Lafayette Parish

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ABSTRACT

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Lafayette Parish is the story of Corey Paquin, a recent graduate of the University of Michigan who has returned to his hometown of Lafayette, Louisiana. Corey, a pious evangelical Christian, experienced a crisis of faith while at university, and though he leaves Michigan with his faith intact, his understanding of both the world and himself has been dramatically altered. In search of stability, he returns to Lafayette, where he is confronted by the lack of comfort he finds in old ways; his Cajun family (and the local culture) has evolved without him, his Christian friends have matured into adult believers, and his church's highly emotional services no longer move him. Interpreting his inability to reify his memory of his home as a deep moral failure, and worried that his education has rendered him unable to believe, Corey fears that he is once again moving towards a state of spiritual crisis; not even his home can save him. Set in the inner suburbs of Lafayette, as well as the rural areas surrounding the city, the novel follows Corey's attempts to understand and accept the relationship between the eternal God of his faith and the forever-changing world.

to Rachelle, for her abundant patience and grace

consummatum est

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I will defend the Volvo. I will defend doors the thickness of a Coke can, and the hollow sound they make when I slam them shut. I will also (somewhat begrudgingly) defend the handles when they're not working. T-Boy will undoubtedly ask about the gas tank, whether it makes popcorn, whether I need him to tow me to Burger King in his Z to pick up some used French fry oil. I will be polite, and I will smile, and I will say: "No, it's fine, T-Boy"—I will actually call him T-Boy, as he wishes—"I'm all full up right now," and I will pat my belly and feel like a kowtowing minstrel.

But now, I will have to get out of the Volvo.

My parents used to leave me with Uncle Gene and Aunt Patty when they'd go on vacation. Uncle Gene would take me out into the sprawling sugar cane field behind the house. He'd cut and peel a section of cane for me, and I'd suck the sugar out until it splintered and fell apart like an inch-thick toothpick. At some point while I was at school, they extended Highway 90 to connect Broussard with the city, bisecting the field. I watch the cars dribble by for a moment, just beyond the circle of men standing around the gumbo pot. They have to see me parked here, with my passenger side's tires planted firmly in the pale post-summer grass, but no one's come over yet. There are four of them there, drinking from amber bottles and chin-checking each other as they talk. There's Leroy, Uncle Gene and Aunt Patty's oldest, who is the size and shape of a hunting catalog model. His cowboy-cut jeans run straight down his legs with no kinking, and he's got on a dark-tan Ducks Unlimited hat whose embroidered logo has sweated clear. T-Boy has on a Saints t-shirt whose fleur-de-lis rolls out over his stomach. He's yapping

at Leroy about something, with a wild sideways look in his eye. Either he's repeating some high school joke he heard offshore or he's talking about Melinda, Leroy's wife. Potentially both. Uncle Gene has his back to me, one hand tucked into the back of his Wranglers, just resting on his belt's ledge near the white Skoal ghost that rings his back pocket; the other hand looks like it holds a Miller at chest level. "You *canaille*, boy," he tosses towards T-Boy, who takes a couple of beers from the fish-grimed Coleman ice chest on the edge of the yard and begins walking up the driveway.

And Peck-Peck is in the middle, with the oar. They've all got their heads down like they're in prayer now, and I imagine they're watching the oil from the roux shimmer in the sun as he folds it with the oar: in and out, in and out. I have no memory of anyone else in the family being allowed to make a gumbo; not at gatherings, at least. At home, in his context, he looks just like he always has. But here in the sunlight at Uncle Gene's, in the reflection of everyone else's relative youth, his age is exposed. He's lost more hair since Christmas, and the few wisps that are left are hanging off of the side of his head, soaked through with sweat and dripping down into the pot. His arms have thinned out, too, and poke their way out of the sleeves of his white polo. But he pushes his oar like he's piloting a pirogue through his childhood swamps. He nudges his glasses up his nose, looks up at Uncle Gene and says something, laughing. Whatever he said must have been good; Uncle Gene backs away and shakes his head "no no!" at Peck-Peck while the others laugh at him. Peck-Peck pushes up his glasses again and goes back to his stirring, a little smirk on his face as he watches his grandchildren gang up on his son-in-law.

There's a dull rap at my window. "Say bruh?"

I know that it's T-Boy before I turn around to look. I recognize the voice, the strain

and crack as he pushes it deeper than its natural register. After he started working offshore, his Cajun twang thickened and dropped with the weight of the new words that he'd picked up. It's so jarring, even now, that I find myself imitating him when we talk. It's like being held at gunpoint; I'm at his mercy completely, on his ground, able only to receive shit-talk from him and unable to respond with the strength of my own words. If he notices my accent at all these days, I imagine he counts it as a virtue, one good thing unsullied by my time in the north.

"Hey, T-Boy, what you know?" I say through the window. He has crouched hands-on-knees to see through it. His camo hat has a white patch on the front with the logo of JP Rigs, the company he works for; "T-Boy" has been embroidered on the side in red script. I can't believe they let him put that on his hat.

"*Mais*, get out the car and come see us," he says, and he stands up and shouts over the roof, "Hey, y'all knew Corey was here?"

I get out of the Volvo as the gumbo circle turns to look and I rotate my back, cracking the spine. "I can't believe you still driving that thing," T-Boy says. "It's not ruining your back?"

"This thing? Nah, man. It's Swedish. You know how the Swedish do massages and all that," I say, and I nudge his love handle with my elbow. He grins from between his scrubs of beard and mustache.

"Aw shit," he says, and he nods knowingly.

We cross the lawn towards the others.

"Say," T-Boy says. "I saw your boys ain't looking to be too good this year. What you know about that?"

"What?"

"Your Wolverines, bruh," he says, his voice rising with his grin. "I know you ain't forgot about 'em already."

"Oh, oh, my bad. My boys, yeah. Well, hey, you know, we've been so good for so long that we thought it was time to let the rest of the Big Ten have a chance, you know?"

T-Boy cackles. "Now I know that's bullshit. No way y'all ever let Ohio State have a chance at nothing," he says. "The Cajuns supposed to be pretty good this year, too," he adds.

"Oh yeah?"

"They been doing better every year in the Sun Belt, picking up a little win here, a little win there. They playing Iowa State at Cajun Field in like three weeks. That's a major-conference school, yeah. And it's on national TV. They beat them boys, which they gonna do, and we gonna have some serious national respect." I want to tell him not to let Iowa State's membership in a tough conference fool him into thinking that they're not one of the worst teams in the country, but reconsider. We've got a whole autumn of this to get through.

We're on the driveway now, closing in on the group. Right as we're walking up, he adds, "You know them dudes on *SportsCenter* say Michigan be lucky to win six games this year."

Asshole.

"Hoo, y'all talkin' 'bout Corey's Wolverines?" Uncle Gene says. He sticks out a thick hand and pumps my little fingers like a well extracting oil. "Corey, brother, welcome home. We missed you," he says, and he pulls my arm in and wraps himself

around me.

"Missed you too, Uncle Gene," I say as he lets me go. I assume a spot in the space between him and T-Boy, who hands me a Miller Lite he's grabbed from the Coleman. Leroy leans in, shakes my hand, gives me a quiet whats-up, then goes back to standing upright and staring at the gumbo. It's as thick as melted peanut butter. The white-blue flame from the propane burner is radiating out in waves, fanning the humidity. Peck-Peck pulls the oar out of the gumbo, taps it clean, and leans it top-up against the pot. "*Mais* Corey," he says, straightening his back and looking up, "that's you?"

"That's me, Peck-Peck," I say, and I step over the electric line for the burner, the Miller raised over my head so the sweat drips down my arm, and I shake my grandfather's hand.

When I was a boy, Peck-Peck and I would roll around, playing football on the dirty-peach carpet in his living room. He'd chase me on his knees, arms high in the air, ready to block anything I'd try. I'd squeal when he'd hop to his feet, scoop me up, and flip me over his shoulder in one move. At some point in high school, we began shaking hands.

"How was church?" he asks, letting go of my hand. "I fell asleep in the chair before you left."

"It was good," I say. "You know, same old. How's that gumbo coming?"

He looks down at the smoky-brown stew. "I think it's gonna be alright," he says. "We got that sausage from up by your cousin Leroy's shop."

Leroy nods, tips his bottle in deference.

"What kind of sausage is it?" I ask.

"Oh," Peck-Peck says, "they got that andouille in there, maybe a little bit of--what

you call that--that turkey sausage your mama like."

"Did she tell you I tried to make a gumbo from your recipe in Ann Arbor?"

"She say sometin' about that, yeah. How it went?"

"It was kind of cool," I say. I'd brought a burner back up after Christmas and lugged it onto the front porch of our duplex on University sometime around Mardi Gras, when everything was three-feet deep in snow. Meijer had some sort of knockoff sausage that was selling itself as Cajun, and I stirred the pot while my roommate, John, leaned forward in his lawn chair to warm his hands on the propane flame. My roux was too dark and the sausage tasted like it had been injected with red pepper, but he hadn't known the difference.

"Bruh, I know they ain't got no good andouille up there," T-Boy says, and he nudges Leroy in the ribs. "Leroy, why you don't open another store up there in Michigan? I could send some gator up there to you and you could sell it to them Yankees."

"People from Michigan aren't really considered Yankees," I say, against my better judgment. I move to stand between Peck-Peck and Leroy, and the circle adjusts.

"They not, huh?"

"Nah," I say, taking my spot and tipping back the Miller. I know better than to try to explain regional semantics to T-Boy, especially right after he thinks he's cracked a good one, but I can't help it. It's the same impulse in me that could no longer call a croissant a "crussont" after I learned how the French pronounce the word. Rarely does this impulse serve to enlighten my audience. This has never stopped me.

I shrug. "If you're calling someone a Yankee, it's usually gonna be like someone from the northeast, like New England and all that. Or if their state fought in the Civil

War," I say. I'm trying to pull my words out of T-Boy's ditch, but the tires keep spinning and smoking. "Course, to someone from Portugal, or like a German or whatever, 'Yankee' is just a derogatory word for anyone from the United States." I'm looking over the steaming pot at T-Boy, finding my grip and gesturing with my bottle as though it were a lecture copy of *The People's History*. "So what that means is that, to our distant relations over in eastern France, you're just as much a Yankee as Ulysses S. Grant or Don Mattingly. Or," I add, pausing to swig from the Miller, "President Obama." I can hear tires squealing from the cars over on 90.

"Huh," T-Boy muses. "Wait. Michigan ain't fought in the Civil War?"

"I don't believe so," I respond, rolling my head around my neck, loosening up.

"Alright then, Corey," he says. "Alright."

Aunt Patty keeps her dining room under her control by never adding or subtracting anything. Championship football teams may fall from their glory, hurricanes may squat on our cities, and God may seem cold and distant, but in my Aunt Patty's dining room, a clock painted with a goose wearing a cornflower bonnet will always tell time. I drained my Miller and used the empty as an excuse to head inside, out of the humidity and away from the natural gas fumes. The dining room lights are on. A glossy red picnic blanket has been laid over the thick oak table, and tall glasses of ice water are sweating rings as they await company.

My mom circles the room, pressing a large aluminum bowl against her thigh and spooning clumps of rice into the bowls that have been set around the table.

Parents are supposed to age. They're supposed to look different when we come

home from college. Sentimental TV shows taught me that they become smaller, more feeble, less able to fend for themselves as they get older. As if our teenage vitality was the only thing keeping them on this side of middle age. The thick and dry skins they grew during our high school years are supposed to have cracked and fallen away in our absence, giving way to soft, wrinkled faces. But Mom had looked no different when I eased the tired Volvo into the carport in Thursday's wee hours. Her hair was the same length it had been at graduation, pulled back and straight as a broom, and she reacted as if I'd only just gone down the street for school rather than a thousand northbound miles.

"Hey Sweet," she says when she notices me. "How was church?"

"It was fine," I say, placing the empty bottle onto the table. "People in this family haven't heard about Abita yet?"

She looked up from the rice bowl to the amber Miller bottle. "I think they've heard of it, love. I just don't think they're terribly interested in it."

I pull a chair back from the table and slouch until my legs are nearly horizontal. I web my fingers and let my hands rest on top of my head.

"You tired?" she asks.

I nod, my fingers brushing through my hair. "I haven't really been sleeping well."

"You're just not used to that bed yet. He bought it brand-new when I told him you wanted to move in."

"It's brand new? He shouldn't have done that."

"He's just being sweet."

"No, I mean, he shouldn't have done that. It's not like I'm moving in there forever or anything."

"You can take it with you when you go."

"That's ridiculous."

"Well."

She scrapes the bottom of the bowl, digging for the last clots of rice.

"Aunt Patty wants you to say grace for the gumbo," she says.

"What? No, Mom, come on."

"Why not? I think it's sweet of her to want you to say it."

"You know, back in the day, nobody ever said grace in this house," I say.

"Back when?"

"Back before, you know, before I had my conversion or whatever."

The bowl makes a hollow clunk as she sets it on the table. "Well, maybe your experience woke everyone up to something, you know? Maybe it had an effect on your loved ones."

"So then why should I always have to say grace? If my conversion has had such a positive effect on everyone, shouldn't they be just as thankful?"

"They are thankful. To God for the food and to you for reminding them of God."

"Oh my gosh."

"You know what I mean."

"I feel like a priest."

"There's nothing wrong with being a priest."

"No, not if you're Catholic. There's nothing wrong with being an accountant, but I'm no good with money, either."

"I don't think that that's a very fair comparison," she says. "Aunt Patty just thought

it would be a nice way to welcome you home is all. It's an honor to be able to give thanks on behalf of the family."

"Well," I say, because I can't think of anything else to say. "I don't really need to be welcomed home, anyway. It's not like I'm establishing residency or anything like that. I'm just a little less distant than I was for four years, is all."

"I have to go set more rice to cook," she says. "If you don't want to pray, that's fine. I'll tell Aunt Patty. That'll be fine." She takes the bowl back from the table, and moves past me, looking down the hall towards the front door. "It looks like T-Boy and Leroy are coming in with the gumbo. Go open the door for them," she says.

Outside, Leroy and T-Boy lurch towards the door, their arms anchored by the cast iron pot, whose handles they lift using felt from Aunt Patty's scrap pile as oven mitts. They try to keep their steps in line as the momentum from the pot leads them. The screen door's hydraulic hisses as I push it open and the chain clanks against the frame while I hold it back. T-Boy tucks his head into his shoulder and wipes the sweat from his forehead on the sleeve of his t-shirt. I stare past them and into the middle distance as they skitter through the door. "Y'all got it," I say; it was supposed to be a question but I lost the inflection in the asking. "No shit," T-Boy says, and he winces.

Steam rises from the gumbo pot like incense at Christmas mass. The tip of my nose is resting on my laced fingers, blocking my nostrils, but the humid black pepper drifts through. This dining room, with its "Kountry Kitchen" signs and niece and nephew photos, is filled with it: the musk of flour and oil and grilled sausages, and the bite of soft white rice. All of the men have wiped the sweat from their faces. Leroy has disappeared

into the bathroom to wash his hands, leaving his wife Melinda vulnerable to the attention of T-Boy, who slides into the empty seat next to her. He starts yammering about the rig, how hard the work is, how he feels like his veins are going to burst. Melinda's demure, a nurse at Lafayette General in the pediatric ward who's used to consoling dying children. She has on her toothpaste-colored scrubs and her black hair is pulled back, making her look like an affable older sister. T-Boy holds out his right arm and squeezes, making the tributaries of his forearm veins pop in and out of their courses, the effects of his work. She nods and glances over his shoulder towards the bathroom door.

