sway preferred customers to close out before the shift changes: it was about the tip.

“Six,” he said and shook off a bit of cold. “Have you seen Sam?” he asked, anticipation mounting as he asked the question.

“No,” she said without looking at him, keeping her gaze on the electronic quiz game on the bar. Nathaniel watched the screen for a few minutes, too. His phone rang. “Maybe that’s him,” Sway said, walking to the end of the bar nearer the front door to serve another customer.

Nathaniel was sure the call was going to be something along the lines of classic fucking Sam. Time didn’t exist for Sam when he’d been on crystal. It seemed to Nathaniel that every other time he saw Sam he’d been either excited or miserable about having just quit crystal the day before or earlier in the day. The other days, he was in love.

“What the fuck, man?” Nathaniel yelled into the phone.

“Take it easy, Nathaniel. I’m outside – I just wanted to know who all is in there.”

“How the fuck would I know, man? There are two other people here.” Nathaniel held his phone up in the air and yelled to two guys sitting at a round table near the door. “What are your names?” They both looked skeptically at him but didn’t answer. He put his phone back to his ear, but the line was dead.

The bell above the door chimed as Sam pushed it open. He was tall and skinny, and his hair was oily, long and thin. He patted the front pockets of his jeans, then slid his hands in the back pockets as the door closed behind him. He looked around, a bit paranoid.

“Sam,” Nathaniel called him over to the end of the bar, “come on over here.”

They each sat on a stool. Nathaniel spun his toward Sam. Sam just turned his head in Nathaniel’s direction. Nathaniel studied Sam’s sunken eyes.

“So, do you have something for me?” Nathaniel finally asked.

“Not yet,” Sam said as Sway put a shot of Jaeger before him. She said hello to Sam, and Nathaniel finished his beer. Sway got Nathaniel another as Sam took his drink and downed it.

“Come with me, Nathaniel,” Sam instructed.

They walked into the bathroom at the end of the hall and locked the door. Sam pulled his stash out of his jacket pocket.

“Sam, I’m in a hurry – ” Nathaniel reached into his shirt pocket for his straw. “Barbara and I are going to hang out tonight. We’re going to a play.”

Nathaniel thought of how much he loved going to plays with Barbara – how when the lights went down and before the curtain rose he was allowed a magic moment to peek into a possible future. He imagined that they were married and watching one of his plays.

“What time is she getting off?” Sam placed his little mirror on the countertop. He held the baggie of what he had on him over the mirror. He flicked it a couple of times with his finger.

“Six,” Nathaniel said, finding himself not as concerned with time anymore. He just wanted to do the coke.

“That’s plenty of time,” Sam said, dumping out the blow from the bag.

The hell it is.” Nathaniel grabbed the razor off the counter and started cutting out lines.

“In an hour’s time, we’ll be back,” Sam said, pulling out his straw. He snorted a couple of lines, pinched his nostrils together and leaned back against the wall.

“If you would just learn to keep your fucking appointments.” Nathaniel put his straw to the glass and watched the white lines disappear before him.

And with those lines, Nathaniel knew the curtain had risen, and that magic moment before the show was gone. When there was no more shit to snort, Nathaniel thought, his nose wouldn’t be numb – it would feel like it was filled with sand, his nostrils would lose their shape, and their rims would feel like the salty ledge of a margarita glass. He knew he’d be certain his head would explode or that he’d have a stroke. He knew he wouldn’t seduce Barbara.

The speed surged through him, but those weren’t the first lines of the day.

“Oh my God, I met this girl!” Sam said, excited and smiling. His teeth were decaying right out of his mouth. “She’s a vegan, too!” Sam was a self-proclaimed atheist and vegan.

“Good for you,” Nathaniel said, the blow gone and the bathroom suddenly revolting. “Let’s get back to our drinks.”

He caught Sam’s reflection in the mirror. He couldn’t remember when Sam started to look so mummified, so rotten. Heading back to his place at the bar, Nathaniel tossed around the idea of taking a picture of Sam and doing it again the next month. While lacking scientific integrity, he thought, it would show the disappearing of his eyes, the pitting of his cheeks, the negative of his existence.

He had known Sam for five years. He had been drinking with Sam during those five years. He had been doing cocaine with Sam since Rufus died eleven months earlier.

Back at the bar, with drinks in front of them, the two sat uncomfortably. “So, when are you going to make your pickup?” Nathaniel asked.

“I’m going right now,” Sam said, getting up. “Walk with me.”

“How long will you be?”

“Fifteen or twenty.”

They stopped at the door in front of the television.

“Dude, I’m not waiting. I’ve got to meet with Barbara by seven.”

“Get the hell out of the way!” an old man at the corner of the bar barked impatiently.

“I’m watching the news.”

Nathaniel recognized the old man. He was a regular who came in and nervously picked at the bar top with his thick and dirty fingernails. He did it everywhere he sat along the bar.

Nathaniel looked over at the television. “MSNBC is not news.”

The door opened again, the bell jingling. “I’m looking for Sam!” a guy Nathaniel had never seen before said. The man stood about six feet tall and had a healthy build to him. His tie was hanging low, but Nathaniel thought it seemed to suit him, because most ties seen in such a place are like costumes, but this guy looked like he belonged to a world of responsibilities and didn’t fit in.

“Who are you?” Sam asked, straightening up.

The stranger and Sam were suddenly in each other’s faces. “I’m Melanie’s husband, you fuckin’ asshole!”

“Outside! Take it outside!” Sway yelled firmly, putting herself in between Sam and the husband and pushing them out the door.

Outside, cars drove past. A few people gathered as the two men continued to yell at one another.

“Please, Tom!” A woman, apparently Melanie, got out of a car parked right up front. Her hair was wind-blown and stringy. Her eyes like glass beads. Nathaniel thought she must be cold in her sandals. “Let’s just go and get out of here!” she pleaded.

The argument erupted into wild punches and kicks, some grabbing and pushing. Nathaniel didn’t want to get involved.

“Stop it!” Melanie said, starting to cry. “Stop them!”

Nathaniel didn’t particularly care to stop the fight, but the cocaine drip has kicked in. His body shivered, and something surged inside him. He felt his heart ripping as she cried.

He stepped up between them and started to push Sam backward, leading him away, stopping when they hit the cross-street. Melanie continued to cry.

The December air was stale. Sam yelled at Nathaniel, “Why did you stop us? I was going to kick his ass!” Sam put his hands on his knees and gasped for air.

Nathaniel started to think about what condition Sam’s insides must be in. He imagined they must be as unhealthy as his outer shell. He wondered if his organs had become pitted like his cheeks, or spongy even. Maybe they were slimy like when you put salt on a slug. For a moment, Nathaniel imagined himself cleaning Sam’s veins out like the rusted-out tin piping of an abandoned cotton gin.

Nathaniel wasn't sure why the husband hadn't just hit Sam square in the nose. That would have busted him up, he thought. Put a hole right in his face. Maybe the husband was afraid to kill him.

"Why is he mad at you?" Nathaniel asked, wanting Sam to just say it.

"Because his wife wants me!"

Just the day before Sam had confessed to Nathaniel that he felt bad about what he did to Melanie. She really wanted a fix and didn't have the cash, he had said, so he convinced her to blow him. Nathaniel guessed her husband came home from work and found her coked up.

"She just wants your coke," Nathaniel said, pointing over at Melanie getting into the car. Sam raised his head just enough to see her climb in. His hands were still on his knees, and he was still trying to catch his breath.

"And we all know how bad you are with women -- and their addictions. Even the husbands know," Nathaniel said, even though he knew Sam wouldn't absorb a single word. "You, the bartenders, the barbacks -- you can't do what you guys do, drugging, exploiting, raping," Nathaniel said.

Sam's eyes bulged and he mouthed silently "What?" in disbelief.

"Yeah, Sam -- many people call it rape."

Nathaniel knew it wasn't just Sam and it wasn't just the people at the bar. He looked down the street to a trendy bar, Toxic, where a neighbor had worked, a bartender named Victoria. Nobody wanted to see the truth about where they lived, he thought, suddenly feeling the rage that came upon him when Victoria told him she'd been drugged and raped by some other Toxic bartenders after shutting down one night. He hadn't known at the time why she had confided in him, but he later acknowledged that she probably thought he would have something

better to say than “Damn!” Victoria had left town on a Greyhound a couple of days later, and Nathaniel hadn’t seen her since.

Nathaniel broke out of the memory of Victoria and the bus and recognized disappointment and anger in Sam’s eyes as he looked up at him with his head cocked and his hands still on his knees.

“Come on, let’s walk around the block, cool you off and get back to business – you have a pickup to –”

“Uhgg.”

Nathaniel heard a thud as Sam came up off the ground from beside him and landed on the hood of Melanie’s husband’s car. The car kept moving down the side street, and Sam came rolling off the hood and back onto the pavement.

A week after the night with Sam and the accident, Nathaniel sat in the university library basement, scrawling in a notebook: *The loneliness has driven me to the basement. Above ground, I can’t make a connection to save my life. There are different crowds everywhere on this campus but none for me. SELF PITY BULLSHIT GETS YOU NOWHERE. PULL YOURSELF UP BY YOUR BOOTSTRAPS.*

He stopped writing, leaned back in his chair and laughed aloud at himself. He could hear Barbara’s voice in his head, scolding him for sounding like a conservative.

Years earlier, Nathaniel and Rufus had lived in the same dorm on the campus. When neither one of them could afford tuition anymore, they shared an apartment and went to work full time. They mostly got along but not always.

Nathaniel moved out after getting carjacked in their apartment parking lot. It wasn't the first time he'd been beaten up, but he vowed it would be the last and started learning how to fight: kung fu, sanshou, boxing, kickboxing. He even trained with weapons: bows, swords, chains, and knives – guns came later.

Just months before Rufus died, they had patched up things after their last and greatest argument about Rufus' obesity. In that patching up, they had talked a good deal about going back to school and finishing before they got any older. Rufus went back to school in the summer of that year at age 27. Nathaniel made it back that fall at 28. Rufus' heart gave out the following New Year's Eve.

The Civic pulled up to the small burnt-orange brick church. Nathaniel folded away the directions that had occupied his nervous hands and put them under the seat. They had arrived early. Very early. They watched the enormous casket get pushed along the church sidewalk. The pallbearers were heaving.

"Are you ready?" Barbara asked, looking herself over in the rearview mirror.

"Yes." He didn't want to wait any longer. He wanted to move the experience forward. He needed to pee. "Let's go inside so I can find a restroom."