Once Leroy returns, Aunt Patty stands at the head of the table, the straw of her ponytail standing nearly vertical as she bows her head. She thanks God for our gumbo, for Peck-Peck's having taken the time and strength to give his morning to it, and for all of the onions and bell pepper and garlic and pigs and even the turkeys who gave themselves to it. She praises God for the goodness of his creation, for the wonders and delights and joys. I picture a turkey strutting behind its chicken wire walls suddenly leap for joy as it sees the farmer approach with a cleaver. Cartoon bell peppers pop from the soil, their square teeth shining, and catapult into Peck-Peck's waiting gumbo pot, using a cornstalk for a diving board.

I'm staring at my rice bowl, noting the number of grains and imagining how much rice must be planted in the world in a given year. I make a note to be thankful for the migrant workers who gather our meals.

Aunt Patty thanks God for my four years of safe travel between Michigan and home, and, even more so, she says, for the safe travel he's given me through the world of higher education. "He has been faithful with his gifts, Lord, and has honored you in his

commitment to the task you've given him." I peer up for a moment to see whether T-Boy has taken this as some kind of slight to his one-and-done at ULL. He's given up Leroy's spot and now sits next to Aunt Patty. His camo hat sits on the table between his arms, just behind his bowl, and his hair is matted in a ring where the band had been. If his mom's prayer has upset him, he doesn't seem to be showing it. His eyes are closed, but he doesn't appear to be squinting. He looks placid, like he's gone away. Or fallen asleep. Aunt Patty wraps things up in Jesus' name, and his eyes pop open. "Amen," he enthuses, and he reaches out for the pot with trembling fingers.

Aunt Patty slaps T-Boy's hand and leans forward herself, ladling the gumbo over a bowl of rice which she hands to Peck-Peck, who sits on her other side. "The first fruits go to the chef," she says to T-Boy.

"Leroy, what time you got?" T-Boy asks.

Leroy pulls back his plaid cuff to check his watch. "'Bout twenty minutes," he says.

"Shoot; twenty minutes too many," T-Boy responds, eyeing Uncle Gene as he passes the ladle.

"Corey, you watching the Saints with us this afternoon?" Uncle Gene asks.

"Oh," I say, reaching for a beer from the Coleman that's been trucked into the dining room. "My buddy Phil said something about watching the game at his place. Do they really kick off in twenty minutes?"

"Probably more like nineteen or eighteen by now," T-Boy says, "but yeah."

I nod to him. "Yeah," I say. "Man, I wish I would have known that y'all were gonna be watching the game, I would've let him know."

"He's welcome to come over," Uncle Gene says.

"Yes!" Mom chimes in, and then she looks away and smiles. "Philip. How has he been?"

"He's been fine," I say, taking the ladle.

"He just went home after church?" Mom asks.

I reach over the table, towards the gumbo. It's further from my side, and I nearly have to stand. "Ah, I don't think so, no," I say. "I didn't see him there."

"Didn't see him there?" she says.

"Well," I say, poking through the gumbo with the ladle. There's good meat on the top, but the stuff lower down's been soaking in the roux since ten-thirty in the morning and is well-worth dragging the bottom for. "I don't think he's really going anymore," I say.

"Bruh, you think you taking long enough?" T-Boy says. "Damn."

I pull up a scoop thick with sausage that's puffed out of its casing and has been sponging up the richest layer. The rest of the pot will look like this tomorrow--everybody knows a gumbo is best the day after it's cooked--and dredging the pot is the only way to guarantee a perfect bowl on the first day.

"Not going anymore, huh?" Mom says as I pass her the ladle. She's trying to look concerned, but there's a glint of irony around her eyes that sells her out completely.

"Mr. Bill's not the pastor there anymore, if that's what you're thinking, Mom," I say. "He and Mrs. Linda moved to Dallas two years ago."

"I didn't say anything about Mr. Bill," she says as she skims the ladle through the gumbo. She passes it off to Melinda, who pulls a small bottle of hand sanitizer from the chest pocket of her shirt before serving herself. "But you know," she says, "it's very odd

the stories you hear about these pastors' children, always running away from the faith, or disgracing their parents."

"Melinda, can you pass the bread?" I ask. She rests the ladle against the pot and reaches over Leroy for the French bread.

"Oh, Brenda, I *know*," Aunt Patty says. "Just the other night on KATC, Tom Voinche was talking about how this church--this *little* church," she says, expanding her definition of "church" to include the aluminum-sided. "One of those ones that's in a shopping mall--it got broken into at night, and they had one of those video projectors and a computer and some other things that was stolen. And Tom says, I'm not even kidding you, that the main suspect was the son of the pastor. I mean, can you believe?" she says, slowing down for emphasis. She shakes her head at the pity of it all.

"I just don't see how they're supposed to lead a flock of people and their own families at the same time," Mom says. She's digging into her glass for an ice cube to melt in her bowl. "I mean, Corey was an angel, but even raising him took all of my time. I can't imagine being the head of a church, too. To me," she says, blowing the steam off the top of her bowl, "it just makes sense to not let them get married. Being a priest, or a pastor, it's a full-time job, the most important mission the Lord can give a person. I don't think it's right to expect them to be able to run a family, too."

"I remember one time I was at your church, Corey," T-Boy says, his eyes following Melinda as she spoons out her gumbo. "The priest dude was all talking about sex and shit, and how he and his wife have sex and talk to their kids and all that."

"Wait, when did you go to New Hope?" I ask, confused.

"Oh, *mais*, we went for like two or three months a couple years ago," he says. "Bruh,

Leroy, talk about taking your time, huh? Hurry it up with that."

"That's awesome," I say, genuinely interested. "You enjoyed it?"

Leroy has finished his ladling and hands the spoon to T-Boy, who dunks the cup and pours a dripping mess of roux and diced onions onto his rice. "Yeah, it was alright," he says, and he drops the ladle back into the pot to dig for meat. "Like I said, it was weird, that dude talking about sex and all that, but other than that I thought it was alright."

"Wait, so--" I say, pushing my bangs up and over my forehead to think. "Who would have been the pastor then? The Broussards left in--what, 2006?--so it was probably...Fauchaux? Alan Fauchaux?"

T-Boy shrugs. "Leroy," he says. "What we got?"

Leroy looks up from his gumbo. "Ten minutes, give or take."

I try to picture T-Boy at New Hope. I want it to be ridiculous, he in his camo hat asking how come the priest ain't wearing no robes and how come they all gotta stay in their chairs and drink them little thimbles of grape juice for communion. They live for guys like T-Boy at New Hope: roughnecks in the middle of their two-offs who're just looking for a place to spend time with family. From the floodlights that illuminate the Christless cross in the front lawn to the wood-paneled sanctuary to the worship lyrics projected onto video screens, the whole thing seems designed to squeeze questions out of Catholics who wander in thinking the building's still a hockey rink. I imagine many leave unconvinced that it isn't still some sort of amusement park.

"What's that book?" Uncle Gene says suddenly, apparently to T-Boy.

"Book?"

"Yeah," Uncle Gene says, "You know, that one. That book you kept telling me to

read."

"*Crazy Heart*?" Aunt Patty suggests.

I shudder and stare down at my bowl. The answer Uncle Gene is looking for is *Ragged Soul*. It's a muscular book about how all the Lord wants of his men is to be brave soldiers, to fight the good fight and woo a mistress and, I gather, generally conduct themselves like Bruce Willis. You shave your head with a knife and then you go to the charity ball. That sort of thing. All the guys got copies on a retreat weekend, but I never read it. There's a whole genre of these books, whose covers almost always show blue and red and vanilla suns setting behind some jagged mountain while a lone climber tacks his feet into a cliff face. Self-help for the Christian bodybuilder. That's what I used to call them. If no one can remember the name of the book before T-Boy thinks to ask Leroy for the time again, we just might get through this.

"*Ragged Soul*?"

I'm so enthralled by my line of thinking that my mother's voice barely registers.

"Aww, yeah," T-Boy says, stretching his words. "That book. *Ragged Soul*. Oh, man." He sits up straight in his chair, gingerly places his spoon next to his gumbo, and shakes his head as if remembering the first time he saw the sun come up over the marsh at the deer camp. "Bruh," he says, though it's not clear to whom. "It's like that dude was talking right to me, yeah. I'm serious. My boy Wayne let me borrow it offshore. Dude goes to your church," he says, nodding at me.

"That's not Wayne Guilbeaux, huh?" I ask. Wayne was our youth group leader at New Hope. I haven't seen him since the summer after senior year, at the commissioning ceremony they held for departing graduates.

"Yeah, that's him. He gave it to me, said it's like the only book he ever read that made sense to him besides the Bible. And seriously? I don't even like to read, but that book spoke to my *soul*, bruh." T-Boy breaks his twilight stare and shakes his head and goes back to his gumbo. Aunt Patty smiles at Uncle Gene and pats her son on the back. I've never seen her make this face before. She's obviously proud, but it's not the same face she'd made when I walked into the kitchen earlier and she introduced me to Melinda, saying that I'd just graduated "come lawdy." She doesn't even seem impressed by the fact that T-Boy has read and somehow profited from *Ragged Soul* so much as she just seems happy to hear him bare something of himself in front of all of us. She rubs a small circle in T-Boy's back, satisfied to see that something she's known all along has been revealed.

"Corey, you read that book, didn't you?" Mom asks me.

T-Boy looks up from his bowl.

"What?" I say.

"Didn't you read it, sometime in high school?"

"No, I don't think I did."

"You've got a copy, though."

The Saturday before I moved to Ann Arbor, I sifted through my bookshelf, packing the keepers into banana boxes and piling another, smaller stack in a tower up the side of the shelf. Most of those were either freebies from church or else were purchased by me from Family Books, where I used to spend half-hours in agony. I would stare at the brightly-colored covers of different volumes from the "Christian Living" section, trying to determine whether my soul was in need of the book's particular maintenance. If I

looked with enough focus and drove all other thoughts from my mind, I might know, as if by a sort of spiritual osmosis, whether God were pointing me towards the one scrap of knowledge that would perfect me. To choose the wrong book was to cultivate growth in the wrong direction. That's what I told myself, at least; usually I left the store with a deep headache and a book I'd never read.

"I--yeah, I think somewhere," I say.

"I saw it when I put those books back on your shelf," she says. "I think that's what it was, at least. It's the one with the pretty sunrise over the mountains." She turns to T-Boy for confirmation.

"Love that picture," he says, then looks to Leroy.

"I think it's a sunset," I say for some reason, "but, yeah, that's the one."

"You didn't want to bring it up to college with you?" T-Boy asks.

"Well," I begin. I realize that I don't have an answer for this. Aunt Patty is still sitting sideways, reclining over the arm of her chair so that she can rub T-Boy's back. In order to see me, Uncle Gene leans around Leroy, who checks his watch again and excuses himself to the living room, taking the rest of his gumbo with him.

"I guess," I say, "I got all I needed out of it in high school." Technically true.

T-Boy snorts. "You saying you was already thinking like a man in high school and you didn't need no more help?"

"No," I say. My voice rises at least an octave at my denial. It's been a long Sunday. T-Boy is bouncing in his chair, almost as if his motion pumps the steam that's steadily growing around the corners of his eyes. There's not going to be any good way out of this, no way to navigate without falling. And it's only September.

I know he means no harm. He hardly ever does, and even when he thinks he's being malevolent, it's rarely effective. Even as a kid, when he clocked me over the head with his dump truck, he was the one who ran to Aunt Patty bawling and sputtering out "I'm-so-sorries" through his snotty throat. What good does it do me to say what I think about the book? That it drastically overvalues and justifies type-A personalities, universalizes specific patriarchal gender roles, and otherwise makes me feel like I'm made of spiritual tinsel for not having any desire to cast myself into the wilds for some sweaty adventure? I can't picture Christ in Carhartt with a five o'clock shadow, but that doesn't mean that I should wrench the whole rag from T-Boy's--well, *soul*, bruh.

He's still bouncing, his whole body jiggling while he shakes his head in tight nods. I can see that he's chewing on his lower lip. "Say what you thinking," he finally says.

"It's a good book," I say before I can stop myself. "I was just remembering how much I'd gotten out of it, how much it had challenged me."

T-Boy roars back from the table. "Bull*shit*. You ain't never read that book." He stands up and begins pacing up and down the parquet floor.

"Terrence," Aunt Patty begins, reaching her rubbing hand towards his shoulder, but he shrugs it off and continues his office.

"Man, you always thought you was something, bruh. Always thought you was so damned smart, so special, like you wasn't just some other dude from Lafayette. You give those people up there a good show about what you was like when you was growing up? You telling 'em we all riding in pirogues to get to school, you saying we all got a pet alligator? Fuck," he says, still pacing.

"T-Boy--"

"What? What you got to say? Bruh, your voice sound straight-up *weird* sayin' 'T-Boy.' I know you still wanna call me Terrence. But what, what you want? You gonna tell me to calm down and all that? I can see you right now, you sittin' there, eatin' that gumbo that I know you ain't never been able to make, and you thinkin' just how crazy I am, how goofy and shit I sound for talking about my soul. And you even judgin' me for using the word 'shit' so close to the word 'soul,' huh?, like you ain't ever said 'shit' before. You just keep it further from all the good words than I do." He stops pacing and looms over the table. Melinda leans over to make room.

"How far apart do shit and soul have to be for you, Corey?" he roars. "How goddam far apart?"

He shoots back up, unclenches his fists and squeezes them shut again and stretches his hands over his head. "Fuck," he mutters, and, craning around to see the goose clock on the wall behind him, he slops more gumbo into his bowl and walks out.

"Terrence," Uncle Gene starts, following him out of the room.

A few moments pass. Nobody talks. I feel like my clothes have been stripped and my chest hairs set aflame. I don't look at anyone, don't close my fingers around my spoon. All I do is watch the dots of sweat drip down the neck of my Miller and wait for the moment to pass. Which it will. Given enough time, all things pass. It's just a question of endurance.

I turn to Mom and tell her that I should go. She's still staring at the stretch of wall behind Melinda's head where T-Boy had been pacing; I can almost see her cheeks sinking into her face and her eyes hollowing out.

"I'm gonna take home another serving," I tell her, clearing my throat. "Could you

show me where the Tupperware is?"

There's a hoarse shout of excitement from the living room. "Saints game is on," T-Boy hollers.

Two

In the dark, I flip the phone shut and feel around on the bedside table for the wire that connects it to the wall. Peck-Peck found a clock-radio that looks like it might have been Mom's in high school, with faux wood-grain casing and flip-down numbers that are mostly illegible in their stiff orange light. He put it in here as a decoration, or to remind me to be responsible with my time, but once it gets dark out its vintage wattage renders it mostly useless. I click a button on the side of the phone and the front display lights up. It's 1:47 a.m.

The text was supposed to be a flasher, a way to give Jessica my number, should she decide she wanted to call. I collapsed onto the bed as soon as I walked in and pried off my slip-free shoes. The polyester of my pants legs clung with sweat to the hair on my legs. My feet were nursing themselves on blood from my upper body, and in the milky drift of post-work euphoria and the warm hum of a short glass of Grand Marnier I'd comped from the bar, I hadn't stopped at simply relaying my phone number.

She was at Vito's tonight, reading *Fear and Trembling* at the end of the bar. Ben asked me over his shoulder from the other end whether I could refill her club soda. He was watching the Phillies and the Yankees in the World Series with a regular whose name might have been Jack, or Jacques. I examined her edition as I poured her drink from the beverage dispenser. Her copy was haggard; it looked read. The spine was cracked and a corner of the cover was bent, as if someone had been trying to weaken it. There were patches of white where fingers had rubbed off bits of the design, which was different from the classic Caravaggio painting of Abraham and Isaac that covers my own

edition. The full painting is of the moment the angel intervenes, but the publisher cropped it so that on the book cover we only see Isaac's screaming face held down by Abraham's coarse hand, and a streak of knife, and in the background the nose of the ram. This version of the book was much older, with no illustration, only large and startling text interposed with jagged interlocking lines. It was like a line drawing of paranoia.