"This church is hidden in these woods," Barbara said, looking around the grounds as they approached the church's double doors. Once in the foyer, Nathaniel could see all the way to the cherry wood pulpit, partially obscured by Rufus' massive, steely powder blue casket. Nathaniel had never seen a casket that big before, and it sort of reminded him of a deep freezer, only more ornate.

“You can go ahead and go on up there,” said one of the men who had helped wheel in the casket. He was clad in a bright green suit and matching crocodile shoes. He was broad like a linebacker, and Nathaniel looked for some resemblance to Rufus.

“I was wanting to find a restroom,” Nathaniel explained.

“That’s behind you, that way,” the suited man said, pointing to a small dark corner.

“Door’s on the left.”

“Thank you,” Nathaniel said, turning to Barbara. “I’ll come find you in a moment.”

“Sure,” she said and started walking into the sanctuary. Nathaniel watched her strappy heels get lost in the maroon shaggy carpet, tripping her a bit along the way.

In the restroom, Nathaniel washed his face and tried to catch a glimpse of himself in the small piece of broken mirror that remained on the dingy wall. He pulled out a baggie of coke that he got off Sam when he met him for drinks and to talk about Rufus’ death. *Relax. You are here to say goodbye to Rufus.* He put the baggie back in his pocket and went up to the front of the church to have a look at Rufus before things got started.

Rufus looked like he had been poured into the casket. His hands were a little ashy. His eyes were squeezed tight, too, like a kid trying to keep out the shampoo, Nathaniel thought. He was cold to Nathaniel’s touch, like the casket he was stuffed in was indeed a cooler, like he was lying on ice, an icy, steel blue cooler.

Rufus had always been heavy. Nathaniel had suspected it, but the photos around his casket, taken during different phases of his life, proved it. The constants were his smile, food, and extra pounds. Nathaniel knew Rufus was the kind of chubby kid everyone encouraged with pinches and smiles, hugs and kisses – not words of warning or moderation even.

Nathaniel touched the satin lining of the casket puffing up around Rufus, and he thought it was as if Rufus was sinking into a balloon bed top. Nathaniel wanted to save him – to pull him out before he got swallowed up and sank to the bottom.

Nathaniel didn't want anyone to see him cry. Rufus' mother, in a satiny nightgown and fuzzy house slippers, came up to him and took his hand. They hugged and talked for a minute. Nathaniel let her see him cry. She motioned to the rollers still in her hair and excused herself to finish getting ready.

"Goddamn! Sam!" Nathaniel was surprised to see Sam back on the scene just a few months after the accident.

"Hey! What's up?" Sam said, putting his arm around Nathaniel. "Let me buy you a drink."

Nathaniel put his wallet on the bar. "That's all right, hold onto your money."

The bartender cut up oranges at the sink. "I'll be right with you," he said.

Nathaniel took the stool next to Sam's, knocking down a crutch Sam had leaned against the bar. "Sorry about that, how are you?" Nathaniel asked, bending over to get the crutch. He noticed the metal brace attached to Sam's leg. It was a monstrous looking thing and was attached to pins penetrating the skin on Sam's leg. "What the fuck is this?"

"Dude, I'm great!" Sam declared, opening up and tossing down his Jaeger.

"What the fuck is on your leg?" Nathaniel asked again.

"It's not going to be on forever."

"Well, thank God for that."

"I'm an atheist, fuck God."

Nathaniel could tell Sam was numb to his problems. “So, what are you going to do?” he asked.

“I’ve got eleven thousand dollars in my bank account right now!” Sam smiled. “That fucker had to pay me!”

“You settled?” Nathaniel asked incredulously. “You think that will cover future medical costs?”

The bartender interrupted: “What can I get you?”

“Nothing, I’m not staying,” Nathaniel said, grabbing his wallet. He put it back in his pocket. “Hear me out here, Sam.” He felt that it would be a great mistake not to share this information with Sam: “You’re an idiot. I’ve been an idiot, too. We are all idiots at some point or another.”

“Fuck you!” Sam raised his crutch as if to take a swing at Nathaniel.

“Try me.”

Sam took a couple of clumsy bats but missed.

“But you can change,” Nathaniel continued, undeterred and somewhat amused. “And, seriously, you should stop snorting all that different shit you’re snorting. Oh yeah, and what you do to those girls, that ain’t right. You, too, *Jack*.” Nathaniel pointed at the bartender.

Nathaniel found something freeing in the moment. He ranted on about the stories he’d heard and the things he’d seen. He got it all off his chest.

When he was done, he walked toward the door, followed by two bartenders and two barbacks. Sam wobbled along, too. Outside, the men circled Nathaniel and started pushing him, and Nathaniel started pushing back, egging them on. They started throwing punches and kicks until Nathaniel felt a certain togetherness with them.

He thought of Victoria getting on the Greyhound and how maybe she told him so he'd do something. He thought of Rufus stuffed into the box and how he could have done more to help him. He thought about all the times he let Barbara down, broke her heart even, for a cocaine binge. He thought of his failure to connect. He was sure he deserved a beating.

He fell to the ground, absorbing the blows with glee. He balled up, kicking and laughing. He could see Sam cheering and pumping his crutch up in the air. There was so much joy in Nathaniel's heart.

The library basement was furnished with a couple of hutches near the winding stairs and four long tables for study. There were stacks of journals and an office for employees in a back corner.

Still bruised from the beating, Nathaniel read a play he liked, trying to figure out what made it work. He took out an apple and a pear and laid them next to his papers. He spun the pear around on the tabletop, lifted it to his mouth and bit into it. He savored the satisfaction delivered by the fleshy fruit. When he was done, he positioned his backpack on the table to fashion it into a pillow and rested his head on it, allowing himself to drift off.

The clouds were filled with water that gushed out whenever Nathaniel stepped on them. He moved across the gray sky with unsure steps. He heard her voice: *Until you figure it all out, walking on the clouds is a bit like walking on a waterbed.*

Nathaniel panned his head around. He fell onto a wet cloud and grabbed it like a pillow during sleep, dampening his chest and face, and squeezing out drops of rain -- big like from the Gulf Coast.

I have to be somewhere. The love place. But where is it?

Barbara swung on a white porch swing outside her red-shingled childhood home. She was always ready. She rarely strayed too far from the house, usually contented by the buds on the bougainvillea vine and the syrupy scent of jasmine that hung heavy in the air, but even if she did venture out she always knew where to meet him.

“Why are you here?” Barbara asked.

“You know the answer -- because I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Why can't I see you?” Nathaniel asked, moving around the clouds with ease now.

“Because you're in the clouds, and I'm on my swing.”

“Can you see me?” He did his best impression of a sailor, holding his cupped hands before his eyes as if they were binoculars and she were a ship in the distance.

“Of course I can. You're so silly.”

“Why can't I see you?” he asked, dropping his fist binoculars and looking a little defeated. He heard a horn in the distance and squinted toward the sun.

Most of the people who exited the parking lot of the church didn't show up to the graveyard. Some left the caravan en route to Rufus' final resting place and took the highway home.

“You know, I need a hat for funerals,” Barbara whispered, and Nathaniel pictured her for a moment in a hat with feathers or maybe plastic flowers.

After a few words by the preacher, everyone left except the pallbearers. They struggled with the massive casket. Nathaniel was somewhat amused that Rufus just wasn't going to let go that easily.

“Do you guys need help?” Nathaniel asked, approaching the shiny casket.

“If you don’t mind,” Rufus’ cousin Charles answered. “Grab it over there on that end.”

Nathaniel hurried over to an empty spot between two of the men wearing colorful suits and grabbed hold of a giant metal handle. It was still cold from the air conditioning in the church. “*Oh, my God!* Rufus! This fucking thing is really damned heavy!”

“We know,” Charles said as the men inched toward the grave. “Everyone left.”

Charles sucked in some air. “The casket exceeds the weight limit,” he puffed, sucking in some more air, “for that lift thing that’s supposed to put it in the ground.”

The expression on Nathaniel’s face began to match that of the other men -- something like blowing a horn in a jazz band or holding your breath when passing the slaughterhouse.

Nathaniel felt Rufus’ coffin falling to the ground on the other side.

“Put it down! Sorry! I got to rest,” said one guy on that end.

“No, no! Go on,” Charles insisted. “If we put it down, we’ll never get it back up again. This weighs a ton.”

Nathaniel squeezed the cold handle harder. He couldn’t believe what was happening. He pictured Rufus laughing in the monstrous box while they tossed him around and struggled. He remembered how much Rufus liked to laugh and how the sound of his laughing would reverberate in any given room.

“If we just ... get a little closer. Just half a foot. We can swing it. On three!” Nathaniel squeaked out.

Charles was game.

“One,” Charles said, but they barely managed a swing. “Two.” They got it just a little further over the hole. “Three!”

As they released the weight, the casket fluttered higher and higher until all they could see was a tiny speck in the sky.

AND THEN HE WAS GONE

The gin was a monster of violence, which spoke in piercing screeches, ringing out through the wintry night sky that stretched forever outward, dappled with burning centers of faraway possibilities. The tin building protected the beast, containing much of the noise and dirt, the evidence of the force and power used to strip the cotton from the seeds with lined-up blades of steel, each with tiny sharp teeth spinning round and round. In the building were also bodies, bundled up from the cold, caring for the parts that moved, trying not to get caught up in the violence.

Nicolas pulled cold metal wires all night. He was wrapping up the final product, the eight-hundred pounds of seedless, cleaned cotton. He thought about school, wondering about the dance, wondering who was dancing with Gloria, wondering if someone else's hands were on her hips.

The fact that Nicolas' father was absent bothered him less after the first time he spent the night at a friend's house. He'd spent an entire Saturday with Andrew. They were in the fifth grade together. Andrew never had to work in the gin, fields, or farms. Nicolas figured Andrew's step-father had a job at the meat-packing plant, but he wasn't sure. Andrew had a mattress he liked to jump onto from the top of a small trailer home his stepdad had out back. On their way to the roof, Andrew pointed out a stack of nudie mags on the living room end table and the boys laughed. They didn't care to look at them – they just weren't there yet. Nothing could be better than jumping off the trailer and onto the mattress down below.

"If you think about flying while you're falling, it slows you down!" Andrew hollered.

He was so excited as he jumped off the roof that he floated higher than the treetops. Then he fell toward the mattress below like a leaf, swaying back and forth, caught in the wind. He crossed his legs and laced his fingers behind his head and softly landed on the mattress.