"I love that book," I told her.

"Hmh?" She fanned Kierkegaard over her chest and looked up.

I replaced the soda dispenser back in its holster and gave her a new straw. "Nothing," I said as I feigned looking for something under the bar. "I read that book when I was in college and really loved it is all. I've never seen that edition before, though; it's beautiful. Do you know where it's from?"

"Oh, no." She turned it around to look at the cover. "It's my dad's, so."

"Oh."

She placed the book face-down next to her glass. Brown hair streaked across her forehead, and she had a spattering of freckles that covered her tanned face like the crisp of a crème brûlée.

"So, what, is he a philosophy major or something?" I asked.

She snorted. "My dad?"

"I mean, professor."

"No, not hardly." She crossed her arms on the edge of the bar and leaned forward to drink from her glass. "He manages an oilfield supply company."

"And reads Kierkegaard."

"Read him, and then only maybe. There aren't very many underlines in here. I'm

meeting he and my mom for dinner if you want to talk to him about it."

"No, that's okay," I said. Lamely, I now realize.

"Are you a philosophy major?"

"No. I took a few classes."

"At UL?"

"At the University of Michigan, actually?" I haven't yet told a stranger where I went to school without raising my voice at the end, as if U of M is some obscure liberal arts college they might not have heard of.

"Michigan? Wow. Public Ivy," she said. I could see her trying not to look around at the bar, trying to square me with the surroundings.

The circular bar is dug out from the middle of the dining room, so that the bartenders stand at eye-level with the customer seated on their stool. Deep black velvet lines its outer walls, which spiral and taper off to the ground near the cash register. The shelves and glass-racks are attached to another circular wall of velvet that descends from the ceiling, blocking most of the space above the bartenders' heads from view. The intended effect is for the customer seated at the bar to feel as though they're interacting with a movie, the black space above and below mimicking the bars of a widescreen film. The ideal customer, Ben explained to me during my first shift, would be transported to the world of Fellini or Leone, leaving behind the manicured hedges and crane-dug streams of River Ranch in particular and Lafayette in general. He pronounced the directors "Fell-eye-nye" and "Leon," which, to be fair, more closely mirrors the way they're spelled in the employee handbook. When we're tromping around behind the bar, grabbing and tossing empty bottles in a single motion, testing the connection on the taps, re-stocking

the well, flagging down the waitresses when their orders have been filled, and momentarily avoiding the eyes of patrons and their empty pints, it's like living inside a crusader's helmet. Peer out through the slits. Just enough light comes in to let you see what you're fighting.

"Where'd you go to school?" I asked her.

"LSU."

"And you came back here?"

She stretched a bit and sat up. "No. I live in New Orleans."

"That's cool," I said, pulling an arm behind my back as if I needed to scratch. I looked down the bar to see whether Ben was in need of anything. He had dragged a stool up to the rail and was rooting through a basket of breadsticks.

Vito's was the first restaurant to open in River Ranch, the tony village in the middle of Lafayette that had been hewn from a former cow pasture. On Wednesday nights we get the occasional man-in-suit like Jacques who stops in on his way home for an Amstel Light, and there's Ben's devoted following of tennis-moms who usually wander over from the club after lessons. Most tables don't want anything more than a glass of wine to match their chicken-and-sausage pastalaya. Besides the organic grocery stores, high-end liquor retailers, and shops specializing in educational toys, River Ranch was home to a class of Lafayette citizens who wanted respite from the anxieties of the current day and the embarrassing brutalism of our downtown's architecture. Vito's co-opting of jambalaya as an Italian dish served as the restaurant's sole nod to the local heritage, and, accordingly, was the only visual reminder that we were still in southwestern Louisiana. For reasons I can't quite parse, it's also the most popular item on the menu.

A Yankee grounded out to end the inning and the game went to commercial. Jack or Jacques stood up and started making his way towards the restroom. I pulled the rag from my belt loop and polished the top of the bar, lifting her glass and offering a reserved "Cheers" to him as he passed. I set her glass back down and tossed the rag under the bar. "I'll get that later," I said. She smiled and sipped her club soda.

Fear and Trembling. I'd stumbled upon it in September of my freshman year in an intro to the philosophy of religion course. I prayed frequently about whether I should major in philosophy or English or history, and found myself sitting in the front row at the base of a large lecture hall arranged in a kind-of clamshell, like an indoor amphitheatre. Professor DeVos, a skinny man in large, wire-framed glasses and a pair of flat brown corduroys, introduced the book and the course by telling us that Kierkegaard would be crucial for our understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. "Which is to say," he added, "that there is no relationship between faith and reason, or at least, not a friendly one. For Kierkegaard, faith begins where reason leaves off." This I wrote down on the first page of my notebook.

I went to his office hours after class that day. As I made my way through Angell Hall, I absentmindedly let my index finger trace the wall, as if by leaving a mark I'd be able to find my way back. He told me that not only was Kierkegaard a Christian, but that he was perhaps the Christian philosopher most well-regarded within the academy since St. Thomas Aquinas. I told him that I really only knew the name "Kierkegaard" from the first *Wayne's World* movie, in which Wayne quotes the philosopher to impress Cassandra. He pressed his lips together in a smile and nodded.

I skimmed the book and understood little. Who was Hegel? What was the system? The word "problemata" had "problem" in it, so a definition seemed to suggest itself. But I took vigorous notes during Professor DeVos' lectures and was riveted by the discussion of Genesis 22. Kierkegaard traces the depths of Abraham's anguish: the anxiety he must have felt as he and Isaac walked together up Mount Moriah; and how, as he raised the knife over his head, he must have felt it pierce his own heart. I wept with the philosopher as he exalted Abraham's great faith, in that he was able to trust God even in the face of evidence that seemed to convict Him. If Isaac was the fulfillment of God's promise to bless Abraham's descendents, but He then required Abraham to kill Isaac, how was God to be trusted? How was His promise to be fulfilled? It was beyond reason, just as Professor DeVos had said. It could not be understood by the mind. Kierkegaard called it an absurdity—a glorious and admirable kind of absurdity— a phrase in which I took a perverse pleasure. John Hoekstra, a tall kid from Grand Rapids with a smear of beard across his chin that he was fond of stroking during lecture, was dismissing Christianity and theism entirely out-of-hand as too full of contradictions, and pointing at Kierkegaard as prime exemplar. I sat and listened with my arms folded and stared straight ahead, a smirk on my face, like a king giving patient ear to a request he knows he won't grant. He spoke quickly, sweat forming at his temples. He was seemingly unaware, I thought, of the fact that Christianity's contradictions were entirely the point. It didn't need to be understood; that was what was meant by paradox. He stated his case with what he imagined to be passion, but which looked to me like desperation. It was as if all of his logic had twisted into an oily, knotted rope that he alone was responsible for hauling out.

He was my roommate, assigned by a computer.

In our dorm, he was respectful, even friendly. He'd gone to Christian High, which he said in vague terms had turned him into an atheist. Most of his friends, and all of his family, were believers, so he retained something of a quiet respect for faith in private; he only asked that the wooden cross I'd twined together from two fallen branches be hung on my side of the room. Still, he'd been intimidating during move-in week, sitting in his corner of the dorm reading from the religious studies and philosophy books he'd already purchased and kept stacked in a neat pile on his desk. I sat across the room and did my morning devotions with my binder Bible, praying under my breath and without closing my eyes, hoping that he'd think I was taking the text into deep mental consideration and not treating it like a letter from a long-lost lover. I hoped that this self-consciousness wasn't a sin. There were verses about being ashamed of Christ that suggested otherwise, but they were talking about out-and-out denial, and there were plenty of verses that suggested that praying in front of others was vain. John never said a thing about it, never tried to talk about what he'd been reading. But as I did my work, I couldn't help but remember that his books had been written in response to mine.

Yes, I thought in class as he drew towards an end. What I believe is absurd. Christianity and all its attendant doctrines--the virgin birth, substitutional atonement, the resurrection, the second coming--none of it made any sense. It was invisible to reason. No matter how vehemently the theologians and philosophers wrapped it in gauze, in the hopes of taming it and showing its outlines, they only served to cover it up. And yet, I believed it. "I believe it on the strength of the absurd," I wrote in my notes. And my believing it put me in company with that most well-respected of philosophers. We were the backbone of undergrad syllabi the world over.

It had been Mom's idea for me to move in with Peck-Peck. "Believe me, Corey, not that I wouldn't *love* to have you move in with me when you come back," she said over the phone. "But he's been so lonely, and it would do him so much good to have you there under his roof. Just like old times." She'd had this idea almost immediately after I told her that I would be coming back to Lafayette, I could tell: from the moment I told her I wasn't sure what else to do, and that I'd rather be rent-free and aimless than debt-ridden and aimless. She'd held it in, though, until a few weeks before I left Ann Arbor. Maybe she didn't want to scare me into staying up there.

"I was so excited when I thought about you moving in with him," she said. "You're always talking about the importance of treating the less-fortunate as if they were Jesus. I'll never forget when we were walking around by all those little shops by your school and you saved the rest of your sandwich for that homeless man you knew we'd walk past. So the moment you told me you wanted to move back here I thought, 'Aw, well he should move in with Papa.' Do you remember when you would stay there with he and Maw-Maw when Dad and I would go to New York?"

"I remember that it happened. Don't remember being there all that well."

"You used to love it," she said, and paused. "You'd cry when we came to pick you up."

"Well," I said, settling into my chair for the ride. With my books all packed, there was now plenty of room. "It's probably because they bought me a one-pound bag of Skittles to work on while I stayed with them. Spend a week building up an addiction like that and it's hard to break free."

She sighed. "Cum laude from the University of Michigan," she said. "Can you believe? Maw-Maw would be so proud."

Now, Peck-Peck's snoring makes its way through the bedroom's back wall beginning at nine-thirty every night. It's as if his body became used to the strict schedule of the smokehouse, and in his retirement it still requires a regimen; the snoring and the early-morning edition of *SportsCenter*, whose theme song blasts through the front wall of the bedroom at six, apparently fill that requirement. He didn't snore when I was a kid, or if he did it was nothing like this. It took me a month to learn how to fall asleep. But now, on off-nights, I lie awake on top of the covers and try to pray, using his snoring as white noise. When my mind begins its inevitable slip, I find myself analyzing the sound. The snore has a high whining pitch, like a stadium horn, but it's countered by a phlegmy distortion that greets it somewhere in the throat, and the two sounds come out together, like a dial tone. As I lie there in my trance, I hum along, trying to match the pitch. When they meet and stabilize, his snoring and my humming, they twine together, and I return to my prayers, wanting to apologize for the detour but still proud of my ear's limited abilities.

John played Madden. He'd read for two or three hours on end, a notebook at his side and a pen in his hand, and then suddenly sit up straight, arms up over his head, twisting so that the joints in his spine would pop one by one. "You mind if I play a game?" he'd ask, and sincerely wait for an answer.

I've never been a very big fan of the NFL. Even with its steroid problems, the moral dubiousness of the players' off-the-field lives, and the overall sense of mania attached to

it, I've always preferred the college game. When John invited me to play, I chose the Saints because I couldn't ever think of anyone else to choose. It's not that I wasn't aware of the Green Bay Packers or the Chicago Bears; it simply never crossed my mind to play as anyone but the Saints. I waited while he scrolled backwards through the list of logos, muttering to himself. "Lessee, you're the Saints, so gotta watch the passing game. Need corners, strong safeties, linebackers to punch up the middle and take away the run. Oakland, no, they've got no offense. There we go: New England." His team chosen, he turned to me. "It's on."

"You don't want to play as the Lions? Your home team?"

"The Detroit Lions?"

"I'm not aware of there being any other Lions in the NFL."

"Having the Detroit Lions for your team is about as effective as having eleven Catholic Saints for your team."

"Touché."

John had memorized New England's playbook, and understood all of the defensive formations. On obvious passing downs, he'd let his cornerbacks play a bit off of the line, ready to sprint downfield in line with my receivers. Once I figured that out and began running draw plays on third-and-long, dropping back like I was going to pass but then handing the ball up the middle to take advantage of the empty field, he started calling audibles, and his linebackers would crowd the line and prevent me from any kind of attack.

My defense was a different story. The game plan consisted entirely of blitzes. Blitzes up the middle, blitzes from the end, safety blitzes, corner blitzes. Just get the guy

with the ball, throw everything you have at him. This is the way T-Boy taught me to play. You unthinkingly deploy your entire defense and hope that your guys can break through the offensive line and destroy the quarterback before he gets a chance to make a move. Every now and then, John would get a quick pass off and pull down big yardage, but for the most part we had him running backwards.

"You finish the book yet for class?" he asked. He jerked his arms in the direction he wanted his player to run, as if shaking the controller would alter the course.

"What I could, yeah. He's difficult to read."

"Really? I didn't think it was that bad."

"Yeah, but you read philosophy for fun."

"Kierkegaard's not really philosophy. He's too soft."

I glanced over, letting my drones do the work for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"Well, isn't it obvious? The guy was in love with a woman, but chose to devote himself to his 'philosophy' instead of to her. So of course he has to justify it to himself by writing a book like that, about making choices that don't seem entirely rational but that meet a certain end."

"That's not what it's about. And plus, Professor DeVos said Kierkegaard left his fiancée because he had a divine calling. He wrote philosophy to please God."

We were silent as we both flipped through our playbooks.

"And the absurdity thing," he said, somewhat more cautiously. "I mean, that's nothing to base a faith around, if you ask me."

"You're an atheist. There's literally nothing you think is worth basing a faith around."

He shook out a laugh and looked over.

"Still, though," he added. "Let's leave aside for a moment the fact that Abraham is a special condition. Assuming that God is who the Bible says He is, that was a one-time thing. He's never asked anyone else to kill His son like that. But the principle behind that--that there are things that go beyond reason and ethics that God might ask us to do, and that because they come from Him, they're morally justified--I mean, that's a little--" he paused as he tried to evade a hefty defensive lineman. "Come on! Throw the damn ball!" My lineman crashed into the New England quarterback just after the pass was caught downfield. John cleared his throat. "But, yeah. Doesn't that seem a little dangerous to you?"

"I mean…" I was supposed to be choosing a play, but was trying to parse what John was saying at the same time.

"You're gonna run out of time and the computer's going to choose for you," he said.

"Well, it's smarter than me." A gold box looped around one of the plays on the screen and started flashing. "Okay," I said. "Ah! Didn't Professor DeVos say that for Kierkegaard, it's not a question of morals?" I strained, trying to picture the scrawls of blue ink trapped in my notebook across the room. "And that faith transcends morals? I mean," I said, unwinding my thoughts a bit, "You went to church. You know that morality can't save you."

"I'm not talking about salvation. I'm talking about everyday life. Think about that lady in Texas, the one who drowned her babies because she thought God told her to do it. That's so clearly, so obviously wrong that it's almost bigger than morality. It's just an assumed universal truth--you don't drown your babies."

"Sure, okay." We were taught in youth group to always argue respectfully, to find common ground and use it as a base. "Obviously that's wrong, and obviously we can all agree on that. And yet," I said, my thought gaining traction, "it's the very same thing that God told Abraham to do, isn't it? It certainly was no more right then than it would be now. That's what makes it absurd--that it's not 'right,' in our eyes. And what makes Abraham special—what makes faith faith, finally—is the ability to do that same thing."