“My turn!” Nicolas ran and launched himself straight into the air – way up high.

“Think about flying!”

Nicolas thought about Dumbo and Superman and Mighty Mouse. About the time Heather told him that we’re all made of stardust as she kissed him on the cheek and how it instantly made him stand taller as his heart rushed, and just like that he felt himself catch the wind, his parachute opening as he floated down to the worn mattress below.

When Andrew’s stepfather got home from work at the slaughterhouse, he called Andrew outside, and Nicolas followed. Nicolas could tell Andrew was scared. He was crying before he even got to his stepdad. It was like he already felt the baseball bat in his father’s hand come crashing into his ribs when he was holding his arms out toward the batter saying, “Please don’t. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been in my trailer. You been looking at my magazines.”

Then it sounded like something cracked. Andrew wrapped his body with his arms and wailed on the ground, and his stepdad swung a couple of more times at him. The second swing came down over his head and caused a sound like breaking wood. But the bat was fine. Afterward, the boys and the rest of Andrew’s family gathered in their living room on the floor, and Andrew’s little brother and older sister made Nicolas promise not to tell.

It was three days before Andrew made it back to school. He had broken ribs and a broken arm, and Nicolas could still see that black eye, although it was starting to fade. Nicolas had been getting in trouble at home and at school because he’d been keeping quiet. He was so afraid that if

he opened his mouth, the scene that kept playing out over and over in his head would come out. When summer came, Andrew went to live with his real father.

That next ginning season, Nicolas thought back to the fun he and Andrew had jumping and falling onto that mattress. The trailers of cotton waiting to be ginned were lined up behind the workers' barracks until the tractor came for them. Some trailers had more cotton than others. When he thought nobody was watching, Nicolas convinced Pablo to climb to the rim of the trailer with him and jump into the cotton. It hadn't been ginned, so there were sticks and other uncomfortable things in there, but Nicolas didn't mind.

He heard a scream, turned to look, and watched as Jesus pulled and wailed -- his hand stuck between the thick gauge wire and the expanding bale of cotton. As the hydraulic press released, so did the eight-hundred pounds. When the press operator was able to stop the expanding bale and reverse the press, Nicolas and Luis helped Jesus pull away. His glove looked OK: Maybe it would be OK. But when they pulled off the glove, two fingers stayed in the little finger sleeves. Nicolas pulled off his gloves, looked at his own hands, wiggled his fingers and noticed how cold and stiff they were. But they were all there.

Nicolas walked into the freezing air and started running. He ran past the junction where the dirt road turned to pavement. He ran while the sun came up behind him. He ran until he couldn't recognize the land around him. He ran until he'd grown an old man's beard and grey hairs. He ran until he couldn't remember anyone or anything from his youth. He ran until he exploded into starlight and shined in the night sky.

SONNET

Nick and Nathaniel were working together, training together, and living together. They had a small apartment in Greenville. When they weren't together, Nathaniel was taking night classes, and Nick was spending time with the more violent guys from the gym. Nathaniel had been saving money for a semester of school since he'd been at the cotton gin.

One night, the brothers were out with a friend, Sean, from the gym at the pizza place near the college campus, and Nathaniel saw a classmate. She invited him to go two-stepping with her and her friends. He ran it by Nick and Sean, but they didn't really know how to two-step. They were more of the bump-and-grind type.

"That sounds like a lot of work to get some play," Sean said.

"Yeah, it's a lot easier to just rub up on the girls at these bars around here," Nick agreed.

"Yeah," Sean continued, "it's easier here, and we don't have to drive to the outskirts of town."

Nathaniel conceded and told his classmate that he wouldn't be able to make it. "Well, you know where I'll be if you change your mind," she said with a smile and walked out with her friends.

Sean was behind the wheel, Nick was in the middle, and Nathaniel was on the passenger side. They were driving away from the strip after barhopping for a couple of hours.

"Did you see that girl I was dancing with?" Sean was beaming.

“Which one?” Nick asked.

“The brunette in the short skirt.”

“I was dancing with her, too!”

The truck came to a complete stop. A naked man covered in blood had jumped out in front of the pickup. They all got out of the truck and left it running with the doors open.

Nathaniel took off his shirt and offered it to the bloody man, telling him, "You need a doctor."

The man took the shirt and led the guys to a bank up the sidewalk from the street. He put the shirt like a blanket over a naked girl, also covered in blood.

The young man had blond hair; so did the young woman, but you almost couldn't tell with all the blood in it. She looked dead. The young man recounted the story of what happened. He seemed out of breath, but both he and the girl were fit. He told of how he and his girlfriend had been celebrating their recent engagement and decided to go for a walk through the amphitheatre down the hill. Nathaniel had often seen students sitting in the sun out there. The bloody man said that four black men, two with shotguns and two with handguns jumped, beat, and raped them both.

A crowd had formed. Someone said that the young woman was dead. Nathaniel said, “She's not dead, not if we pray,” and he knelt. No one prayed with him, and he felt God sink. The ambulance showed up and took the blood-covered couple away.

The boys were angry; many in the crowd were. Many different people decided to go and try to find the assailants. Nathaniel, Nick, and Sean were back in the truck driving toward the outskirts. This was going to be a bad thing, and Nathaniel could feel it.

He remembered being a child in the truck with his father. His father thought it was fun to get Nathaniel drunk, as he got drunk, and sit Nathaniel between him and the wheel of the truck and let Nathaniel pretend to drive. Once, Nathaniel was laughing in his father's lap and listening to him laugh and feeling his liquored breath heating up the back of Nathaniel's head. The truck moved forward, and the cool night air was a chocolate bar, and Nathaniel couldn't have enough of it. Nathaniel couldn't remember what happened between the chocolate and the police officer at the window, who yelled at his father, in English and in Spanish, and then made Nathaniel's mother take the wheel. When the police officer drove away, Nathaniel's mother screamed and slapped at her husband. That night, Nathaniel learned that a good time isn't always a good time.

"Stop the truck!" Nathaniel said.

"What?" Nick yelled angrily.

"Stop the truck. I'm getting out." Nathaniel looked out to his right and saw the neon lights of the honky-tonk his classmate was going to be at.

"You are such a pussy! If I stop this truck and you get out, don't expect us to be friends down the road!" Sean yelled.

"Stop the fucking truck!" Nathaniel yelled back.

The truck came to a stop and Nathaniel got out. He looked at Nick. "I'm staying," Nick said, slamming the door as the tires squealed into the night.

OF NO FIXED ADDRESS

The road before them was a mystery. Nathaniel and Barbara had recently moved to Maryland from Texas, and they were heading out to Preston in the Chesapeake Bay area on U.S. 50.

“We’re two fall-struck lovers,” Nathaniel told her.

“It is really amazing -- fall.”

She refolded her newspaper and looked into the distance where sunlight illuminated the leaves, setting some ablaze around the edges. They passed Annapolis and drove toward the Bay Bridge.

“It’s strange, the faith we put in bridges,” Nathaniel said, but Barbara only nodded in reply. “People use them as launch pads while leaping to their deaths.”

“But they get us from Point A to Point B,” she said without raising her eyes from the newspaper, only slightly dismissive but typically optimistic.

Bridges always brought a feeling of vulnerability from within Nathaniel up to just under the skin. An uncertainty surfaced. The complexity of closing a gap was demonstrated in the repetition of the handiwork on the steel structures. The nuts and bolts on the rusty beams were strategically placed for support.

A week earlier, he’d read on the Internet about a migrant worker who had been murdered over in the Chesapeake Bay area in August, and he’d decided that morning over their IHOP breakfast that he wanted to see the farm where the worker had died. Barbara was game and wanted to take a drive, like they were used to doing in Texas. But as they headed to the house the man was killed in, Nathaniel was not sure why he was drawn to the worker’s story or why it was necessary to drive an hour and a half to get closer to it. He just kept thinking that it could have been him or someone he once knew.

According to a Maryland State Police press release issued shortly after the slaying, the migrant worker was killed during a robbery by three people shortly before midnight on Aug. 6 in the small Eastern Shore town. The news release used the word “secluded.” It said a white woman and two black men drove to the property, used to house migrant farm workers, and parked at the end of its drive off Early Road. One worker was hit in the face with a gun, and another was shot and killed. It said the county had seen an increase in murder recently -- from none in the past two years up to two that year.

The migrant housing part made Nathaniel think about the different places he stayed season by season and the different people he was surrounded by. He knew what that was like – to have his life dictated by the seasons. During winter breaks from school in his teens, he went to work in the cotton gins, where the fiber is pulled from the seed and compressed into a bale. You had to wear a dust mask, or you’d just inhale pure dirt, and the machines left you deaf and numb. The noise isolated you. You were your function: *Get those metal wire ties secured around the bale and your hands out of there before the hydraulic press releases the 800 pounds of cotton and tears your fingers off.*

He once caught a ride one winter break to Cordele, a small central Georgia town with a few cotton gins. He and a few others were housed in a cold, empty warehouse kept by one of the cotton gin owners. The concrete floor may as well have been ice and the warehouse a fridge, but they were glad to be sheltered from the wind. They folded large yellow bags made of coarse synthetic fibers into scratchy mattresses. The bags were used at the gin when one of its many moving parts pushed a compressed bale of clean cotton into it for protection during travel.

Sometimes it was too cold to read in the warehouse after Nathaniel's shift, and all he could do was fall asleep. He was tired, and he was cold, but he wasn't alone.

There were a few guys sleeping there during the days, too. Nathaniel worked the night shift. Twelve-hour shifts, seven nights a week: that was the routine. The gin was cold, too, but they were moving around in the gin, and the motors that ran all the equipment and the machines themselves gave off a heat of their own. When it was really cold, and if he could take the time, Nathaniel would go stand by the giant gas-fueled cotton dryers.

Among the people living in the warehouse with him that ginning season was a man transitioning between military and civilian life, a mechanic without a shop, and a guy from Mexico. Those guys had the same shift as Nathaniel, and they were all far from home. One night they invited Nathaniel to go out with them. They had a couple of days off for Christmas, and Nathaniel thought it would be great to get out of the freezing warehouse.

They filed into a hole-in-the-wall bar and out from the cold. The front room had old, dark wood paneling and tacky red lights. They were stopped at the front desk and told the drink minimum while paying the cover charge. The man looked at Nathaniel's I.D. and said, "Sorry, you have to be eighteen to get in here. There's shadow dancing back there."

He was not allowed into the "shadow dance," and he was left alone in the truck to read. He didn't really mind, but he'd seen naked girls before on television and even had a girl lay naked before him. They had kissed, but he couldn't stop thinking about God. He didn't want to tell her that, so he told her that she tasted like Doritos.

Nathaniel was nervous, but he didn't want to bother Barbara as she read the newspaper. He put his hand on her knee, and she patted his hand like she would one of their dogs, affectionately but somewhat absently.

He tried to recall where he was on the day when the worker was killed at the farmhouse. It was his last semester of undergrad, and he was turning in an assignment. It was a narrative in Spanish about going to church as a small child. (His parents had argued in the front seat of the station wagon. He stuck his head out of the car window to get away from his father's cigarette smoke and the fighting only to have the cigarette fly into his face as his father flicked it out the window.)

That day, Barbara had been riding around the university in a golf cart, being sentimental about their time spent there. She had been born and raised in the city, and the campus had been her stomping ground. It was her last day of work.

They arrived in Preston, and Early Road had little traffic, but the one other vehicle that needed to get by as they looked for the farmhouse was a work truck. Nathaniel pulled the Honda off the winding road, certain he'd passed up the house, giving the farm truck a chance to get around them. He wondered if the killers had also overshot the house. Had they staked out the place? He parked on the side of the road like the killers had.

Two articles about the murder that he'd read last week noted that the getaway car was parked off the road instead of in the drive. It made him think about a courtesy he learned early in his youth. He had been riding with his father before he had left. The sun was setting in the West Texas sky, and they were driving past a house sitting a couple of hundred yards off the road. Nathaniel's father honked the horn, and Nathaniel decided to ask why, because he had noticed he

didn't always do it, and he wasn't sure why that house and not the next. His father explained that he had seen a car parked off the side of the road but not up the drive, and "that could mean that they want to sneak up on a person." He continued, "You can get their attention or the dogs'."

Nathaniel headed down the drive of the farmhouse crime scene and noticed the soft dirt beneath the vehicle. Nobody'd been driving on this drive to this house as of late, he could tell as the car slowly sank into the ground. He kept the vehicle moving toward the hard-packed dirt around the house. The killers sneaked up this drive, he thought.

"Come on! Let's check it out," Barbara said, packing her reading materials away on the perpetually cluttered floorboard.

"No, wait. I don't want the cops to come."

"Why the hell would the cops come? Jeez, you and the cops."

"Just wait," Nathaniel said firmly. She lit a cigarette indignantly and stared out the window.

Barren fields surrounded the white farmhouse. The rows lined across the land created patches that looked like pieces of a puzzle. Different colors marked the patches, all a faded kin to the colors of the past crops harvested there. A pair of sweat pants and a pair of slacks hung motionless on an abandoned clothesline near the lonely house. A dirty soccer ball was left in the yard. The house, probably built in the late 1800s or early 1900s, stood beaten and deserted, and its nearest artery for life was the road that brought in the murderers. Nathaniel locked the car doors.

"I've seen enough," he said finally.

"Are you fucking serious?"

“Yes, let’s go.”

“Oh, my fucking God. We just drove all over goddamned Maryland,” she said, emphasizing “Mar-uh-land” the way she did when she was pissed about the new people or the new place. “And I don’t even get to go peek in the windows? Un-fucking-believable.”

“Jesus, Barbara. You can’t just go lurk around a crime scene.”

“Dude, there isn’t even police tape. Nobody’s here. They bailed!”

“Still.”

“Fine. I have to pee, and I’m hungry again,” she said, pausing. “Why didn’t they take their soccer ball?” Nathaniel studied the dirty ball lying near the clothesline post.

“They wanted to get the hell out of here. They could have been illegals.”

“Yeah.”

They headed back home through Easton, which was really more of a town than Preston. It has restaurants, gas stations and banks. People in Preston probably call Easton “town,” Nathaniel figured, like his family did for places nearest to wherever in the country they were.

“Denny’s or the Easton Diner?” Barbara asked as Nathaniel steered the Honda away from Early Road.

“Wherever there are people who can talk to me about this murder.”

“Do you think the killers were from Easton?”

“Maybe,” Nathaniel said.

The Easton Diner was really nothing to write home about, but it smelled a little like the ocean, and Nathaniel found its retro interior was somewhat unexpected. A lanky redheaded kid seated the couple at two vinyl-covered stools at the bar, a decent perch for people-watching.

“What can I get you?” the bartender, a fortyish brunette, asked.

“Dr. Pepper?” Barbara queried.

“Sorry, we have Coke.”

“OK, Coke.”

“Coke for me, too,” Nathaniel said.

Barbara spun around on her stool, not so subtly assessing the Easton Diner crowd.

“Maybe he knows something,” she said, nodding toward a young Latino bussing a nearby table. “Oh, or like the redhead. He probably knows everyone here.”

“Let’s just order first,” Nathaniel told her, willing her with his mind to stay glued to the stool and not humiliate him with her special brand of bravery, the kind that develops over a lifetime of nothing all that bad happening.

“Dude, we should totally go to the newspaper and ask for clips of their coverage,” she said, as if it were completely normal for two people to walk into a newsroom and ask for copies of articles about a migrant worker who was killed.

“Maybe. We can drive by,” Nathaniel said, even though he knew he wouldn’t get out of the car even if the newspaper had a sign out front proclaiming it had all the information he wanted.

“Oh, yeah. It’s a weekly. I bet they’re not open right now. But, yeah, let’s drive by.”

When the food came, Barbara picked at her crabcakes with an unhappy look on her face.

“I don’t think this is very fresh,” she complained a little too loudly.

“Sorry.”

“Whatever. Maybe I just don’t like crab,” she said, seemingly pleased to have one more thing to dislike the state of Maryland for. “The Chesapeake’s like not really the ocean anyway.”

To Nathaniel’s relief, the newspaper, housed in a historic building, was in fact not open, but Barbara remained undeterred. “That’s the library. Let’s go look at their stacks!” she said excitedly. The library Nathaniel could do.

Inside, a librarian kindly offered the couple a computer code to access the archives, and Barbara insisted on doing the search of the electronic archives. Nathaniel moved out of her way.

“Here, here. Look at this,” she said, again a bit too loudly. ““Police have identified a migrant farm worker slain last week during a late-night robbery and are still looking for three people involved.””

The Baltimore news report identified the worker as “Antonio Gutierrez Angeles, 32, of no fixed address.”

As a child, Nathaniel had mistaken the name of a cotton gin yard, “Southlawn,” for the name of his town growing up. Southlawn was a dirty and loud gin. It wasn’t a town or really a place. But for him it was a sort of home. “Of no fixed address” resonated.

Another article said police believed the suspects fled in a gray or silver car, a new detail on which Nathaniel could fixate. The article used those words he was suddenly acutely sensitive to: “no fixed address.” He also learned that Antonio was El Salvadoran, and he was identified by a relative who was “currently” working in Pennsylvania.

“All right, I’m going over to the stacks,” Barbara said, bundling up her things.

Re-reading another the account of the murder, Nathaniel just couldn't help but picture it happening in his mind. He envisioned the places used to house farm laborers, to house him. He envisioned different men, both young and old, he'd worked with, lived with, dreamt with, ate with, and laughed with. They were different and the same. Had Antonio and the others been telling stories about their families? Maybe Antonio was asleep and dreaming. Drinking and playing cards? Nathaniel wanted to ask the witnesses.

I've had the cold steel rim of a double-barrel shotgun pressed up against the back and base of my neck, Nathaniel thought. I've stared at the face and down the arm of a person holding a pistol less than a couple of feet away from me and pointing it at my face. But I am not Antonio, and I can only piece together his story.

On the day Antonio was identified, Nathaniel was packing in the Heights. Barbara was having a party down the street at a great Mexican restaurant they liked walking to for food and drinks. Thanks to summer school, he was behind on his packing, so he stayed home to get that done.

He had the company of their pitbulls. They'd been nervously watching all their possessions being packed away, even their tough-as-nails Kongs. Barbara had adopted the older one when she worked for a newspaper in Memphis, but he'd lived most of his life in the historic bungalow. As a pup, the second one was rescued by Nathaniel's sister after his original owner was locked up for running her car over a Dairy Drive-In manager who got her order wrong.

Nathaniel gave his acoustic guitar to the neighbors' son, because the U-Haul was getting full, and he remembered how much he wanted a guitar when he was a kid and asking his father for one anytime a birthday or Christmas was around the corner. He always asked and always prayed and always got socks or nothing. Once he got some Lifesavers candy. That always led to

the “Why can’t I keep my own money or spend it how I want?” argument. He should have known better than to ask, but he’d always been a dreamer.

One day his father came home with an accordion he had picked up somewhere. Looking back, Nathaniel guessed it came from the dump, because they’d found things at the dump before, and it looked a lot like trash. At the time, though, it was the most awesome thing his eleven-year-old self had ever laid his hands on.

“It’s getting late. We should go,” Nathaniel whispered Barbara, who was surrounded by newspaper editions folded neatly the way he’d seen her fold her newspapers at home. “It’s OK if this is all we can find today,” he assured her.

“But it’s been three months, and I can’t find shit about suspects. This is bullshit.”

“I know. Maybe we’ll find something online that I missed. Let’s call it a day.”

“Yeah, OK.”

As the sun set behind the hills and trees, Nathaniel merged the vehicle onto U.S. 50 homebound. Barbara was visibly disappointed but threw herself into finding a country oldies station that didn’t exist on the radio.

The sunset itself was somewhat disappointing, blocked by the trees and hills, and for a moment Nathaniel longed for the flat landscape of West Texas, where vastness was full of opportunity.

Barbara leaned against the window after accepting that the market for country oldies was limited in Maryland and plugging in the mp3 player. Tom Waits’ “Cold Cold Ground” played, and Nathaniel was haunted by the song in a new way. He thought about Antonio’s life as they neared D.C.

Had the killers, those same killers who ran down the farmhouse drive taken the same route? Had the gray or silver car driven their same escape route?

They drove into the night, the rain and fog heavy on the bridge and the highway.

BAD PORN NEEDS GOOD HOME

Nick pressed his palms up against the front door as if he were doing a standing push-up. The aluminum was cool against his hands, and the day beyond the peephole was bright like a spotlight. The world he wanted to be a part of was outside the door, but he couldn't go outside. It was an illogical phobia. He knew that most of the time. Still, he just kept watching the world beyond through the four-inch-wide and five-inch-tall yellow-stained-glass window, a tiny door that swung open, allowing him to watch and communicate without having to go outside. Some days, he could stand to only open the miniature door within the door. Some days weren't even that nice.