"No, what makes it absurd--what makes something absurd--is that it defies all logic." He responded immediately; like a chess player, he'd been playing four moves ahead of me. "The absurdity isn't just that Abraham was willing to kill Isaac, it's that he was willing to do it while still believing that God wouldn't take Isaac from him. That's faith; that's your absurdity; trusting in what God says even when it literally makes no sense to you." He jerked the controller again. "That's the thing. God's intellect is infinitely higher and His will infinitely better than yours. The point--and the point for Kierkegaard, too--is God's faithfulness, not Abraham's strong will."

I stared at the space over the TV while he spoke, trying to follow. "I see what you're saying," I said. "I definitely see what you're saying. But didn't Abraham still have to be there? He still had to raise the knife."

The draw play I'd called was actually working, and my running back was bursting up the middle. John paused the game.

"Let me ask you this, and I want you to answer me as honestly and seriously as you can, Corey. You can take your time thinking about this. In fact, I'd prefer if you did." The arch in his eyebrow had flattened and he was calm now, almost pastoral, like he was imitating a minister from his youth. "Let's say an angel comes to you in the night. Not

in your heart or in your mind, but literally opens the door and walks into the room. He's material. And he says to you, 'Corey Paquin, I'm going to take you back to Lafayette, and I want you to kill your grandfather. Just pull back the covers and push a knife into his chest while he sleeps. Ready? Let's go.' And that's all he gives you. Do you do it?"

He looked at his watch, then stood up suddenly and walked to the door, turning off the TV as he passed.

My throat was dry and heavy and full of sinking stuff. I coughed into a fist, trying to clear it out. "Is this one of those questions you guys sit around making up to trap us? You atheists?" I said, but it came out craggy and weak.

He shook his head. "I've got to go meet someone for coffee," he said. "I'll be back in a bit. Just think about it, alright? And not for the sake of our argument."

Later, when he came back, I was pretending to be engrossed in my geology book's chapter about glaciers. I had been staring at the same diagram for two hours, convincing myself that I was preparing for a quiz. But I knew I wasn't. I knew I was just staring into space, killing time, and along with it both logical answers to the angel's question.

Jacques had drunk down the last of the Amstel and Ben nodded at me from across the bar to change it out. In the taproom, one keg's air feed was rattling as it tried to suck from the dry container. The room was narrow, the width and length of a shipping container, and the left side was lined two-deep with dulled tin kegs. Lines of hose ran from each one up to and then through the wall to the taps at the back of the bar on the other side. I'd done enough changing in my few weeks of work to have the process down, but I was still having trouble remembering which beers were positioned where.

Before it left the taproom, each hose was crowned with a valve that shut off the air, and a strip of white tape had been slapped onto the wall next to it with the name of the beer scrawled on it in black Sharpie. I could have followed the ticking of the dry air feed to the empty, but I wanted to have the room fully mapped out so that, in the future, I wouldn't even have to think about where I was going as I flicked on the lights and entered the room. I wanted to be able to do it with my eyes closed.

"But faith isn't *entirely* without reason," Jessica said. "Is it?"

She'd introduced herself when I returned from the taproom. The circular Amstel sticker still clung to my pants leg, where I'd placed it after ripping it off of the keg's crown.

"I mean, I think one could make the case that it is, yeah."

She looked at the book, which was still splayed face-down on the bar.

"Okay, one could make that case, sure. But would it be true?" There was a sadness in her eyes, as if she were standing on a city wall watching marauders at the distance, slowly approaching in their cloud of dust. "I mean, if faith is entirely without reason, if there's no intellectual aspect to it whatsoever, then doesn't that mean that the facts don't matter? And so then it doesn't matter if Jesus actually lived, which means that what He's supposed to have said doesn't have any bearing on anything. Can't you then say that anything comes from God, whatever you want, regardless of its content? You could never change, you could never—what's that word?—you could never be made more holy, because you'd always be able to say that the call to change hadn't come from God. You'd never have to work to change. And, really, wouldn't that contradict like almost

everything Jesus ever said about life?"

"I—"

Ben came over shaking an empty bottle of Ketel. "Wanna grab another of these? Just had a six-top order a round of double cosmos."

I looked to Jessica, then back to Ben. I blinked.

"Yeah, gimme a second."

When I came back with the bottle, Ben had gone back to Jacques and the World Series. "Oh," he said over his shoulder. "I ended up using Grey Goose. No worries. Just put it up on the shelf, I'll crack it in a minute."

She'd been reading. She slid a thin bookmark from the last page into her spot and closed the book. She was looking over her shoulder towards the door.

"Look, here's the thing," I said, talking as I approached. "I don't understand what the hell Kierkegaard's talking about most of the time. What I do know is that what we believe oftentimes doesn't make any sense, and the goodness of *Fear and Trembling*, to me, was that it made that okay. I didn't feel like I had to understand everything anymore. So don't let it destroy your faith. Let it encourage you; some things just don't make sense."

I hadn't stated my own thoughts on something that directly in years. None of my declarations rounded up into questions, and I didn't look down at the bar or over her head as I spoke. There were no deflections.

She smirked. The marauders had changed course; they'd be sacking some other village, and the city would be safe tonight. "That's very kind of you," she said. "Thank you for your concern."

I felt my cheeks burn and noticed a few spots on the bar where the enamel was scratched. We need to polish that out, keep things looking good. I searched for the rag. "Uh-huh," I said as I looked.

It was a slow night. After her parents showed up and they took their seats, I stayed at the empty end of the bar and drank plastic cups of cranberry juice from the beverage dispenser. There was a laminated list of back-work we were supposed to be doing when things got slow tacked up next to the phone. Dust the bottles, check the connections on the taps, sweep the floor; keep things in order. I looked the list over and then poured myself another cranberry juice. I've never been able to motivate myself to do busy work.

It always takes an hour or so to fall asleep after a shift, even on the most exhausting nights. Slowly, systematically, my calves and thighs begin to loosen, as if they're expanding back into their natural shape. My bangs are slicked onto my forehead, and as I brush them away, I smell the liquid from the bottom of the trashcans on my arms. It's a high, sweet smell, like bursting overripe fruit.

I struggle out of my workpants and toss them in the direction of a pale-blue easy chair in the corner. They land on the nearby hobbyhorse that's been at rest since my childhood. As far as I can tell, Peck-Peck hasn't set foot in this room since Maw-Maw died, except to bring in the bed and to plug in the clock radio. The wall frames protect photos of the two of them on the beach in Honolulu under black and orange sunsets, or large and fading prints of tropical birds.

My dad hated Michigan. He was from Jersey, which, owing to its proximity to Pennsylvania, made him in his eyes a natural Penn State fan, never mind that State

College, Pennsylvania, and Ocean City, New Jersey, are a four-and-a-half-hour car ride from one another. When I was eight years old, he sat me down in the living room on a Saturday afternoon to explain that we would be watching "our" Nittany Lions square off against the disgusting and immoral Michigan Wolverines. The Michigan basketball team, he told me, wore baggy shorts that went down nearly to their knees, and their black shoes were the same kind worn by the thugs in Los Angeles. Their football team was just as bad, he said, though he didn't explain how. I sat belly-down on the floor in front of the TV, resting my head in my hands, waiting in awful anticipation for the hordes to storm the field.

And then they did. As a camera panned across the mass of people crammed into the stadium, flowing blurs of maize and blue and black sprung from the locker room tunnel. The clash of yellow appliqué numbers on their dark blue jerseys made them look like the Blue Angels, propelling themselves down the narrow pathway and out onto the wild green field. And those helmets. Blue as a bruise with a wing-shaped shock of yellow over the brow, and three yellow beelines streaking over the crown. The trombones and bass drums pumped and the players kept running out, bobbing their helmets in the white autumn sun and nodding at one another as they made it to the field and pumped their arms at the crowd. This was their house. Over a hundred thousand people were there to watch them do something they loved, and they looked damn good doing it. If they were thugs, they at least made thuggery stylish. No face-length scars, no pinstripe suits and thick Italian accents: just pure strut. In the T.V.'s reflection, I saw my own dropped jaw and straightened up before my dad could notice.

He made a good effort of tamping down his reaction when I told him over the phone

where I'd be going to college. I imagined him in some high-ceilinged apartment in suburban Houston, nothing hanging on the eggshell walls. He'd be sitting on the spare sticks of furniture that had come along when Hess transferred him from Jersey to Lafayette, and that had now lateraled west with him to work in the newsroom at the Houston *Chronicle*. He was hoping that the excitement of the newsroom would keep him good and lathered for the rest of his life. He'd been given all he'd ever wanted--an adoring wife, a son he loved, a comfortable job, fifty-seven channels--but he couldn't escape the feeling that there was something else better out there that he had to have, and so, my junior year of high school, he left to find it. "If you stay in one place too long, you fester," he said. We sat in the front seat of his Explorer, parked in front of Meche's Donut King. The windows were glazed over with our heat and the humidity of the early morning, the Meche's sign barely filtering through in a white glow. I gripped the neck of my orange juice bottle and squeezed, waiting for the strength to say something. "It's Jesus you're looking for," I suddenly spat out. A fleck of donut frosting rocketed from my upper lip and ticked off of the windshield, drawing a line of water down the glass. "Don't you know that? He's what you're missing. And you don't have to leave to find Him. What are you going to do? Replace this stuff with a bunch of other stuff, like it's the stuff that's the problem?"

It's still the longest conversation we've ever had about Jesus. We pulled out of the parking lot and he dropped me off at New Hope for a weekend retreat. Then he went home and started packing. "That's a good school," was all he'd said when I told him about Michigan the following fall. He sounded distracted, as if he were close-reading a no-parking sign and looking for gaps in the wording that he could exploit, were he to be

given a ticket.

The phone still sits inert, like a dead mouse on the bedside table. I flip it open and squint against the light from the LCD. The background picture is of a sunset over a ridge that I snapped just outside of Nashville on the way home. Clouds had gathered at the edge of the land and towered into the sky, with thin strands wrapping themselves around the outer walls. The sun was halfway down the column and was shooting rays in every direction. I'd been so overcome by road fatigue, there among the short pines and clearings of Hendersonville, Tennessee, that I nearly drove off the road in rapture. It had seemed at the time a sign of grace, the great white cloud being transformed into a pillar of fire as I made my way home. Did she notice the picture when she took the phone from me to tap in her number before she left? She couldn't know the context, couldn't know its importance unless I explained it to her. And so I'm the guy who likes the pretty sunset.

I delete the text from my sent-messages folder and click around for a while, looking at old pictures. The distant view of the ice from the cheap seats in Joe Louis Arena at a playoff game this spring. The lead singer from Built to Spill playing his guitar at the Magic Stick, his face buried in shadows. Then, much earlier, the even more distant and shadowed view of the field from the top row of Michigan Stadium. That shot's from sophomore year, from the night John and I and some of his friends snuck in and played touch football for an hour and a half with the giant stadium rising up and out into the night. We were certain we were going to get caught. We had to pry apart the opening in a chain-link gate to get out. It was the only time in my life I've ever snuck out of a place,

and as I lay down on the lawn outside of the stadium, catching my breath and letting the thin cool air babble over me, I felt for the first time completely sure that Ann Arbor was where I was supposed to be. It lasted about five minutes.

There was a daiquiri hut out by Evangeline Thruway that would sell alcohol to anyone whose car had a parking tag from our high school. The Breeze-Thru. They'd seen the kind of cars most of the students were driving and they figured we'd be good tippers, I guess. It was a little white hut made of corrugated tin, and trimmed in red two-by-fours whose paint peeled off like sunburnt skin. The place was legendary in our school, a celebrated open secret. Even the administration seemed to know about it. One group of senior guys named their club-league flag-football team after the place, and had all these white t-shirts with red rings around the sleeves made up.

I never went to the Breeze-Thru. It was a real crisis for me if I was hanging out with some of my non-church friends and they wanted to make a run across town for piña coladas or a plateful of Jell-O shots. On the one hand, these guys were my friends, and I didn't want them to have to drop me off at home two and a half hours before curfew. And, I'd reason, like we all did, that Jesus went to parties with prostitutes and tax collectors all the time, and that He even drank wine with them. I'm not sure, now that I think about it, what the drinking age might have been in Judea at the time, but, then again, whatever it might have been, at thirtysomething He would have been old enough.

The other guys would be on their cell phones, calling up girls from school to take their order. It was a forty-five minute drive to get from our part of town to the daiquiri place, so if you were going it was a social obligation to see if anyone else wanted

anything. As soon as the phones came out, I'd make a head nod like I had to go to the bathroom but not to leave without me, and I'd go in, lock the door, sit on the lid of the toilet, drag my palms across my face, and pray. And that was where things would really heat up. As long as I was out in the living room with the guys, I could hold everything together in my mind:

A) These are my friends, and I love them.

B) There's no sin in being around alcohol, even if you're under twenty-one.

C) By being here with them while they drink, the opportunity to serve them might arise--what if someone needs a ride home?

D) Such opportunities might also be an opening to share the gospel.

But the moment I bowed my head in the bathroom, some greater sound would roar to life. It was like a beast whose body and texture conformed to its surroundings while it slept, and only if I looked very closely could I see it breathing. But the slightest confusion, the quietest flick of uncertainty, would shake it from its sleep and it would shoot fire. Was I serious? Did I really think that driving through the north side of town with a bunch of my non-Christian "friends" to buy alcohol was permissible? Was it worth the risk of being shot at by some north-side thug, just to impress my friends? And was I really trying to say that the whole thing was some form of Christian charity? I'd rock back and forth on the toilet seat, pressing my palms into my eyelids, feeling my cheeks flush: sorry for having tried to pervert the gospel just so I wouldn't have to ask them to drop me off at home on their way out. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I'd sputter, over and over, but there was no silence, no peace, only the continued tension that pulled at my chest from either end. It was a very physical thing, and as I would wash my face and

tamp it off on a hand towel before leaving the bathroom, I consoled myself by remembering that Jacob had wrestled with the angel and had had his Achilles' heel stripped in the process. To be engaged with God is to grapple.

I'd come back out into the living room, just as the guys were pulling on their shoes and backhanding one another on the chest in pre-drink excitement. They'd know from the fading of the red in my cheeks that I was going to ask them to take me home. It stopped being embarrassing shortly after I accepted it as the new normal. Then, back in my bedroom with my ear pressed against the dented grill of my stereo, listening to the radio, I'd realize that there's a kind of joy in hurting for something that you actually believe in.

It had been weeks since I'd felt anything. I walked to class slowly, staring straight ahead while Professor DeVos lectured on Paul Tillich and Simone Weil, then returned to the dorm and continued staring at my books until bedtime. When John set down the angel's question, its volume had displaced everything else in my life. I stopped wandering across campus for church on Sunday mornings, stopped emailing my friends from back home. Then I worried that, with the break in communication, they'd figure that something had gone haywire. But how to explain it to them? They'd tell me I was being dramatic, that the situation was entirely hypothetical, and that anyway God would never do that to me, that it went against His very character as a good and loving God. But He'd done it to Abraham; why couldn't He do it to me? Or, and this would be almost worse, they'd listen quietly, jutting in with little groans of understanding when I said something particularly resonant, and waiting for me to finish so they could respond. They'd tell me that sometimes you can end up far away from God without realizing

you've been drifting. And if I told them that I didn't feel God anymore, they'd respond in a soft, almost ashamed voice that if you don't feel God, one of you must have moved--and God doesn't move.

On a Wednesday afternoon the week before Halloween, all three hundred of Michigan's clubs and student organizations set up booths on the Diag. Near the rear entrance to Angell Hall, a live band was playing on the back of a flatbed trailer that had been transformed by maize-and-blue bunting into a stage. Card tables had been unfolded and placed side-by-side along the paths that cut across the autumning greenspace, most of them displaying a large poster-board with the particular organization's logo and photos of its members smiling together. A few frustrated sorority girls kept brushing red and gold leaves from their table beneath a maple tree. Enthusiastic upperclassmen in navy t-shirts, with their club name spelled out in yellow, passed out fliers, or lured passersby to their table with the promise of free candy or coffee or pizza. People took these things on like another class, or like their most important class. There were plenty of opportunities to care about Darfur and abortion. A member of the campus anarchist organization tried to give me a flier about veganism. On it was a picture of thin cows hemmed into a narrow pen in a factory farm. There were brown spots of blood among the black on their white hides. When I handed it back to him, he narrowed his eyes, which made the ring through his right eyelid hunch over and jut out, as if it wanted to jump off of his face. "You mean to tell me that this isn't evil?" he said. When I replied that I really wasn't sure, or that anyway I wasn't sure it had anything to do with me, he gave me a look of further disgust. "How can you say that factory farming isn't evil?" Foam was gathering at the corners of his lips. "By participating in a global economy that not only allows but supports these

kinds of activities, we all--every single one of us--have a personal responsibility to do something about it. We're all implicated in this, and it's our responsibility to fix it. All of us," the anarchist said.

I'd avoided the campus ministries on my way through. I'd gone to the local chapter of a national ministry called Soul'd Out that someone at New Hope had recommended, but I hadn't been among them long enough for my absence to be noted. As I passed through the last of the booths, which had been devoted to small-timers like the Colombian Culture Society and the Stand-Up Comedy Guild, I noticed a plain white sign marked "RM" in thick navy letters. Beneath that, it said, "REFORMATION MINISTRIES." Standing near the booth was an athletic man of medium height, with short-buzzed grey hair and horn-rimmed glasses. As I approached, he smiled at me in a familiar manner. There was something about the way he was standing, a kind of confidence that the other groups were trying to exhibit, but whose desperation sold them out. Adrenaline flooded my chest and I stopped.

"Are you a minister?"

His smile broadened and he nodded. "I am." His "I" was mild, more of an "ah."

"Can I ask you about something? It's kinda private."

He nodded and asked one of his students to watch the booth. We walked back across the Diag, behind the tables and through the lawn this time, avoiding the noise. He introduced himself as Matthew Major. He'd read *Fear and Trembling* in his undergrad, of course, and he had read it again in seminary. He laughed to himself when I explained the hypothetical that John had laid out. He asked me what my faith had been like in high school. I told him that I had converted during summer vacation before the start of my

freshman year, alone one morning on the beach in Destin, Florida, and that God had immediately become the most important thing in my life. I loved nothing more than to feel His presence. I told him about the Bible study I'd led after school in the cafeteria, and about the pledge I'd made to wake up early to spend an extra hour in morning prayer my senior year. We were out of the Diag now and walking down State Street, past the frat houses. "You ever take a campus tour?" he asked.

"No. I just applied here and came up when I got in. Was that wrong?"

He chuckled to himself again. "I don't think so, no."

He pointed at the gargoyles guarding the cornices of the Lawyer's Club. We took a right onto East Madison and curved around the Michigan Union. In his mind, we'd moved past Kierkegaard, past the angel's question. He pointed at the spot where JFK had spoken before he was president, where he'd announced his plan to create the Peace Corps. "You have to know the lay of the land when you move to a new place," he said.

I didn't say anything. He kept pointing at landmarks. I realized suddenly that we hadn't been walking anywhere. We were just ambling, trying to get to know one another.

"Do you think I did the right thing by going to school here?"

He considered this. "I don't know. I don't know you well enough to say." He stopped walking and faced me. "Look," he said, "Your friend, this situation with the angel. What're you really worried about there?"

I looked away, down the street. The sun was beginning to set through the maples that drifted over the road. "I don't know," I finally said. "I guess I'm worried that my faith's too weak, and that that's why God's taken his love away from me. For that and for having come all the way up here. I wanted to go to a good school, but I feel like I've

walked into the lion's den, and if I get eaten, it's my own fault and He'll leave me to it. And so now I just want to get back to that feeling. The security feeling."

He nodded. "Okay," he said, pinching his nose and squinting. "Hear me right on this." He took his time looking up and down the street, and when he spoke again, he chose his words carefully. "There is no 'path' to God's love and forgiveness," he said. "Or, there is, but not in the sense that you're talking about. Think of the prodigal son when he returns home. He's come up with this great list of things he's going to say to his dad, but when the time comes the father won't let him; he's just happy that his son has decided to come home. If you miss a turn, make a bad decision, you've not fallen off forever. Otherwise, Jesus wasted His time. There is no series of challenges in which it's your job to choose wisely before God will love you again. You don't have to write the map; you just have to go home. So follow Him home."

He looked down the street as if watching someone on the approach and shook his head, as if he was angry with the perpetrator of not only my confusion, but of the confusion of everything.

"I don't know if you made the 'right' choice in deciding to go to school here, but it's the choice you've made, and here you are," he said, turning back to me. "God's allowed it to happen. I don't think He's going to abandon you because you decided to go to school out of state, or because you can't answer a difficult hypothetical question." He turned and looked at the Union, then down the street. "You ever read any William Blake?"

"No. But I know who he is."

"He's okay. Had some interesting thoughts. But this one thing he said, he talked

about this god who was forever silent and remote, and who didn't want anything to do with his people. 'Why darkness and obscurity in all thy words and laws?' But he calls this god Nobodaddy, as in, he's nobody's daddy. The Father of Jesus," he said, finally looking back at me, "is not Nobodaddy."

We walked across the back lawn of the Union, then past the Literature, Science, and Arts Building, across State, and back into the Diag. He asked me about Katrina, but didn't give me the look of relief I'd become accustomed to receiving when telling strangers how little the storm had affected me. I hadn't known anyone who'd died or even lost a home, and so hadn't considered it my problem. "Huge groups from our church went down to help in the weeks and months after the storm, but I didn't really pay it much attention," I explained to him. "It was like two-and-a-half hours down the road from my hometown. It might as well have been happening in Ann Arbor."

"You give me the Fear and Trembling." That's what I'd told her. It's possible that she thought I was referring to the book, as if I were commanding her to loan me her copy. Mine is somewhere in one of the boxes stacked pole-high behind the closet's louvered doors. Is that what I've made myself tonight, the guy who sweats over Kierkegaard, and especially his vintage editions? Is it worth it to send another message, clarifying the first? Or, maybe she got it, got it completely, and that's why she hasn't responded. I'm the graduate who still thinks that philosophy puns are impressive business.

I'm nearly asleep when I hear the vibration. I flick the phone open and squint to understand her message:

:-)

Three

Despite my best efforts, we're here a few minutes past the promised hour, T-Boy and I. The house turns out to be an aging Victorian surrounded by a waist-high wrought-iron and brick fence overgrown with ivy and weeds. Whole chunks are missing from the porch columns, as if the place had been cannonballed by passersby in 4x4s. The scrubby lawn is sealed in the shade of two massive live oaks, whose protection keeps most of the grass from growing. Still, the place has a charm and dignity all the way down in its architecture that sets it apart from the rest of the places on General Mouton, whose sinking cottages and red-brick apartment buildings have been made ratty by the neighborhood's proximity to The McKinley Street Strip.

T-Boy grabs the knocker, gold so white it looks like it's still setting in the mold, and raps it against the forest-green door. Wayne flings it open with a shout and hugs T-Boy around the neck with a crooked arm. I can't understand a word that either of them is saying. Wayne's the son of shrimpers from lower Plaquemines Parish, to the extreme southeast of New Orleans, where all the real flooding hit. His voice is low and muddy and fast and all of his words sound somehow both guttural and nasal, as if the halfway point between East Texas and Brooklyn weren't rural Tennessee but some spongy stretch of marsh below Chalmette. He once insisted, in the overstuffed living room of a New Hoper who had gladly volunteered their home for our Senior Bible Study, that everyone in Plaquemines talked that way. "You oughta hear me when ahmanna phone wit my friend Jim," he said. "Den you'd be confused." T-Boy's rig-talk suddenly makes more sense.

The two of them babble at one another for a few more moments, their arms still engaged over the doorway. Wayne's not much bigger than T-Boy, but his heft is better-formed. The years of hauling shrimp nets have twisted his biceps and triceps permanently into braided ropes; the triangle of muscle on his neck and shoulders make it seem as though he's stuffed a camping tent into the Tabasco shirt he's wearing, the hem of which rises as he and T-Boy wrestle. T-Boy had his bi-weekly shave only a few days ago, he'd told me in the car, and the stubble that's sprouted from the fat of his neck looks like black pepper rolled into bread dough.

"An ya brawtcha cousin too, einh?" Wayne asks, looking at me, though I'm not sure which one of us he's addressing. He lets go of T-Boy and wraps his arms around me. "We misstcha, Cawrey." I sink into his arms and let my head rest on his shoulder. It's been too long since I've had one of these hugs.

Though Sam had mentioned that it wasn't really a study, I've brought along my high school Bible anyway, along with a new notebook we just picked up from Follett's. As Wayne leads T-Boy and me into the darkened living room, I hunch them up under my arm and hold them there like a compress. Wayne taps a switch--one of those old ones with two buttons, like in an elevator--and the room turns bronze. Overhead, a brass ceiling fan begins to wobble and shakes its light across the clay-colored walls, which are bare except for a few acoustic guitars hanging on brackets and a velvet edition of the classic painting of Christ in prayer. A green and yellow plaid couch with fraying arms sits under the guitars and is bookended by two different tables, one of which is a blocky, monochrome thing that I recognize as being from IKEA.

"Sam just ran out ta da store," Wayne says from behind me.

I twist around to see him. "Oh really?" I say. "I thought he'd said to be here by six."

"He oughta be back soon. They got that big block party out onna Strip that might be keepinnim. You wanna cuppa coffee?"

I nod and he and T-Boy disappear into the back of the house.

Wayne had come to Lafayette because he wanted--needed, in his words--to get out of Plaquemines Parish. He had been taking courses in New Testament Greek at ULL when he became youth leader at New Hope. He was only a couple of years older than us, a fact he never ceased to remind us of when we tried bullshitting him about the day-to-day details of high school life. He was wise: a tender young prophet who we were willing to listen to precisely because he called us out. Not that it completely stopped the bullshit.

I sit down on the IKEA side of the plaid couch, and sink in nearly to the frame. Both end tables are overloaded with stray papers, plastic dinner plates, and several hardcover books. I recognize the spine of *Strong's Concordance* under a thick study Bible. A Gatorade bottle with a paper towel stuffed inside of it stands guard on the edge of the table and, from the look of the brown ring around its base, has been for quite a while. Spit thick with tobacco dip has crept up the paper towel, drying near the top into a pale brown crust.

As recently as a year ago, I would have gloried in this poorly-lit living room. I could have put that very painting up over my couch in Ann Arbor, leaving it up to my guests to decide whether it was ironic or devotional. The dried-out bowls of ramen would have seemed to me proof of some bohemian quest, the scattering of books indicative of a hunger for knowledge so vigorous it knew no discrimination or tidiness. I loved these houses in college, loved the way the people who lived in them were almost unaware of

the mystique their living produced. I walk over to the leaning bookcase and find copies of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and St. Augustine, each with a yellow USED SAVES stripe, and a leather-bound set of Calvin's *Institutes* whose spines are coming off in husks. Those giants share space with glossy trade paperbacks and large-format books designed to look like ancient tomes. The titles are written in quill-and-ink fonts, and they're bound up in illustrated wax and twine, their back covers studded no doubt with quotations about how this particular book would challenge you to grow or strike you with conviction or change your life in its two hundred pages. I'm not surprised to see *Ragged Soul*, T-Boy's favorite. Sam and Wayne must share the bookshelf.

In the hallway, the front door opens and Sam makes his way into the room, weighted down with yellow grocery bags. He's got on an olive ski cap over his long blonde hair, and a chocolate t-shirt whose pocket is coming unsewn. I'd seen him on Sunday from across the room during worship. He was standing, his head turned upwards but his eyes closed, his arms out at his sides, palms up, lightly swaying, oblivious to his surroundings. Standard worship posture. I'd gone back to scanning the lyrics on the projector screen, trying to stay three or four lines ahead, vetting for anything I wouldn't feel comfortable singing. He'd come up all smiles afterwards in the fellowship hall, where I'd managed to burn my teeth on a Styrofoam cup of coffee. The lines in his face were deeply worn, and he looked not surprised to see me so much as relieved, as if he'd finally come to the end of a long road trip.

"Corey Paquin, it's so good to see you in my home again."

We embrace under the shaking lamp and he pulls away, picking at my shirt.

"You're not hot in that?"

I'd put on a red and white flannel after checking the weather this morning. I'd repressed the fact that in Louisiana a fifty-degree morning doesn't mean there won't be an eighty-degree evening.

"Hell of a place you've got here."

He squints and looks like he's trying to read me. "I'm going to hold off on deciding what you mean by that."

"I appreciate it."

"Bruh, why you never told me 'bout the Courage Chair?" T-Boy's coming from the back of the house, followed by Wayne, grinning and nodding like he's found my closet key. I watch the fat under his chin rub against his neck and wonder at what point in the evening his razor burn will become most apparent.

"Y'all were talking about Courage Chair?" Sam says to Wayne, who shrugs and hands me a mug airbrushed with the image of a palm tree at sunset. The name "Angelique" has been painted in script over the orange sun.

"I mentioned it. Here's ya coffee."

"Who's Angelique?" I ask Sam.

"Someone who went to Destin for Spring Break and decided to forget about it."

"Hole on, hole on, hole on," T-Boy says, brushing Angelique away. "Someone sits in a chair in the middle of a circle, and you could axe him anything you want?"

Sam nods.

"Aw shit," he says through a rising giggle. "Bruh, I'ma go to the Kajun Korner and get us some tallboys, and when I get back we playing Courage Chair." He chops the air as he speaks, punctuating like a politician.

"You're not going to Kajun Korner," I say. "That defeats the whole purpose. The point is you sit there and tell the truth because you're courageous, not because your friends feel like jerking you around."

"Bruh, I ain'tcha friend, I'm your cousin."

T-Boy is already at the door to the hallway, putting on his shoes.

"How're you even gonna get to Kajun Korner? We took my car."

T-Boy looks up from his lacing. "It's like right there. I'm not stupid. I could walk."

I shift my Bible and notebook under my arm. "T-Boy, you don't have to drink every time you're around another human being. If you wanted to get wasted, you should've said something, I would've dropped you off at The Strip and picked you up later. Seriously."

Sam digs in his back pocket and takes a few bills out of his wallet. "You wanna pick up some Abita Amber, too?"

"Abita," T-Boy says, rolling his eyes as he takes the money. "Y'all think y'all all fancy. Drinking that thick stuff."

"Wayne, Amber good with you?"

"Nah, ahm not gonna have nothin tonight. I gotta get up airly. I'll walk wittim, though."

"Good," I say to the carpet.

"You hungry?" Sam asks when we hear the door shut.

"Nah."

"I'm gonna go put these away," he says, hoisting the bags. "Make yourself at home."

An art history prof at Michigan once said in class that when the early Christians had

conversations with strangers, they'd oftentimes draw a curved line in the dirt with a stick, feigning absentmindedness. If the stranger was a Christian too, and not a Roman, he'd draw the line in the opposite direction and the two lines together would form the fish symbol we all recognize. It was a method of finding fellowship in a violent republic, though the prof chose to think of it as an art event. I walk back to the bookshelf and place my Bible and notebook on a ledge next to several stacks of car magazines and alphabetized action films. There's dust all over the ledge, so I draw a line and scribble it away, then go to find Sam in the kitchen.

"So we're not gonna--we're just gonna drink?" I saunter in and lean on the door jamb, trying to play it cool. Sam's in the walk-in pantry, reaching out and into a bag he'd left near the sink.

"You disappointed?"