Looking through the stained glass, he thought about church. He could see the blurred security bars on the miniature door through the stained glass. He felt safe and trapped at the same time. It wasn't even really the outdoors that much. He loved the outdoors growing up. It was something else.

He turned on the television and watched some news for a few minutes, swaying back and forth as he listened.

"Congresswoman St. Clair has died," the news anchor on television announced. Time was Nick's enemy as it carried away his possibilities for the day. The anchor chimed in again: "We are now confirming that forty-five people have died in the plane crash."

He turned off the television and focused on the paperwork on his desk. This was something he could distract himself with. Watching the clock on his desk, he couldn't help but think it was smiling at him. Its hands marked 10:10 with a grin.

Then suddenly it jumped off the desk and waddled toward the front door. Nick watched the door open right up for the clock. It left the house but he wasn't too upset because it didn't mark any time but 10:10.

It was Saturday night in Montrose, and Nick could hear the drone of the streets turning into the sound of the train of energy the place put out. The partying had started a few doors down.

Nick's neighbor Patrick was by then a disappearing flame. He'd been sick and was dying with AIDS, and the party crowd often came and started their night out with a visit to their friend who could no longer make the outing. Patrick liked to smoke, and his favorite drug was cocaine.

The crowd gathered in the yard and some people trickled onto the porch. A knock came at Nick's door, and he ignored it. He noticed the crowd was larger than usual but didn't care enough to look into it.

"Hey, Nick! Are you in there?" someone shouted into the door. "It's Jared. Dude, the girl in number 4 is having a bonfire tonight in the drive way!"

Nick remained silent.

Jared continued to shout at the door. "Her fiancé called it off, and she's pissed!"

Jared rapped hard on the door and then stopped and walked away. Nick peeked out the miniature door.

Nick grabbed the flashlight and turned on the back porch light. He'd put on pants and a long-sleeved button-down, covering himself as best as he could. It was time. Armed with a plastic shopping bag, Nick looked for the pooper-scooper and found it leaning against the fence just a few feet away but couldn't get the grasp he had on the door knob to budge. Everything got

farther away and smaller, and he couldn't breathe anymore. He felt a mosquito pierce the flesh on his exposed ankle.

Let go of the door. Back up. Breathe.

"I'm sorry, Paw," he said shamefully.

Nick went to his bed and lay down. South Paw put his chin on his stomach.

"Tomorrow the guys come and do the lawn. They'll take care of it. Don't worry about it."

The sunlight broke through the edges of the doggie door and danced on Nick's feet. He rose from his chair and walked to the window, putting his palm to it and catching the sunlight. He could see South Paw in the back yard sunbathing. South Paw loved to sunbathe.

He'll come inside, Nick assured himself, and I'll smother him with affection and smell that pancake scent the sun bastes him with.

South Paw always brought in the sun. It radiated off him and onto Nick, and Nick was certain South Paw was happy to share it with him. Nick knew the dog could sense there was something wrong with the way Nick lived, but South Paw loved him anyway. South Paw had been a bait dog, and Nick couldn't resist his insightful, human-looking eyes, the white surrounding the deep brown irises.

Nick wanted to feel the sun directly on his skin, outside, like the grass and the trees and South Paw, too. He wished he could get outside. Maybe tonight. It was usually easier for him at night, and he didn't know why. Maybe because he had to, because he loved South Paw, and because South Paw was good to him and somebody had to pick his poop up for him or his back yard would stink and be a horrible place for him to sunbathe.

It was not yet noon on Sunday, and the brunch crowd was already drinking. The talk of Jenna's bonfire made its way around the circles, and diners shared stories of their favorite parts. For some it was when she called her ex-fiancé and was screaming at him and telling him what she was doing while smoke came up from all around her. Others talked about the items themselves: "Did you see how big that stuffed bear was? Or how fast it burnt up?" But what Nick really liked was the way Jenna had talked to the cops outside his window.

"Officers," she said, "I put this stuff out here for my piece of shit ex-fiancé to come pick up."

"Have you been drinking ma'am?"

"Absolutely! And you'd be drunk, too, Mr. Man. But I'm not driving!"

"Did you start that fire?"

"Yes, but it was an accident, and I put it out. You see, I was looking at this picture of when we first got together, and I was thinking about the warm feelings in my heart, and then the photo caught fire," she explained as she cried. "Before I could think what to do the books and hats and letters were up in smoke. And, by the time the giant stuffed bear caught fire, it was too big and scary for me to deal with. The whole pile just went up so fast. But I managed to save the jewelry – thank God."

Staring at the front door from his seat and small portable writing table, Nick found himself mesmerized by the sunlight diffracting through the screen door. He followed the sunbeams with his eyes to the floor in front of him and then back to the screen door.

He reached over and turned on the radio and then stood and moved to the rhythm of the foxtrot. Feeling inspired, he began to think he could make it out of the house and into the world.

Out loud, you have to say it out loud, put it out into the universe and make it happen.

“I am getting out today,” he said almost convincingly.

Come on, that was so not good enough – you can do better.

“I am getting out today,” he said again, this time loud enough to get South Paw excited.

The dog raised his head off his paws, watched Nick with encouragement and wagged his tail.

He wasn't sure where it came from, but there it was: “Bad Porn Needs Good Home.” That's what the sign said on the box on a stump painted yellow at the curb of the six-plex.

Nick was surprised by how many of his neighbors were sifting through it. Five of them were gathered around the box filled with VHS porn. He just couldn't believe how many people still had VCRs.

Nick wanted to be a part of this moment with his neighbors, to share the experience as well, to talk about the bonfire he watched from his miniature door.

South Paw was immediately excited. It was if he knew, like all the moves Nick was making -- putting on his tennis shoes and brushing his teeth and spraying himself with deodorizer -- were a cue, a signal.

As Nick moved out the door, Paw made his way on to the backrest of the couch, where he lay down, slid the window open with his snout, and rested his chin on the window sill.

Outside, Nick looked into the box, and the tapes' worn jackets all looked familiar. He didn't remember putting it out – but he was certain it was his stash. Sifting through the box, he saw his favorite, a medley of sex and pantyhose. Jenna reached for it and started walking away with it.

“Wait! I'll trade these two for that one,” he said.

“OK,” she replied.

Nick went back into his place and realized that he had left his VHS player in the alley for anyone to take. It had never been like this before.

He turned the television back on, and the news anchor explained that the congresswoman had in fact not died, and 100 more people were said to be dead in the plane crash in Spain. That brought the total to 145; and one fewer congresswoman was dead.

FAMILY GATHERING

Nick and Nathaniel greeted each other at the pond, which their older brother Ricky had stocked with catfish. “Remember that time mom and dad took us to Mexico and tried to unload us there?” Nathaniel started to reminisce with Nick.

“We were kids,” Nick said, smiling.

Nathaniel and Nick could always be reached through Ricky. He seemed to know where everyone one was and what they were doing all the time. The family gathering was meant to celebrate Ricky’s latest purchase of a plot of land. Ricky had also informed them that their father was dying and wanted to see them.

“I remember those boys hanging you out the window. Remember that? They really wanted to kill you, you know!”

“Yes, thank you for saving me.” Nathaniel had not forgotten. The boys in Mexico hadn’t wanted the two new kids staying there, so they dangled Nathaniel from eight floors up.

“I’m not sure I did save you. Did you ever think that you might have floated instead of fallen?”

“I didn’t know I could then.”

“But we did.”

“I know. But it had never happened before, and I wasn’t sure what was going on. If you hadn’t grabbed hold of me, I may have drifted up forever.”

Neither Nathaniel nor Nick could remember the last time the family was together. Each had pretty much given upon the notion of family anyway. Even though the two of them were mostly apart – it often seemed to Nathaniel that Nick was his only family. Nick felt more alone.

“I think we’re cursed. Unwanted. Unloved.”

“I love you.” Nathaniel wanted Nick to feel the love he had for him.

“Well, we beat them up and didn’t have to stay there in the end,” Nick remembered. “I ended up being left at Grandpa’s and working his farm.”

“I ended up in some cotton gin yard in Alabama.”

A silence hung over them for a moment.

“What do you think about going to see your father?” Nick asked.

“He’s your father, too.” Nathaniel replied.

“I decided a long time ago that he ain’t my father. He grew up on Grandpa’s farm, and he had to know what Grandpa was going to do to me. No father would leave his son with a monster like that over and over again.”

“I’m sorry, Nick.”

“Fuck you! Fuck your ‘sorry’! You have no idea what it was like for me there.”

“I know it wasn’t easy — ”

Nick turned and pushed a left hook across Nathaniel’s jaw. “Shit! I’m sorry.” Nick put his hands on Nathaniel’s shoulders, held him sturdily and hugged him.

“It’s alright, brother.” Nathaniel solemnly wiped a thin stream of blood off his lip.

Looking over the pond and into the distance, Nathaniel noticed a big black dog walking toward them slowly but confidently. Certain it was one of the many strays Ricky and his kids always picked up, he just nodded his head toward it to get Nick’s attention. But Nick was already transfixed on the creature, knowing it was something darker, something bringing vengeance, a beast feeding on his hate.

AFRICAN SLEEPING SICKNESS

“We aren’t leaving,” a young man with sandy brown hair said into the newscaster’s microphone as his young wife nodded behind him. “We’ll be here, me and my wife, my family. People always make a big deal.”

He was no older than twenty-one and wearing a blue T-shirt and jeans. His hands were in his pockets, and he stiffened his arms. His shirt flapped like a flag. Behind him, his wife, probably still just a teen, swayed in the wind. Her shorts were too tight to flap, and she had a baby wearing a diaper, and nothing else, on her hip waving its arms in the air. The wind whipped her hair, and the tumultuous sea thrashed behind them.

“And there you have it,” the newscaster said into the microphone, looking into the camera while bracing himself against the gusts. “Some people are choosing to ride this storm out instead of evacuating. This is Alex Sanchez for KHTX, reporting live from the Galveston seawall.”

Nathaniel flicked the remote to turn off the TV and turned to Barbara standing next to him in the small, bright living room. She was flushed.

“Why would they stay?” Barbara asked, not really asking and shaking her head disapprovingly.

“No better options?” he offered, resisting the urge to call them fucking idiots. “I’ll holler for you when I do the big window up front. I’ll need your help, so keep an ear out.”

“OK, I’m going to see who called while we were gone.”