"I just thought we were gonna, you know, talk about life and things."

"Who said we're not doing that?"

"T-Boy and his tall friends. And your six brown ones. Amber ones. You know what I mean."

"You don't talk when you drink?"

"No, I do, actually. Too much."

"Well there you go," Sam says, emerging from the pantry and stuffing the bag under the sink, which he then turns on to wash his hands.

I don't want to say what I'm about to say. I know the way it will come off, and I know that it will sound the depths of my hypocrisy. I, who made it a point that our RM small-group should meet once a month at the pub, pointing towards the predominance of

wine in the New Testament. I, who championed O'Riordan's for its slow Thursday nights and cheap pool tables, and who occasionally kept a cigarette in the corner of his mouth while he chalked up his cue.

"I just don't think it's appropriate."

Sam stops the water and shakes his hands.

"Seriously?"

He's looking me up and down, scanning for the traces of sarcasm or lightheartedness. I'm suddenly small and skinny in my clothes and in need of something to eat. I sniffle, though my nose isn't running, and droplets of dishwater fall from Sam's fingertips to the black-and-white tile below. I step into the room and instantly regret it, feeling more exposed.

"I'm just surprised that you guys drink during community group is all." I hear what I'm saying, but the words feel light, almost playful, disconnected from anything. They could be any words; they carry less weight with me than an overheard order in a crowded restaurant.

Sam's not smiling anymore, but he doesn't look concerned yet, either. He wipes his hands on his jeans. "This isn't our community group. Wayne and I just wanted you to come over to hang out and catch up."

"Oh," I say. "I guess I didn't realize?"

"I mean, if you want to talk about something, or need to," Sam begins.

Oh, sure. If I want to talk about something, or need to, you know, just over a few beers. If you wanna hash out everything while I turn the meat on the grill, or during the TV timeouts, shit yeah, let's do it, let's get down into it, brother. What's on your mind,

C-Dawg? Lady problems got you down? There might be some old sermon notes on that in the case for *Talladega Nights* if you wanna open 'er up and check; remember that prayer scene? Funny shit!

I stare as I respond. "I guess I feel bad about T-Boy, then. I invited him thinking we were having community group. I thought it'd be good for him."

"T-Boy's fine, he comes over all the time."

"He does?"

"Oh sure. He comes over most Saturdays to watch the LSU games with Wayne."

"T-Boy watches the Tigers? He hates them. He hates the whole institution, even the profs. Not that he's ever met one. He's said that exact thing to me before."

Sam shrugs. "He comes over in the afternoon and they read John together, then one of them cooks and we have beers and watch the Tigers. Wayne says he asks good questions."

T-Boy, my cousin T-Boy, who still calls New Hope "that church place" and who still snorts in approval when Uncle Gene graces dinner with "Good food, good drink, good God, let's eat!" T-Boy is studying the Gospel According to John. He says how come the light came to his own and nobody seen it? He asks whether freshwater catfish are among the "all things" that were made through Him and is impressed to find out that, yes, as a matter of fact, they are.

Sam smiles, thinking on his quaint Lafayette Saturday afternoons. "Your cousin's a hell of a chef. "

"He gets his recipes from our grandfather."

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Someone had to invent them."

"Your double-great-grandfather, then."

"We're not going to get into things tonight, are we?" I say. "We're seriously just going to sit around and drink beer."

He acts as though he's considering this, bobbing his head back and forth like he's actually weighing the options. "I think that's what we're gonna have to do."

I shake my head.

"Is Wayne still leading--"

"Youth group? No. He quit a couple of years ago. It just wasn't his thing, running around with all these high school kids, tucking his shirt in and all. He's a shrimper at heart; he belongs on the water."

"What? He was incredible with us."

"Doesn't mean he liked it."

Sam grabs a chair—yellow and white Naugahyde that looks like it's been stolen from a diner—and walks past me. "You mind grabbing one of those?" he asks from the living room. I do as requested.

"Was it awkward, him leaving?" I ask, setting the chair down next to the couch.

"No; people generally saw it coming. A few were upset for that very reason, because he was so good with the kids, but for the most part they were very supportive of him. Not everyone's cut out for full-time ministry; they knew that."

"Is he still a Christian?"

There's the bottom.

"Yeah, he's still a Christian, Corey. A much happier, much more devoted one at

that. Hence your cousin."

Sam takes the chair from where I've placed it and sets it next to his. "We missed you, Corey. We're happy to see you. I'm not going to baby you with lessons you already know. Just relax. And go grab those other two chairs."

T-Boy and Wayne returned with the beers, just as they promised, good and faithful men. They did not disappoint. T-Boy held up a white plastic bag and said "Alright, y'all, what you say" and the shape of the 16 oz. cans poking through the plastic made me think of some college night, doesn't matter which. Wayne counted change out on his palm for Sam and handed over a box of beers, right there in front of all of us, changing money like that, right in front of the velvet Jesus painting, right there.

Sam and I sat on the back porch together, on Wayne's green leather couch, and waited for them to get back. We smoked Black and Milds, sweet little cigars with a plastic tip, and bounced dead matches off the porch screens. I counted as the bug zapper ended the life of seventeen mosquitoes, dinosaur beasts between evolutionary stages, too dumb to see the pain they're causing; I was the sole watchdog, here in this great western execution field. Why have a bug zapper outside of the screen? It's the ones that slip through the screen that do the damage. Makes no sense, no sense.

They're having a tailgate party out on The Strip, trying to get people all jittery and buzzed about ULL Ragin' Cajun football. Hot Country's set up out there, just blaring today's hot hits, coating the surrounding blocks with its syrupy polish. We only heard muffles and blurs out back and tried to guess which songs they were, and decided that we were often wrong. So we wrote new ones. Most of mine were about God, and loss. Sam

had a good one about sweet corn whiskey, to the tune of Deana Carter's "Strawberry Wine." Then we sang "Friends in Low Places" together and I was embarrassed by how true it felt. Sang that song a hundred times, sang it karaoke with John in Ann Arbor once to great acclaim, never realized till now that you, too, can be in the low places with your friends. It's not exclusive territory. I shut the fuck up as soon as that song was over and went inside and stared at my face in the bathroom mirror. The glass was all blotchy in the spots where it had worn out and the tin and nickel were pushing through. Sam knocked and asked if I was okay and I said sure. Blame it all on my roots. And that's when T-Boy and Wayne returned with beers, just as they promised, good and faithful men. And I'll be okay.

I've got a plug of dip in the front of my lip, wedged in there like sharp wet moss. I'm spitting into an empty I keep on the floor, trying my best not to knock it over with my foot. It takes a full effort to remember not to knock it over. I've never done cocaine, that's no surprise, but I've heard people talk about "the drip" on movies and all, and this dip thing is possibly a similar sensation. Similar name, at least. It's a slow, cool feeling that makes its way through your blood and pulls you down till you've slipped into the upholstery of your chair, between the pads. That's what cocaine must be like. No--no, this isn't the way I think cocaine feels, that doesn't make any sense. It's the way I think you're supposed to feel after sex. The glow! Like if someone coated your forehead with weak adhesive from a spray bottle. Plus a slight tingle way off in the distance. It's like being picked up and carried around alone in a blanket made of pine needles. My God, no wonder people are always doing these fucking things!

"Bruh, why you don't answer your boy's question?"

"Hnh?"

"Favorite song. Someone else can go if you don't want to."

"Shit, I ain't sittin in that damn chair."

"Favorite song: 'Dancing With Myself'." Not a chance, but it's another question down, swallowing the *amuse bouche* without chewing. "Next!"

T-Boy's pressed his fat hands under his fat thighs, pinning them down onto the padding of his chair, bouncing all that weight on his grubby little workers. He's sneering, straight out-and-out sneering, and his curled lip draws a deep line in the fat of his face that I keep mistaking for a patch of hair. His first question was something about who's your favorite cousin.

Sam: "What do you miss most about Ann Arbor?" Sips from his Abita, puts it down by the chair leg.

"What I miss most about Ann Arbor is the very large football stadium." Next!

"They got a guy at New Hope who gives out LSU tickets if you wannem."

Wayne says "Ellesh-yoo." That's how everyone down here pronounces it.

"Not the same. Not till they add another seventeen thousand seats."

"My boy got all spoiled by The Big House up there, yeah. Bruh, I tell you what, you miss football, I'll take you to The Swamp. Cajun Field. UL vs. Oklahoma State. My boy Toby got me some seats."

"Despite what you've heard, the Swamp is in Gainesville, on the campus of the University of Florida. Roughly twenty thousand seats smaller than The Big House." Next!

"Seriously, Corey, what do you miss most about college? I really want to know."

Sam takes another sip of his beer and waits, resting his chin on a pinch of fingers, propped on the thigh of his crossed right leg. It looks like the kind of answer he wants to hear is the kind you can only form years later, after the fact, when you're on the other side looking back and can move on to the work of figuring out how to get back there. Sentimental Sam, so simple, such a good bud, never left Lafayette, never gonna leave Lafayette.

The churn of beer and stray tobacco juice in my stomach has been curdling and considers rising; I shove the back of my tongue against my palette and swallow. I reach for the can and let my dip spit drip into it, shake my head clear. The two cans of Bud Light T-Boy gave me filled me up. I drank fast, filling my middle with liquid that would push everything out towards the skin. A balloon belly.

"Y'all coulda gotten all these answers from my Facebook. I didn't need courage for this. Come on, guys, ask me something good, something penetrating. Ask me about relationships with girls, or with God. The important questions; come on, let's work through some things here. Let's speak directly, no more fucking around."

"We are asking important questions, you're just not taking them seriously."

"Oh yes, 'What do you miss about college?' I guess if it's an important enough question for Miss America it's important enough for me, eh?"

Sam looks over to Wayne, who shrugs with his palms out.

"What?"

"I think it's a fine question. You spent four years living in a different state, and we only saw you, what, three or four times? When you came home for Christmas, if you called? And that's fine--honestly, it is. It was obvious you wanted to get out when you

went away, and it was obvious that you were happier there than you were here, or at least like you'd discovered something there that you hadn't found here. It seemed like Michigan meant a lot to you. None of us have ever been up there, so we want to know—or I want to know—what's so special about the place. I think that's a fair question, and plenty deep. And maybe it'll take us deeper."

Things I'm willing to mention about my Michigan experience to my former youth group leader, a deeply sensitive evangelical old-buddy, and a first cousin who looks around the circle with vicious excitement, as if he's not the only one out for blood: The University of Michigan was founded in 1817 in Detroit and moved to its current location in Ann Arbor in 1837, the same year the state of Michigan was admitted to the Union. May 2010, Michigan Stadium, our commencement address was delivered by President Barack Obama. What I will not mention, unless it be coaxed out of me by more beers: I sat on the opposite thirty-yard line from the President and had a champagne headache from pre-grad celebrations; I consulted the scratched face of U of M wristwatch early and often. I wore sunglasses and did not cry during the final performance of "Hail To The Victors." Twice in four years I vomited on pebbled sidewalks in The Diag after Ohio State games to the cheers of passersby. College recruiters told me that the University would turn me into a Michigan Man. The watch is now in the care of a Goodwill in Ypsilanti. It's all detritus anyway, the juicy fruit hanging from the real problem's low branches.

"That's not what you want to ask me, and I know it. Ask me what you're really thinking about. Ask me to *explain* the picture of me with the beer bong that showed up online freshman year. I know you all saw it; ask me about it."

No one says a word.

"Or, okay, let me ask you one. How did you feel when you saw in your news feeds, 'Corey Paquin has removed his religious views?' Were you relieved that nothing else went up there? Were you relieved when it popped back up a few weeks later? Did you wonder what happened? Then why not ask about it? Let's get into it. Come on. Let's talk about things that matter. Don't beat around the bush, don't use weak questions as a ladder into the depths. Don't insult me by insinuating that you actually care about anything but my relationship with God. No detours. No scenic routes."

Wayne's been leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head and now he sits up and rubs his neck a bit. The beer's fading in my system and I just feel tired and full now, here on the other side of it. I work my tongue into the pocket between my lip and gums and flip the tobacco plug into my hand. It's moist, and smells like the sleeve of an old sweatshirt. I squeeze it into the top of a beer can and set it back at my feet. The dip's worn off now, too, and I'm left with little flecks of tobacco that I dig out of my numbed mouth with my tongue.

Wayne scoots forward to the edge of his chair. He's perched on the tip and looming like a darkened cloud. "What you think, Corey? You think we haven't alla us here in this room struggled trying to do this? Everyone has. Everyone who believes has struggled. Jesus Himself, in the garden. Or on the cross, when He asks God why He's been forsaken. Whatever you been through, it ain't nothin' special, and it don't make you different. So stop actin' like it does."

I think I feel a few flecks of dip still stuck to the inner wall of my cheek. I try to swallow the flecks down and gag quietly. "That's an actual response to extreme stress,

you know. Sweating blood. It's scientifically verified," I finally say.

Wayne sighs. "If you're really still struggling, and you wanna talk, then come over tomarrah. But don't think you're impressing us, Corey. You'll impress us when you start taking it seriously."

"Christ died after he sweated blood."

"And he rose after that. You needa go home. T-Boy, you safe ta drive?"

T-Boy stands up and stretches and rattles his hand in his pocket. "Gimme dem keys, cuz."

"I'm probably alright to drive."

"Yeah, but probly not," Wayne says. "You had a lot."

"Alright."

"Shit yeah, I'ma drive me that Volvo, bruh. All them artsy girls gonna be all over it. I know they love that weird shit that makes you look smart. I need some a them black glasses, me."

We're all standing now, making our way towards the door. Wayne's got his hand on the knob, T-Boy's right after him, chattering about something. Wayne's listening to him, smiling. The corners of his mouth say he's about to laugh out one of his long, deep bellows that make you feel like you've just tickled God between the ribs. I make it a point to walk behind Sam, watching the patterns our feet make in the ricey carpet. I want to turn around, to look behind me to see the depressed space on the chair where I've just been squirming, but I remember that the stars are everywhere, everywhere. You can find them at night, everywhere.

I hand T-Boy my keys on the doorstep. We're almost out, half way out of there,

when Sam remembers something and tells us to hold on while he runs back into the house. Hot Country hasn't let up, and there are washes of light through the oaks coming from The Strip. Two blocks away, between us and the car, McKinley St. has risen with partiers decked out in vermilion and white, their school colors. Half the crowd yells "You!," the other "Ell!," back and forth like that under the wet amber lights.

"You know that party gotta be bumpin' by now. We oughta go; you'd be fittin' in better than me with that shirt. I bet they got like half of Lafayette out there." T-Boy's looking, but he doesn't seem that interested. He's just making an observation.

"I'll bet everyone's out there," I say.

Sam comes back with my Bible and notebook and hands them to me, smiling like a waitress dropping off a slice of pie. "You'd probably remember by the time you got back to your car anyway, but I figured I'd save you the trouble."

Four

I hate the formality of the thing. The giggling, the awkwardness of pretending that our bodies have only accidentally come into contact as we lie on the futon. Having to pretend to watch *Robin Hood*. When the end result is a foregone conclusion, why bother pretending? Why disguise it? Decoration, decoration, all is decoration.

I'd burst into Jessica's childhood bedroom two steps ahead of her, confident as if it were my own. I walked straight to the bed and sat down on the corner; the floral quilt was pulled back, revealing lime-green sheets underneath. "So your parents went to Tuscaloosa for the Bama game," I said as she walked through the door. It was the most evasion I could muster. I smiled at her, bleary-eyed, my edges smothered by white-label bourbon and my insides floating in the beer I'd used as a chaser.

"They'll be back late tomorrow night," she said as she looked around the room. She hadn't understood. "They wanted me to watch the dog. Hence my being in town. Remember?"

She settled into the room. Like most girls her age, she explained, she'd wanted to set up a room within her room in high school, a kind of salon space with couches and bean bags and a TV that was separate from the privacy of her bed and mirror. She'd asked for and received the TV in ninth grade, the futon in tenth. The former sat on a TV stand in the corner, surrounded by stacks of VHS cassettes. The latter was positioned diagonally, facing the television and blocking off a portion of the room. Its arms nearly touched the walls on either side.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" Jessica asked. I watched as she twisted her hips to maneuver past the futon and into the TV area.

"Depends what kind," I said.

I haven't been into a woman's bedroom since that night in February, back in Ann Arbor. I'd convinced myself then that everything with God had finally been rebuilt, that after three years of confusion I'd clawed my way back. I'd genuinely counted it as an act of chivalry when I'd agreed to escort Ellen, a tall sophomore who annoyed our Brit Lit prof with her feminist readings of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to her studio apartment across campus. As we crossed the Diag and headed towards her apartment on Ashley, I calmed my rumbling breath. It was charity to walk a woman home in the dark.

Jessica knelt in front of the TV to riffle through videocassettes. I got up from the bed and set myself down on the left side of the futon, stretching my legs in front of me so that my feet lay adjacent to her bent frame. "Oh," I groaned. "This futon feels like mashed potatoes." I shifted my weight, settling into the cushion. "Lumps," I clarified. She had her back to me. The hem of her western shirt raised and lowered as she dug through the cassettes. I watched as it approached the beltline of her jeans when she reached towards the back of the pile, and then sighed to myself as she straightened her back, the hem covering her hip pockets.

"You have any requests?" she asked.

"No VeggieTales," I said. "Please don't let it be VeggieTales. I will not abode a VeggieTale."

She turned around, amused. "'Abode?'" As she turned, some of her hair flipped over and covered her temples. I swallowed.

"Abide. Is that the right word? I'm lost."

Jessica returned to the stacks.

I again occupied myself with the hem of her shirt. "Come on," I said. "I know you've got something good back there."

She pushed aside a pile of tapes from the middle shelf. "There they are!" she exclaimed, and knelt closer to the ground, reaching deeper under the TV stand and exposing three full and golden inches of her lower back. Two tickling hands pushed my stomach into my bowels. "My God," I muttered to myself, and gulped.

"How about *Robin Hood*?" she called.

"Disney's *Robin Hood*? With that fox?"

"That's the one," Jessica said. She pulled herself out from under the TV and swiveled on her heels to flash the cassette case. She smiled and raised her eyebrows. "Complete with pantsless Little John."

While still at the bar, I'd begun to feel a tension rising somewhere beneath the blankets of alcohol. It pursued me into Jessica's bedroom. The deep tension had grown slowly, nearly imperceptibly, like sand piling on the bottom of an hourglass. The bourbon had padded me, as if my skeleton had shrunk and left an extra foot of skin and tissue between me and the outer world. I forgot what good whiskey is capable of. I forced myself to sit up straight and compose my thoughts.

"Funny thing about that movie, *Robin Hood*," I said, holding myself steady on the futon's armrest. "You know Roger Miller, the songwriter?"

Jessica popped open the case and reached behind the TV to check the connection. "Nope," she said.

I sat up straighter still. "Okay," I said. "First of all: know him. Big-time country music songwriter in the 70's and 80's. 'Dang Me,' 'King of the Road.' Wrote the songs for the Broadway version of *Huck Finn*. Total genius, brilliant songwriter, funny as shit. Good smart Southern boy." I tried taking my left arm off of the armrest. The other sat on the futon pad next to me, dormant, dead as a snake.

"I'll check him out," Jessica said. She'd finished with the TV and sat down next to me on the futon, curling her legs up between us.

"Yes, you will," I said, turning my head to face her. "As he wrote the songs for this very film."

"Oh yeah? 'Not in Nottingham'?" she said. She leaned on the futon's other arm with her elbow, palm up and acting as a support for her head. She looked tired.

"Indeed," I continued, now turning the rest of my body towards her, my right leg up on the futon forming a little triangle. "And also the far superior opening theme song, the one where Robin Hood and Little John and all the other animals are marching in line behind that rooster and singing that dee-da-do-do melody. Plus the 'Running Through the Forest' song."

Her eyes had narrowed nearly to slits. "Mmm," she said, and pushed herself up on the futon. Her eyes opened again. "Yikes; I'd forgotten what good drinks do to me."

I made a noise that wasn't quite a chuckle.

The Disney logo flashed on the screen and covered us both in blue light. Jessica smiled in anticipation.

"I love this movie," she said. "My mom used to let me watch it when I stayed home from school. And we always watched it at retreats with my youth group."

"Your youth group?"

She turned from the screen to face me.

"At First Pres."

"You went to First Pres?"

She nodded.

"Do you still?"

She looked back at the screen. The rooster parade had begun.

"I stopped going when I went away to school."

"Man." I tried to ponder this a moment, but had trouble keeping my thoughts together. She went to First Presbyterian downtown, was serious enough about it to go on retreats with the youth group, but stopped when she went away to LSU.

"Don't stop believing," I said to one of us.

"What?"

I coughed. "They played 'Don't Stop Believing' at the bar tonight. I hate that fucking song." My mouth felt as though it'd been swabbed with cotton, and my head flapped away from my efforts to hold it upright. Was I leading us both down this road? I'd thought I had been going out to meet her; I hadn't counted on the possibility of bringing her along with me. "Your youth group had retreats?" I finally said. "I thought Presbyterians were supposed to be all worldly and shit."

"They are; hence the Disney."

She said 'they.' I swallowed again.

"If you'd been at one of my retreats I would've kissed your feet in the dark," I said.

She looked away from the screen again and smirked.

"Oh yeah?"

I nodded, trying to look solemn. "Yes. Yes I would have. While everyone else was asleep at night I would have crept into the girl's bunk, found your sleeping bag, unzipped it, and kissed your perfect little digits." My finger dotted three of the toes on her right foot as I spoke, pausing for each of the last three words and giving them the air to resonate. My face was hot.

She squirmed her toes and looked back to the TV. The troubadour rooster had almost finished leading his band of animals across the blank screen.

"This one, this is the one," I said. She glanced at me. "Roger Miller," I reminded her.

"Oh, sure," she said, and resumed her watching. I sang the oo-da-lollies to myself in a low voice while tracing the contours of her foot with an index finger.

The drinks kept me completely aware of every grain of skin that my fingernail scraped, and the deep tension began to rise a bit more, bumping into things and disturbing the order of my fog. I ignored the noise. I'd seen this movie a hundred times. Were it not for the songs, I wouldn't be able to get into it at all. Not with her foot right there.

She shifted in her spot and her feet were suddenly out of reach. She didn't seem to have registered the difference. "Shit, man, that fuckin' rooster," I said. She didn't react.

The deep tension was loose from its trappings, but was moving quietly. It was tapping its foot.

"It ever make you uncomfortable how good looking these creatures are?" I asked.

Jessica sputtered a laugh. "What?"

"Seriously, look at Maid Marian: she's kinda hot."

"Well, I wasn't uncomfortable before." She was smiling, but I couldn't tell whether she meant it, or what she could've meant by 'uncomfortable.' She didn't have to phrase it that way.

"Aladdin, though," she said. She was still looking at the screen, but she had one eyebrow raised and the corner of her lip was curled up, offering a coy partial view of her teeth. She nodded. "That's one sexy cartoon."

She repositioned herself again, this time letting her head rest on the futon's arm and draping her legs all the way across my lap.

"Ah," I said, and I grabbed onto her calves as if they were a guardrail. The collar of my t-shirt was damp.

The bar Ben recommended had confused me. When had all of these fancy bistros, with their chrome bars and dim lighting and high velvet booths, moved into downtown Lafayette? When had we become that kind of town? I'd missed the transition, if indeed there had been one; nobody else seems to find the disjuncture anything more than a face-lift. The women strode around with fluorescent drinks in slender glasses, wearing tight black clothes, while the men sat upright at their barstools, clacking at their Blackberries and laughing at whatever their dates were laughing at. It was as if they'd all blocked out the past, as if in their version of the world, Lafayette was a booming metropolis, New York on the Vermilion River. I'd wanted a bottle of Abita—only a bottle or two—but had been sheepish when the waitress finally approached our table, and ended up mirroring Jessica's order: gin and tonic, sprig of mint. I'd never had gin before and was

surprised by how clean it tasted, nearly antiseptic, like a purer form of alcohol. I ordered another, and carried a third with me when Jessica spotted a group of guys she recognized from high school. They were gregarious and moneyed, and their pastel polo shirts and the parts in their hair set them apart from the new uptown crowd. I'd cringed at the thought of my impending solo drunk-drive home, but Jessica placed her hand on my arm as soon as we sat down and introduced me as having just finished school at Michigan, not without a hint of vicarious pride. The guys were more interested in tearing apart Big Ten football and discussing the differences between what made a good scotch and a good bourbon than they were in chatting Jessica up and down about what she'd been getting herself up to these last few years. When asked, I cleared my throat and professed myself to be a bourbon man, which garnered me a couple of attaboys and a friendly snort of derision from the scotch drinker and a short glass of Booker's, straight-up with an Abita chaser, they were buying. And they bought.

My thumb jerks against Jessica's calf and her muscles flex under the touch.

"You doing alright?" she asks.

"Huh?"

I have dozed off and am right where I was when I fell asleep. My mouth is dry; I smack my lips, trying to get things flowing again, but it seems that all of the moisture in my body has drained to my bladder. At some point in my nap, I'd developed the urge to relieve myself.

"Movie's over," Jessica says, sitting up against the edge of the futon and stretching her arms over her head.

"I'm sorry," I say, and clear my throat. "Didn't mean to spoil the mood."

"I'm not spoiled if you're not spoiled," she says. "I'm happy that you're here."

"I'm happy, too. Happy to be here." I think I was aware of being asleep, but the memory of the night's earlier experiences had ridden into my sleep-consciousness on an amber wave, and the ability to discern between what was night fantasy and what was the horrible reality had apparently been submerged. It was all real. She brought me back to her parents' house. The sheets were lime-green. On the other end of the couch, she gathers her legs in, pulling them to her chest. She scoots a bit towards me and stretches her legs out once more, letting them rest firmly on my lap.

The deep tension kneads itself out and into my organs, perhaps sensing an opportunity to escape, and so signaling as much to me. My insides shiver as the tension spreads across the surface of things, pulling at my stomach, my lungs, my spine, my urethra with a suddenness almost joyful in its exhilaration. Wake up, it tells me; arise with me. I don't have to be here. I can just go home. I shake the weight of the drink from my shoulders and begin to stand up. I can walk out of the room, I can find the bathroom, I can set the alarm on my phone and sleep curled up on the couch. But the tension quivers its way out of me, taking with it my resolve. I am once again alone with my choices. Free.

Ellen: the head of her bed was against the wall and she'd hung a poster of Nietzsche just above it. She left me in her bed in the morning to go to class, and I stayed in, staring at the German's upside-down face and his handful of mustache. Must have taken him years to grow that thing. She emailed me a few weeks later to apologize for what had happened, and to tell me that she'd torn down the poster after reading

Chesterton. It was wrong for her to have taken advantage of me, she'd written. She'd spent her entire life trying to get back the control that she thought the world had taken from her, but our tryst had convinced her that neither of the sexes really had much control over anything if the only thing anyone ever seemed to do with their power was to seduce and corrupt one another. Everyone is powerless, she wrote, least of all over themselves. I was too ashamed to do anything but snap my laptop shut.

Jessica's head is back on the arm of the futon, resting at an angle that had been innocuous in the presence of the deep tension but which now threatened to consume me. A few strands of hair cover her eyes, which are closed either in rapture or in hiding. I swear she's moaning and I wonder whether that's the sound she made when she got left behind, too.

My fingers dance their way up her leg, towards the waistband of her jeans. She opens her eyes and tilts her head slightly. I flit at the hem of her shirt and fiddle my way under it, onto the stretched surface of her stomach. It's warm, like a cake baked on a rock. I sit up and lean forward to help my hand make it the rest of the way to Jessica's chest, thinking only that it's happening again, that I'm tossing rocks through my repairs, and not taking any real pleasure in it. My body slips away from me as I move in towards Jessica, my mind suddenly filled with the sound of Roger Miller yucking it up in the chorus of "Dang Me," and I mop it under what was left of the beer-and-bourbon blanket. Like the space between a parenthesis, the gap between the tips of my fingers and the underwire of her bra is interesting but beside the point; the only turbulence I experience as the space narrows is in my acknowledgment of its absence. There was nothing there to stop me. Now the song's gone and there's nothing but a warmth between us so strong as

to be nearly liquid. As Jessica sits up and into my hand, there's nothing but what I feel through my fingers and that same warmth where her legs rest on my lap. I see the anger on her face and hear her shout, as if from the other side of a tunnel, What the fuck, Corey? Seriously, Corey? What the fuck? I see myself at the other end of that tunnel, pawing at my crotch, which is now wet. My nostrils pinch against the ammoniac smell rising from my jeans, and I hear myself saying that it's just sweat, just a bit of sweat.

Dang me, dang me.

I slink against the couch, ignoring for the moment the overwhelming sense of relief granted to me.

They ought to take a rope and hang me. High from the highest tree. Woman, would you weep for me?

Five

I need to wake up. My back is sliding down the seat of a waffle-combed chair. I rest my legs in the wire rack beneath the row in front of me. My arms are crossed over my chest and my eyes are closed. I wonder whether I've convinced anyone that I'm deep in prayer. Posture never fooled my geometry prof into thinking I was studying proofs. I doubt it's doing any good now.

Even when I'm not listening, the thump of the worship band's kick-drum coming through the speakers overhead makes the blood in my veins jump, and my stomach feels like it's being suctioned through my lower back. I imagine an aura of bar smoke or piss hangs like a fading cloud around me, and I partly wish that it did. Then, some well-meaning lifer might approach me after service, wrap a bearish arm around my shoulders, and cock his head to ask whether everything's alright. It's highly likely that I'd fall apart. I'd let myself melt into his arms, into a puddle of slush and snot, moaning about what a weak man I've become, or always was. I would smell providence in the lingering mixture of sweat and deodorant under a stranger's rising arm.

But no, I look and smell as fresh as anyone else, slouching aside. I'd driven straight home, wet-crotched and half-sobered by the experience. I showered immediately. I brushed my teeth before bed and again after waking, tucking the borders of my single white sheet between the mattress and box spring with one hand while scrubbing the coating off of the roof of my mouth with the other. And now here I am, carefully shaven, clothes neatly pressed, half-asleep in the middle of the third row while someone I don't fully recognize comes to the stage to talk about the importance of repenting before

communion. Once a month they let the seminarian interns give a little talk on material we all learned in ninth grade youth group. This one's retained the youthful vigor and passion of his own days as an abstinent teen; he's waving his hands and drooping his eyes and dropping his voice near to a whisper as he proclaims God's bold righteousness. He speaks as though he went to the throne room with Isaiah. His hair is parted on the right, his polo the color of a raspberry Ring Pop seamlessly tucked into his khakis.

"If we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged," he reads from 1 Corinthians. I sit up a bit straighter, rolling and cracking my neck. I don't have to be here, after all; I didn't have to wake up on time. Out of duty to my better self, I should at least put forth an effort. "Let us pray," the seminarian finally says, and I obediently shuffle upright and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

Before he can even finish uttering the salutation, I'm off, my mind lazing down an ethylene river.