Nathaniel walked out the front door, through the enclosed porch and into the sunshine. The neighborhood was abuzz. The Heights was one of Houston’s five historic districts. Just northwest of downtown, its bungalows, built in the 1920s, were in various stages of disrepair and renovation.

Nathaniel turned around and looked at the shotgun-style house. It had been turned into a duplex with a shared front porch. It needed a new roof, and the Morning Glory was growing through it. The outer walls were rotting away and had white peeling paint. The front door stuck.

Well, maybe the Morning Glory will keep the roof on, he reasoned.

“Oh, hey. Do you want to put that stuff in the lockbox first?” Barbara appeared, leaning out the door and squinting in the sun.

“Oh, yeah, good idea. I’ll do it right now.”

Nathaniel stepped back through the porch and into the first room. They’d chosen it as the bedroom because the second room was the only one large enough for a couch. The bed was covered with keepsakes and paperwork – a jewelry box that chimed “Unchained Melody,” Barbara’s parents’ wills, Nathaniel’s passport, a dog collar once worn by a long-gone dog.

Nathaniel picked up a picture of his father, a sepia-grained shot from the early 1960s. His father was a boy and perched on an old tractor. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt buttoned only one past midway. There was a beaten wooden trailer behind the tractor. The sky behind him was clear. Nathaniel put the photos in the black lockbox, packed up the remaining items and went back outside.

Barbara, sitting on the laminate kitchen counter in a denim skirt and tanktop, listened to the voicemail messages and jotted down a number on a notepad in her lap while the sound of Nathaniel dragging plywood toward the small back yard entered through the window over the kitchen sink. Barbara dialed the number.

“Hi. Can I speak to the nurse assigned to Rick Fernandez?”

Barbara looked at the storm map and the course of the hurricane on the small television on the far side of the kitchen. On hold, she hopped off the counter and used the notepad to take inventory of the fridge and freezer while pushing the portable phone to her ear with her shoulder. Her hair was pulled back in a messy bun, and her skin glistened with humidity.

“Oh, hi. This is Nathaniel Fernandez’s wife, Rick Fernandez’s daughter-in-law. I have the password. It’s ‘elephant.’ Can you tell me how he’s doing?”

Outside, Nathaniel balanced one foot on the wobbly chain-link fence and the other on the rusted handrail for the stoop’s steps. He assessed the small kitchen window overlooking the back yard. His long-sleeved button-down was spotted with sweat.

Interstate 45 is the main artery connecting Galveston island to Houston. In 45 minutes, you could get from their place to Galveston. The weatherman said the storm was a Cape Verde-type hurricane, meaning that it originated as a disturbance off the shores of Africa and then turned into a tropical storm just west of the Cape Verde Islands. Isaiah was 900 miles in diameter at its largest point. With winds of 120 mph, it was classified as a Category 3.

Nathaniel couldn’t imagine why the young couple on the news would stay. The storm would certainly hit Galveston on most projections, just with varying degrees of accuracy. A direct hit would be costly, and the size of the storm alone meant it would certainly hit Houston.

He continued to board the west-facing window.

“This is why we need the Little Giant,” he grunted, “so I don’t lose my ’nads trying to keep Isaiah out.” Barbara had always said the infomercial ladder was probably a rip-off.

Nathaniel started to feel frustrated as he struggled to find his balance. He thought of his father being upset with him and his shortcomings as a boy under the hood of a truck. The hood was propped up, blocking out surrounding light and sounds. Like in amphitheatres, the sounds

were amplified for acoustic resonance. He could hear his father sigh, and all his disappointment in him echoed under the hood. With all his might, he grunted and leaned onto the wrench, his weight forcing the nut along the rough, worn-down threads of the screw.

Nathaniel looked up at his grease-spotted hands holding the board against the window and grimaced at the griminess against his skin and the grittiness beneath his nails. Transitory years had been tattling and telling a little bit here and there. Now, his own hands were blurting it out – snitching and squealing.

How does a brand new screw get stripped anyway? He could hear his father's impatience and see his twelve-year-old hands fumbling about for the tools and hopes of his father. It took so much effort, and his stringy arms were not strong enough. He could hear his father yelling at him as he took the wrench. All his failures were in that nut, and being able to pull it out was the difference in this family making it or not.

Memories he had tried to keep at bay came rushing over him like Galveston waves when he was floating belly to the sun and dreaming of drifting on and on. Around him, everything got darker. His thoughts disintegrated into silent yelling. Huffing, puffing, silence.

Nathaniel steadied himself again on the fence, using his weight to hold the worn plywood board in place against the window. He thought of all the sunsets that had painted themselves onto the walls and floors of the kitchen and down the hall. He knew they'd miss the light.

He drove a nail in with three swift swings of the hammer, having gone through the motions twice already that hurricane season. The neighborhood's collective hammering resonated -- a cacophony. After securely covering the window, he carefully and slowly backed onto the fence and hopped onto the ground, relieved to be done and maybe even a little proud.

He looked to the sky and listened for a moment to the chainsaws and power tools of his neighbors and went through a checklist of the supplies noted by the newscasters. *Filled the car with gas. Tools. The radio. Batteries. Water. The oil lamps. Flashlights. Cash. Toiletries. Wet wipes. Ice. The first-aid kit. Check.* He scowled about not having trimmed the limbs overhead and moved on to the windows in the front.

Barbara walked through the darkening house toward the front door as Nathaniel placed the plywood against the wall of the enclosed front porch.

“Was your father in a war?” she asked skeptically. “I called the hospital.”

“I don’t think so.”

“The nurse said he keeps telling stories about being caught up in a war.”

“He may be talking about Africa,” Nathaniel said. “I can’t remember which country in East Africa now. Uganda maybe. I’m not sure. I talked to him on the phone a few times and was telling him he needed to get out of whatever fucked-up country he was in. He wanted to finish the cotton gin.”

“Do we need to go see him?”

“No. I made my peace with him.”

“OK. We have plenty of water and food.”

“All right. I’ll fill the tub.”

At the doorway to the porch, Nathaniel and Barbara watched the water rise in the street. The motions and noise of the day – the pounding of hammers and the hum of chainsaws echoing – had ceased save a couple of knocks here and there. The sound that filled the air was that of fat

falling drops of rain, hitting homes like a knock and the sidewalk like a juicy bug splattering on a windshield. Barbara leaned on the doorframe, flicking her cigarette into the rain.

“Fiesta is still open!” said a man who lived at the end of the boulevard as he carried a bag from the small international grocer down the block. “It’s crazy in there, though, and most of the shit is gone, but they have plenty of Jesus candles.” He chuckled as he raised his reusable shopping bag in the curling motion of a weightlifter.

Nathaniel and Barbara had only talked to this neighbor a couple of times at the boulevard. He sometimes strummed his guitar on a bench while people threw Frisbees to their dogs. Neighborhood walkers strolling by his house often heard him playing his drums.

“Can you believe how much water is already on the street? The sidewalk will be flooded before the storm even gets here!” he yelled, picking up the pace.

“Yeah, this fucking street floods any time it rains,” Barbara replied with another flick.

On most days, the grassy boulevard served as a makeshift dog park in the mornings and a makeshift running track in the evenings. While the front and back yards of the bungalows had ancient, strong live oaks and tall pecan trees, the center boulevard was landscaped with thin, wiry crepe myrtles. At each end of the oval were rosebushes, benches, and a garbage can for dog poop.

One of the daily dog-park users had tied down the lid of the poop cans to keep them from becoming projectiles, and the knoll had become a makeshift parking lot. It was elevated more than the street and many of the driveways in the neighborhood, making it attractive to people trying to keep their cars from getting flooded. A Lexus, Mercedes, and BMW were left behind like offerings.

Nathaniel and Barbara watched people abandon their cars and scurry along. Neighbors up and down the block did the same.

Rick and John were in their sixties and lived next door to Nathaniel and Barbara. Rick was retired, and John continued to work because he liked having a place to go during the day. They nodded at Nathaniel and Barbara. Both nodded back.

“I guess Keri found somewhere else to ride it out,” Rick yelled in their direction.

“Yeah, her boyfriend’s place,” Barbara replied. His place was newer, Keri had said, and likelier to survive the storm better.

Each neighbor appeared to take an inventory, scanning across the street and down the street with worried looks. The two men directly across the street from Nathaniel and Barbara were in the Army. They too lived in a duplex, but the other half of the house was uninhabited.

The rain worsened, and the neighbors went inside one after another to disappear into their foxholes.

Nathaniel and Barbara agreed to try to get some sleep and be at least semi-rested. The ugly side of the storm would come in the middle of the night, as it always did.

Barbara talked about her parents as she and Nathaniel lay in bed with their shoes on, in case they had to start running.

“I am so glad my parents left early this time.”

“Me, too.”

“I hate thinking of those people stuck in their cars when the storm hits. Just miserable.”

“Me, too,” Nathaniel said, a bit lost in thought. “Yeah, your parents, the travel trailer and all their pets. They left early. They’re far away from the storm now. Don’t worry.”

“But their house! They’re so close to the water. Their house.”

“I know.”

Nathaniel lay on his back and looked into the complete darkness ensured by the boarded windows. Barbara turned onto her side and felt around for his arm.

“Tell me a story about your father. I don’t want to think about my parents anymore.”

“I don’t want to think about mine either.”

“Too bad, I want to know, and I make these phone calls and they make me even more curious.”

“He was there. Then he wasn’t.”

Barbara pinched his arm. “I know that part. Tell me something else.”

“My father has African sleeping sickness.”

“Oh, jeez, honey. Your father has Alzheimer’s. What the hell is African whatever?”

“That’s what they think, but I think they’re wrong. They said he had a bout with malaria once, and I’m pretty sure that was the first stage of African sleeping sickness.”

“OK, go ahead. Explain yourself. You’re crazy. What is this about?”

“What? I could be right. You get it from the Tsetse fly,” he says, emphasizing the tee-tee.
“And now he’s in the second stage, the neurological phase.”

“OK, fine. Say he has African sleeping sickness. What does that mean?”

“He’s spent a lot of time working on that gin in Uganda and just in the region in general, and they had an epidemic within the last decade.”

“Wow, you’ve read up on this, and I thought you were just bullshitting.”

A loud thud caused Barbara to grab onto him again. “I guess I need to get used to that for tonight. What do you think it was? What hit the house?”

“A branch, a small dog – I don’t know, but it’s definitely spooky.”

“It’s not a small dog!”

The wind strengthened, and the house inhaled and exhaled with force.

“Keep talking,” she urged.

“OK. Here’s something I remember about seeing my father.”

“Go,” she whispered.

“He’d left us, and my mother found out he was living with this other lady in a trailer at this cotton gin, and Mom took me and my sister there. Dad had been put up at the gin, and this lady was staying with him. The lady left after we’d been there a little while, and I was playing at the train tracks. I’d read about mashing pennies, so I wanted to try it. Problem was, I didn’t know when a train would come.”

Nathaniel laughed at himself.

“If I’d been a brighter kid, I would have noticed the weeds that had grown around the track. It’s obvious now that a train hadn’t been there in a while and wasn’t likely to come for me. But you know what ended up happening?”

“Tell me.”

“OK, so I walked up the tracks toward the weeds and away from the place where I could see my parents fighting, and there was a mashed penny already out there – and I took it.”

“Awww, now that’s a sweet story. Talk about rare for you.”

Nathaniel nodded in the darkness and continued, “And then we were on the road again.”

“Yeah,” she said a bit sadly. “Oh, my God, that was insanity at gas lines today. I’m exhausted.”

Nathaniel kept talking as Barbara began to drift.

“Highways and amber waves,” he said, “that’s what I remember.” He exhaled and pulled her closer to his heart. “Goodnight, babe.”

Small things hit the house, thumping the boards and causing Nathaniel to think that is what it must be like to live in a box. He felt Barbara breathing on his shoulder, and he fell into a thin sleep.

Nathaniel held the picture of his father sitting on top of the old tractor, backed by the trailer and clear skies. He closed his eyes slowly and opened them again equally slowly, the world becoming sepia-grained. A hot, dry wind blew but his hair was mostly still. He blinked.

“I’m becoming my father,” he said as red West Texas dust began to swirl around him. He turned on his heels dug into the soil and behind him was a boy, his father, steering the tractor. In an instant, they were both dirt and smiles.

“I’m glad you’re here! What do you want to do?”

“Wow! I just want to know how you are,” Nathaniel said hurriedly even though he could see that everything was fine. “I want to know where you’ve gone. I want to know that you’re OK.”

“I’m good. Are you ready to go back?” his father asked, spinning on the tractor seat.

“I want to mess up their television, their telephone calls, and their flights. Let’s be solar flares!” Nathaniel said as the boy looked at him quizzically.

“I say, let's be rain,” the boy said. “We could fall back to the Earth and turn back up in something else, before they forget about us.”

“I want to be lightning!” Nathaniel insisted. “I'd zap that asshole Rocky Mason right on the head! No, I'd get him on his dick. He popped me with a rag once after practice -- right on the tip! I can't think about it. It makes my knees weak. I'm gonna be rain.”

Nathaniel let himself fall -- big fat drops of rain -- loving the world anyway.

FRACTURE

Inside the arena, darkness and people filled the seats. The air above was thick with cigarette and cigar smoke refracted by the lights drawing all attention to the center of the theatre, where a ring had been set up and a brawl was under way. Nicolas watched the clash from a couple of rows back; he'd been rewarded with the tickets for the good work he'd done with the dog fights.

Johnny Marquez landed a hard right to Kirill Litvinov's body and threw a left to the other side. Litvinov tucked his right arm to his side to pad the blow, causing the hands guarding his head to drop on both sides. Marquez threw a fast right hand and left hook to Litvinov's face, ending the combo and drawing cheers from the crowd. But Nicolas had known how the fight was going to end seconds after it started. He'd seen a bait dog before. The only question was which round.

As the cheers continued, a lady walked by him carrying a box of popcorn. Her hair was short, and her eyes were bright. Her red minidress showed more back than cleavage. Her legs were golden. These were the details he could see in light spilling over from the ring. To everyone she walked by in the shadows farther back, he imagined, she was Lauren-scented skin and a silhouette to be looked at, all the way down to the high heels nobody could hear clicking.

Nicolas smiled at her as she walked past him. "Hi," he said, assuming she wouldn't reply but sensing it was the polite thing to do, and there was something polite about her.

"Hello," she answered back, looking over her shoulder.

Marquez finished Litvinov on the ropes before the second round ended with a five-punch combo: jab, right hand, left hook, right hand, left hook. Nicolas was sure some damage had been done to Litvinov's face, and, if not for the audience erupting at the devastation, he could have

sworn he had heard something break. Nicolas saw Litvinov's misshapen countenance on the canvas: A mangled mandible pushed his chin to the left side of his face. The fight was over, and Nicolas watched the witnesses to the carnage filtering out.

The city was dark, as dark as a big city can get. Big cities like Houston don't usually get too dark, and you can always hear the urban static. The electricity was still with the members of the crowd as they exited the arena. Nicolas moved with them across the side street, where an upscale strip bar and plush Latin dance clubs were ready to take in the energized patrons. The women showed off waxed legs in short dresses. The men sported suits or pressed shirts with the collars wide open. The mob emanated the excitement of the fight like a current.

Nicolas went into a Latin club, Melinda's, owned by his boss. There were all kinds of lights over the dance floor – colored beams moving to the rhythm of the music, strobes flickering with the beat and a giant disco ball hanging over the center – painting the dancers as they moved. As was the case in the arena, it was darker farther away from the dance floor. Nicolas saw the popcorn lady in the red dress standing alone at the bar drinking a glass of wine, and he approached her.

“I saw you at the fight.”

“I know. I saw you, too. I walked by you with popcorn.”

“I'm Nicolas,” he said, extending his hand.

“I'm Isabel.” She put her hand in his and they had a gentle shake.

The bartender brought Nicolas a bourbon. Isabel started tapping her foot to the Julio Iglesias song, and Nicolas took the cue.

“Would you like to dance?” Nicolas held his hand out, and she put hers in his to go out to the dance floor. “That's a lovely dress,” he said, watching her hips sway for a moment.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling. “You’re a good dancer. Why were you at the fight alone?”

“I wasn’t sure I was going until half an hour before the fight.” Nicolas thought about the decision: It would be easier to tell the boss about the fight the next time he saw him, if he asked, than to explain that he hadn’t been interested in going.

“Who were you at the fight with, and where is he now?” Nicolas asked, lifting his arm for her to turn and pass through. Her hair smelled like flowers.

“My brother – he loves boxing. I tolerate it, but I prefer dancing. He’s gone home to his wife and daughter. They won’t even tolerate boxing,” she said with a grin, and Nicolas admired her shimmery lips.

After a couple of songs, they sat at a table and talked. Nicolas, a good listener, was always hoping to hear that opportunity to get out of his life, his routine. At his training sessions and fights, he met gritty people, not everyone but some. Nicolas found it hard to remember exactly when he stopped working for “the man” and started working for “the boss,” but he knew it was better to be a listener so you didn’t have to divulge, retrace and see all the things you’ve done – especially if you were trying to forget.

Nicolas couldn’t tell her he made arrangements at the dog fights or that he was an “associate” of Mr. Martinez’s – the man who named Melinda’s after his wife just before having her killed and marrying her sister. Instead, Nicolas said – as he always did – that he was a real estate agent, although he hadn’t done business with anyone other than Mr. Martinez for a while. Nicolas thought maybe Isabel didn’t pay attention to mafiosos in the news – maybe she was just looking for a place to dance, to be an anonymous, attractive woman and to have a good time.

Nicolas met the boxer, Litvinov, in person five years later at a Montrose dance club frequented by gay and straight alike. By then, Nicolas was going by Nicky and injecting herself with hormones. She'd been dressing like a woman and selling real estate in nearby midtown for a couple of years. Mr. Martinez kept Nicky in good work on his own. He went to Nicky when he needed a place for business or a mistress or something Nicky didn't know about and didn't want to.

That night, the sky was purple around the city. Near downtown, the moon spotlighted the herd of patrons moving toward Pete's – a club housed in a remodeled warehouse. The heavy house music from Pete's could be heard down the street, and the building cast darkness over the line of people waiting to get in. Nicky walked up to the doorman, who shook her hand familiarly and let her in.

Inside, the laser and light show zeroed in on painted male and female bodies, clad in thongs and wings and placed on platforms throughout the club for the patrons' viewing pleasure. The dance floor was filled with shirtless, sweaty men and glistening, barely covered girls. Everyone was on something, probably.

When Kirill Litvinov approached Nicky at the bar, Nicky instantly recognized him. *He's the one that needed reconstructive surgery*, she thought.

"Can I buy you a drink?" the boxer asked.

"A whiskey and some blow – and you'll be my best friend."

Two drinks later, they were crammed in a bathroom stall doing cocaine. Two more drinks later, they were on the way to the boxer's house. Kirill pulled into the alley parking for his eightplex, climbed out, walked around and opened the car door for Nicky as she reapplied her shimmery lipstick.

“I’m not sure I should let you into my place,” Kirill said, his Russian accent more pronounced with the booze and coke. “We just met tonight and did some blow together; how do I know you aren’t trying to rob me?”

“You want to do it out here?” Nicky asked.

“Yeah, out here.”

The boxer unzipped his pants, and Nicky spread her legs and rested her forearms against the brick back wall of the building. The boxer hiked Nicky’s skirt up from behind. Between grunts, the boxer said, “I like that your top shows so much back,” rubbing Nicky’s bare skin.

“Thanks,” Nicky replied. “I met this lady once. I want to be like her.”

Afterward, smoking a cigarette at the boxer’s front door, Nicky told Kirill that she had been at the fight with Johnny Marquez.

Kirill took a deep, slow drag from his Parliament, and exhaled, the smoke hanging low, suppressed by the swampy night air. “I don’t remember many things around that event,” Kirill said a bit sadly, his accent seeming even thicker now to Nicky.

“I do,” Nicky said, drawing out her last drag then dropping the butt on the ground and stepping on it with her platform shoe and twisting it out. She felt like he’d chosen a good wound to pick at and angle for control.

“You want to come in?” The boxer opened the door. “It’s getting bright out. You can crash here until dark.”

“OK, I don’t have to be anywhere tomorrow, today, whatever.”

Lying in bed together, the boxer told Nicky stories, all kinds of stories. Maybe it was the cocaine, maybe it was the alley sex – but Kirill had become a blabber mouth. He talked about everything that came to mind. Nicky felt the cocaine, too, but mostly talked about nights out

under the big Texas night sky dappled with stars. Lying on the grass with Jennifer Lewis. Smoking weed on top of Uncle Daniel's trailer.

"I don't always identify with white people like you," Kirill said. His pupils had become so big that Nicky thought he maybe could see inside into his head.

"White people like me? What are you? You're Russian." Nicky realized Kirill must have taken him for some redneck kid or something.

"I'm Russian, yes, and a Jew. But I know the Mexicans, the Latinos, here. I'm like them. I have an accent like them. I have paper problems. So what if my skin is like yours?"

Nicky let the boxer's words trail off and didn't bother to correct him. If he wanted to think she was of Texas farm-raised stock, he could. Nicky listened as Kirill went on about being uninsured and going to emergency rooms after fights.

"Everybody does it. You think everyone that comes here is a Mexican?" Kirill asked, not to Nicky in particular. He had gotten up and walked out to the kitchen counter, still in Nicky's line of sight. He poured out some cocaine rocks to crush and continued. "Hell, every Latino group can count on all their bad stuff to be thrown in under the category of 'Mexican.'" Kirill took a spoon and pressed his thumb into its curved little bowl and mashed the rock into powder. "People like me, we don't have to worry about it too much. We're pretty much left out of the conversation." Kirill pulled a straw out of his pocket and snorted.

Nicky had a feeling Kirill would always be muscle for the boss, who was going to hold on to him for as long as he could get some bite out of him before getting rid of him. *A man with a dream*, Nicky thought. *It's a fine line between that and a broken dog.*

Nicky wanted to tell Kirill about those days spent working for the boss with the dog fights.

“I started out just finding him real estate. Honest, lawful enough. I knew he had dead bodies linked to him, but I was drawn to that dark side. I got him that secluded place for the fights, I collect his cuts, and it’s worked out so well for so long that he rewarded me with tickets to your fight – good seats.”

“You saw this happen to me from up close?” Kirill asked, pointing to the scars along his jaw.

“Yeah. And after he gave me the tickets, I was outside his office door, and I heard him get back on the phone with Marquez’s people and he say he didn’t care if he killed you. He said the crowd would love the blood, and he hated your optimism.”

Nicky looked at Kirill at the counter, watching as his now-black eyes swelled. Nicky got out of bed. “A few people made a few dollars.”

Kirill walked out of the kitchen and started yelling through clenched teeth as he unloaded lefts and rights, head and body shots, all over a heavy bag hanging on a stand, the lone piece of furniture in his living room.

“We have to do this now. Soon we’ll need passports to get into Mexico, and we’re going to have trouble getting those. Understand?” Nicky asked impatiently.

“What are we going to do?” Kirill asked.

“We’ve been over it. Do you have your gun?”

Kirill patted his jacket pocket holding the .44 he used when they went over the plan earlier. “What about you?”

Nicky ran her fingers over her purse, holding her snub-nose .38.

“Just hide until we know he came alone to see me,” Nicky instructed. “Remember, he thinks it’s just me and him.”

She had planned to meet Mr. Martinez at the isolated house. The boss thought he was getting the first look at his next property, before it went on the market officially, having expressed an interest in moving one of his operations.

For years, Nicky had been gnawed by the feeling that she hadn’t given Kirill a fair amount of anything for his doting affection. She didn’t feel like she owed him but just saw this as her opportunity to give the bait dog the upper hand.

From the second-floor bedroom porch, they watched Mr. Martinez’s yellow Hummer pull into the ranch house drive.

“Hide now, Kirill.” Nicky motioned him to the closet. She walked out to the edge of the balcony and waved at Mr. Martinez. He grabbed his briefcase and shut the vehicle door. “Come on up here,” Nicky yelled.

On the porch, Mr. Martinez looked out over the desolate land approvingly.

“This place will be perfect. Here’s the hefty finder’s fee you requested. Are you leaving town?”

“I am.” Nicky took the briefcase, set it on the porch rail and opened it. It was full of cash – and she didn’t bother to count it. Mr. Martinez checked her out.

“I have to admit, Nicolas, you make quite a pretty lady,” Mr. Martinez said, advancing toward Nicky, putting his hand on her ass.

“It’s Nicky.” She took his arm by the wrist and twisted it until he yelled and jumped around, turning away from her a little. “Thank you for noticing that I *am* a lady,” she said,

punctuating her words with a kick to the back of his right leg. Once he had collapsed onto his knee, she tossed his hand and walked away.

As Mr. Martinez began to get up, Kirill burst out of the closet in a rage. He punched him with the combo he ruined him: jab, right hand, left hook, right hand, left hook.

“I had everything ahead of me!” Kirill howled. Then, after a deep breath, he continued, “My life could have been different, and now I’m just waiting to be deported!” He pulled his gun from his jacket and pressed it up against Mr. Martinez’s jaw and pulled the trigger. Mr. Martinez fell to the floor, gurgling with his jaw split open as pieces of broken teeth floated in the blood.

Nicky and Kirill drove with the top down on U.S. 59 toward the Rio Grande Valley. The highway was lined with palm trees, and the skies were blue. Nicky breathed in the hot air and remembered riding along the same stretch with his father as they headed to a Mexican cotton gin.

“I really messed this up,” his father had said. “Remember when I opened the car door and put you out on the side of the road? It was overcast, and there were blood colors on the earth – where it had been cut out for the road. And the storm was coming.”

The smoke he blew lingered in the car. Nicolas was annoyed by his father’s story.

“I really wanted to leave you, but I knew it would take practice. I saw you in the rearview mirror. You hadn’t even gotten off the road. I knew I would need to practice,” he said, ashing his cigarette into a black plastic ashtray between them on the car seat. “And, well, since then, you’ve been so clingy. It makes me really want to go.”

Nicky looked suspiciously at the border crossing, where bottlenecked cars directed by Border Patrol agents fanned out and funneled across. They were just going to the outskirts of Reynosa, but Nicky already knew it was going to be dark when they got there.

“You know, when I was a young boy, sixteen maybe, me and my friends used to sneak out of our homes at night and go party in Mexico,” Nicky said, looking over at Kirill in the passenger seat and wondering what he was like as a teen. She realized she’d never thought about that before.

“What was that like? Was there panic like this?” Kirill asked.

Nicky noticed that the scene was different, but, then again, the Valley they’d just driven through had also seemed different. They had watched the local news the night before in the hotel room in Mission. They the cartels’ turf battles were leaking across the border. They also knew they had to go to the no-man’s land.

“We just got drunk, met girls,” Nicky said, remembering the smell of youth, the feel of sweat and the taste of alcohol and dirt.

The sun set on the border town of Reynosa. Above was a Mexican moon, the same moon that would have been a Texas moon across the river in Sharyland, where Nicky spent some of her childhood. That South Texas, Rio Grande moonlight had painted some fun youthful nights: chasing friends and being chased with four-wheelers, three-wheelers and dirt bikes through local orchards and farms. But across the river in Reynosa, Nicky and Kirill were in a hotel room – two killers, one in love.

“Mexico! We’re in Mexico!” Kirill said excitedly. He threw himself on the bed with a giant smile like someone who’d never had his face shattered. “What now?”

“I told you, we’re meeting someone about passports and IDs,” Nicky answered. She could tell he was getting worried, maybe even suspicious of her.

“You know, when I was a young boy,” she paused, admiring her figure in the mirror, “my cousin and I were at his friend’s house – across the river there, in Mission. We would have been in middle school.” She paused again to apply some lipstick. “Well, me and my cousin’s friend started playing with his guitar, and before long we didn’t even notice that Johnny had gone. That was my cousin’s name, Johnny,” she continued. “We heard this ruckus, this yelling, and all of sudden there was what seemed like this giant man coming down the hall with a shotgun, and he points it at me and he pulls the trigger but it just clicked and he was yelling, ‘Fucking wetback!’ and ‘Fucking Mexican!’ and ‘Get the fuck out of my house!’ He went to get some shells for the gun.”

Nicky sat down on the bed next to Kirill and continued: “I started to cry and ran for the door and just kept running down the street. I ran until my legs felt as if they were on fire.”

Nicky smiled and looked at Kirill; he was still lying there, but he looked more like the bait dog he’d been at that fight all those years back – out of his league. “The guy we’d been visiting, his name was Matt, and he was there and my fucking cousin Johnny was there, too. Matt was like, ‘I’m sorry. My dad shouldn’t have said those things to you,’ and I’m like, ‘Where were you Johnny?’ and he says, ‘I snuck out the back,’ and he catches his breath and he looks at Matt and he’s like, ‘Your dad walked in on me fucking your sister.’”

Nicky chuckled a little, inhaling her cigarette and noticing the dinginess of the room and staleness of the air. Her minidress was red. Her legs were golden.

“You mean to kill me, don’t you?” Kirill asked, sitting up.

“I do.”

“I thought we were in love,” Kirill said, sounding more like a boy to Nicky now.

“You were in love; I can’t love anybody.” Nicky got up off the bed and pulled her gun from her purse. “Aren’t you even going to go for your gun?”

“No,” Kirill said. His scarred face was etched with defeat.

Nicky saw him as a ghost, a shell of a being. “If it makes you feel better, I would have killed you anyway,” she said. She lifted Kirill’s gun gently from atop the dresser. Kirill sat still at the foot of the bed. Nicky picked up a pillow and held it up to Kirill’s head, then pressed the pillow with the end of the .44.

“I’m not going to shoot you.” Nicky put the pillow back on the bed and returned the gun back to the top of the dresser. She pulled open the top drawer of the dresser and removed a Bible, which opened like a box. Inside lay a syringe filled with a clear liquid. She moved slowly toward Kirill, and he watched her calmly. She jabbed the needle into the boxer’s shoulder and pushed the plunger. Kirill lay back on the bed. Nicky walked out of the shadows of the hotel room – her own cast by the Mexican moonlight on the porch.

Outside, a man was waiting. “¡Bienvenidos, Pamela! Pamela Miller de Raleigh, North Carolina.”

“¿Como estás, Carlos?” Nicky asked, taking the packet and car keys he was holding out for her.

“Aquí tienes todo que necesitas para vivir en los Estados Unidos, México, o Canadá,” Carlos responded. A small group of people came in behind him with toolboxes and ice coolers.

“Vamos a trabajar. El dinero está en la Mercedes. Ya tienes la llave. Que te vaya bien.”

“OK. Gracias.”

Inside the car, Nicky put the briefcase from the boss on the floorboard. She opened the envelope that Carlos had left for her on the passenger seat, revealing a stack of large bills. She tucked the envelope inside the briefcase and then checked her shimmery lipstick in the mirror on the sun visor. She pressed her teeth together and pulled back her lips to make sure none of the lipstick had smudged on her teeth. The devil smiled back at her.