Jessica had held her arms tight across her chest, like she'd just seen a car crash. I didn't say anything, just walked out, just left her there. I had a minor hope, as I drove out to Broussard this morning with the radio off, that some small blessing might come out of it all. I thought I'd be sufficiently humbled by my actions, and my mind sufficiently cottoned by evaporating booze, to actually be able to experience something like forgiveness. If not at New Hope, then where? Here, where the music streams from the congregation's mouths, where the sounds of so many human voices haze up towards the rusting crossbeams and ripped insulation in the ceiling; where the warp and trill of the eighth-notes from the worship leader's guitar and the ever-thumping bass make some weird sonic space. Years ago, with my eyes closed and my mind focused, I felt like I

could walk around in that space, as if the song ceased to unfold over time and instead became a strange building: four stained-glass walls, fully illuminated. Communion. It was like slipping into some ripped dimensional seam and falling into God's velvet pocket. What happens when you simply fall through?

So this morning, after splashing several handfuls of water over my face in the restroom, I entered the cavernous main room of the church building and chose a chair near enough to the stage to not be distracted by anything. I spat out prayers as the lights dimmed, like an amateur hacker searching for the right combination of verses and confession. Something to break through the tin screens that I felt had long ago been lowered. Had there not been four or five other people in my row, I might have ripped my oxford shirt from the collar, popping off buttons. Nothing changed. No curtains torn, no floods of white. Only two spots of red and blue trailing the worship leader around the stage. Only the sound of guitars cracking off of the walls. Today, again, would be entertainment. It's never very good entertainment.

I slip out when the lights dim for communion. I look back from the door as the seminarian raises the bread over his head, offering it up plaintively in the spotlight. Sam and Wayne always attend the early service. No one stops me as I go out to the parking lot.

Dried clumps of mud dot the concrete around T-Boy's Z in the driveway. He signed the papers for the truck the day his first paycheck cleared. "Didn't even take it for a test drive," he told me during my first ride. He's since added a four-inch lift to the suspension, along with boxy tires whose width makes the truck seem stocky and athletic,

like a middle linebacker. I unlock the front door and glance back at the Volvo before going inside. It looks like it's trying to figure out a way to leave without anyone noticing.

The lights are off in the front hallway and the kitchen smells like burning tires. I turn off the burner under the coffee and toss out the dregs, watching as they slouch down the drain. There's a Hostess pie wrapper in a crumple on the counter; the proximity is sprinkled with scabs of dried sugar. I brush a bit off of a stack of envelopes. The top one is addressed to me, from the Federal Direct Loan Program.

Peck-Peck says my name as I walk into the living room and reaches up from his recliner with a tremorous right arm. "You good?" he asks.

I take his hand, unsure whether he wants to shake or embrace. "I'm here."

T-Boy has his legs up in my recliner and the remote is resting on his belly.

I sit on the couch, perpendicular to the recliners. The Saints are on and winning, which should be surprising. This year, they're undefeated heading into the final few weeks of the season. Most fans are split between a barely-concealed ecstatic hope that the team might make the Super Bowl and a strange complacency that comes with continued success. They're waiting for the results before they really give in to one or the other, but in the meantime they're becoming neurotic; for the fans, the Saints winning the Super Bowl is inevitable and impossible and glorious and almost-certainly doomed to fail by historical precedent. It's guaranteed to happen; it will never happen.

"We missed you this morning," T-Boy says.

"What do you mean, you missed me?"

"At church."

"You went to New Hope?"

"With Wayne and Sam, yeah."

I sigh and slump into the couch. "Y'all already ate?" I ask.

"They got some sandwiches in there," Peck-Peck says.

"Saved you half of mine. You want your seat?" T-Boy asks. He's sitting up, the remote in one hand and his other ready to pull the plunger on the recliner.

I shake my head. "You're good, T-Boy. Stay there."

Neither of them says much when I return with half of a roast beef po-boy from the fridge, which I unwrap and spread out on the glass-top of the coffee table. Dried mustard has plastered a few limp scraps of lettuce to the white paper, and there's a bite missing. I eat it backwards, leaning over the tabletop and hoping that T-Boy won't notice and ask if I'm afraid of his germs.

"Terrence," Peck-Peck addresses him, and motions with a slow nod of the head towards the TV. "Why they not putting Archie Manning in there?" He shakes his head and smiles as if in disbelief at the ineptitude of the coaching staff.

"Archie Manning? That dude retired like twenty years ago. He got two sons playing now, for the Colts and the Giants. You don't remember Peyton Manning, or Eli?"

"Eli?" The name looks as though it's struck some distant bell, many years back. "He won him a Super Bowl, einh?"

"Against the Patriots. Peyton won him one, too."

Peck-Peck blinks behind his glasses. "I remember," he says.

Even with Archie Manning, who I understand to have been a pretty good player, the best the Saints ever finished was 8-8. As a kid, you had to cheer for them because they

were on TV and they played just a couple of hours down the road. It was as if we were aware that there were kids in Oregon and Maine who didn't have NFL teams, and so we'd wear black-and-gold Starter jackets out of a sense of charity and begrudged gratitude. The skinny kids in Ethiopia couldn't get us to eat our broccoli, but the football-starved in Bangor got us cheering for disappointment. I haven't sat down and watched an entire game in years, though I do occasionally wear an old t-shirt I found in a New Orleans thrift store.

"You know who that quarterback is," T-Boy tells Peck-Peck, motioning before the TV cuts away from a shot of Drew Brees.

"Who's that?"

"You know that, come on. Starts with a 'D'."

Peck-Peck lulls on his recliner's rockers, fore and aft. "Looks like his name start with a 'B'."

"His last name does. First name start with a 'D'."

Peck-Peck creaks forward, examining the 9 on Brees' back from across the room. "Well, it ain't Bobby Hebert, I know that."

Years ago, this was Peck-Peck's favorite game, feigning ignorance at our questions so that he could watch delightedly as we delivered the answers. Bobby Hebert led the team then. He was everyone's favorite player and the only NFL quarterback we'd ever heard of who had a Cajun last name. Everyone wanted to be him when we played touch football on a fenced-in scrap of playground. "I'm Bobby Hebert!" "I got Hebert!" "All-time Hebert!" Even the kids playing wide receiver were Bobby Hebert, gripping the school lawn in their dirty-white Reeboks, seeing downfield, making defensive linemen

miss under the dark rubber roof of the Superdome. He retired years ago, though, and is now the team's radio announcer. He's put on weight and watches the games from the press box and generally looks uncomfortable in his white polo shirt.

"Say, bruh." T-Boy is sitting halfway up now, his body straining between recline and attention. "You still gonna be around for Mardi Gras, huh?"

"If I am, I'll probably go to New Orleans."

"Psh." He shakes his head. He pities me. "They get stupid over there, yeah. With all them people?"

"That's why you don't go to the French Quarter. Stay Uptown. It's quieter, more families. More like Lafayette, actually."

"You know what you gotta do? You gotta go see the Independent Parade this year."

"Why?"

"JP Rigs got a float up in there every year, and they let us all ride on it."

"You're riding in the Independent Parade?"

"Shit, I'm running for King." He covers his mouth quickly and glances over at Peck-Peck, who's fallen asleep in his chair. "They always vote one person to be king of the float. Wayne came in third two years ago," he adds.

"Not bad." I'm not sure what else to say to the news that Wayne was almost king of a single float in a parade made up of oilfield supply companies, hair salons, and radio stations.

T-Boy finally lets himself fall back into the seat, which rocks under his weight. I ball the last scrap of French bread up in the paper. The game's more-or-less over, a handful of minutes left and the Saints up by twenty-one. The broadcasters have failed to mention

the impossibility of all of this, that the New Orleans Saints have made it through thirteen football games without losing. This is the biggest bit of news in our lifetimes; everyone knew the hurricane would hit eventually. But from their critical viewpoint, up in the press box of the Superdome, they saw it coming from a mile away: a few decent seasons here, a good draft pick there. Management made a thousand small smart decisions, a million consistent noes to the nipping sense of doubt and the slow tug of entropy and apathy. This is the way these things work; football teams develop into champions over time. At least, most football teams. But not our New Orleans Saints. No.

I burp as I stand, tossing the paper ball from hand to hand as I walk out of the room. "I'm going for a drive," I say.

This short space between Peck-Peck's and the first scraps of Lafayette are the most green space I've seen since the drive from Ann Arbor. If I manage my line of vision, I can make it the entire way to the city limits without seeing any neighborhood built in the past four years. There are only stapled-together boards approximating a house with stamped-down dirt driveways, and row after row of sugarcane being burnt off at the harvest and hauled away in the rusting red bins of semi-trucks. In the earliest morning hours, on my way home from work, I drive on the opposite side and tell myself that I'm lost in Saxony, this ruddy two-laner the only path that cuts through a vast and hostile heath. On balmier nights, the fog crops up almost by pressurization, as if the humid sky above has forced it out of the soil, and I imagine driving through western Belgium in a compact Peugeot, a solitary monk returning to the Abbey from a day trip selling cheese in Paris.

This morning, while milling around near the water fountain waiting for church to begin, I had noticed a flier on the announcement board advertising a silent retreat out in Grand Coteau. "Spend time with the Lord, away from it all," was splashed across the top of the page in a spiky word bubble. A whole week of silence, concluding with mass on Ash Wednesday. I've never visited Our Lady of the Oaks before, but I drove past it once in high school, on the way to a dance at Sacred Heart, the girls' school next door. Both campuses are built up on proud French colonial architecture and are kept warm and cloistered by shrouds of oak trees. Spend time with the Lord, under the oaks and away from it all. Clean out and reconcile and then finally start sending out resumes and applications. You have to. Make amends and then get out. In the meantime, save up, and keep busy.

The phrase "a rehab for the soul" had effervesced into my mind as I read the flier over. The banality of my words repelled even me as their content attracted me. I imagined being one in a circle of rough-looking men in plastic chairs, leaning forward on my knees and talking with a far-off look in my eye about the way things used to be, twisting the ends of a chewed-up toothpick in my fingers. The way things used to be isn't ever going to come around again, is it? I'd ask, and nod my head in resignation with the others. Admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery, I once heard. I just have to make it to the February retreat, I thought to myself as I stepped out into the sanctuary. Just get to February. Or March at the latest. March.

The hostess never works nightshifts and doesn't recognize me, nor I her. Vincent's in a meeting, she says, and asks me to wait at the bar. I wonder whether she thinks I'm

applying for a job.

There's a check waiting for me. I meant to pick it up from Vincent, the manager, after my shift on Thursday night, but I'd been so wrapped up in conversation with Jessica that he locked up the office and went home. After she left, Ben asked me whether I was planning to get on that. I had flashed her number at him from my cell phone's screen, and didn't look him in the eye. "New Orleans ladies," he whistled. He must have noticed the area code.

Vincent picks at the embroidery on the chest of his tan dress shirt as he shuts the office door and walks towards the bar. There's a white envelope in his other hand.

"Mr. Paquin," he says, brushing away bits of thread from his chest and handing me the envelope. His hair is buzzed close enough to the head to see his scalp, which is a boiled-hot-dog-red despite the late November weather.

"Not used to being in here in the daytime," I say, laying the check on the bar. "Seems like a different place."

He puts his hands on his hips and sighs and surveys the room. It's a full house, and there are a few groups seated on the padded benches by the door. Plenty of eight- and ten-tops either still suited up from church or else for the occasion. "We've already gone through four cases of house," he says, wiping his brow.

"Four?" I say, and whistle, impressed. "We're lucky if we do two-and-a-half on a Friday night."

"Yeah, well. Welcome to Sunday afternoons."

"I guess."

"Hey, listen. You got a minute?" I nod and he hikes his pants up by the pockets and

eases himself onto the adjacent stool.

"You been enjoying working with Ben, feel like you're getting the hang of things?"

"Yeah, sure. I mean, he doesn't talk very much, other than telling me where things go and all, but yeah. It's coming together."

"Well, look," Vincent says. He's squinting and looking through the bar towards the mirrors that form the back wall. "He's talking about going back to school in the spring. Night classes at UL." He squints deeper and nods his head from side to side as he talks.

"Are you gonna bring someone on from the dayshift?" I glance at the bartender, who has short-spiked blonde hair and is wiping the inside of a pint glass with a white terry-cloth. I don't recognize him.

"It's an option. I was thinking, though, about whether you'd be interested in taking his spot."

"Would I be working the same shifts?"

"He's going to keep his Friday and Saturday, at least for now, but Wednesday and Thursday would be all yours. You can have his Sunday night if you want it, too. You'd work side-by-side while he trains you during the week, to let the regulars get used to seeing you pull their drafts and whatnot. You can keep bar-backing on weekends. Once classes start, the mid-week shifts would be yours. And once he finishes, all of his shifts would be yours."

"Huh," I say. "When would that be? May?"

"If he finishes." Vincent looks back towards the kitchen and shakes his head. "He's gonna finish, pretend I didn't say that."

"What's he studying?"

"Engineering. Petroleum."

"I didn't realize he had academic ambitions."

"He said his dad won't hire him on until he finishes his degree, and that oil is a more sustainable future than bartending."

"On to bigger and better things," I say, regretting it. Vincent nods with his lips pursed together. He's no fool.

"So look, think about it, okay? And let me know asap." He pronounces it out: ay-sap. He groans as he pushes himself up from the seat and cracks his back and starts walking towards the office. "See you Wednesday," he says over his shoulder. I nod back and pick up my check. "I'll let you know," I say, though not quite loudly enough for him to hear, and I tap the envelope on the edge of the bar.

When the sun came up today the clouds lightened and spread and it's turned out to be something of a beautiful afternoon. I'm halfway through downtown before I realize that this isn't the way I wanted to drive, and have in fact gone at least twenty minutes out of my way. There's an Art Walk on Jefferson St., though, so I drive slowly, piloting the Volvo through the scene that parts and moves around the windshield. A young couple strolls along the sidewalk, their arms looped across one another's backs. They stop to examine grey and brown swamp landscapes an artist has leaned against an iron fence. He's sitting on an overturned industrial bucket, wearing an olive-green fishing shirt and a broad tan cap, and he chats them up while tugging at the tips of his beard. All three laugh at something he's said. Further up the street, a plume of hickory smoke rises off of a barbecue pit sitting in a trailer that's parallel-parked against the curb.

The street signs are new, Rue Jefferson and Rue Mouton in boldly styled white letters on a royal blue background. In the 1920's, the city whitewashed the language out of the rural poor, who would be beaten if they brought their French to school. English was our official language and the only one in which public school could legally be taught. It was a federal law whose normative force ghettoized Cajun culture out into the most remote rural areas, and stigmatized it within the city limits. As kids, when we flipped through channels and accidentally landed on the footage of people two-stepping on public access, the staccato wheeze of the accordion drew from us a gasp of embarrassed recognition. We were embarrassed not only for ourselves, but for all of the generations that came before us, and we'd quickly click through to the major channels. People commented on my lack of accent in Ann Arbor, and would then ask me what a Cajun accent sounded like. I'd cringe as I mocked the nasal drawl, but they were too transfixed by the sound itself to understand how humiliating it felt. And yet, now, French street signs.

I lower the windows halfway and turn the radio down to hear the tweets of conversation and outdoor music that dot the steady putter of the engine. It's the same temperature outside as it is in the car. A soft breeze hooks through the open windows. I take the right onto Garfield and pass the wide concrete apron of Parc International, the entrance to which is crowned with an arch proclaiming the name in bold yellow letters. A permanent bandshell has been built in the corner of what used to be a bank parking lot; a trio of acoustic musicians—guitar, bass, and fiddle—pick away for a few onlookers. The fiddler looks like someone I went to high school with, but I idle past before I can get a good enough look. As I turn back onto Johnston Street, I can't decide whether I'm passing through a gentrified ghost town or if it's always been this way, if downtown is

just another interesting part of what has become a broad city. And if it is a ghost town, who is it that's died, and who is it that's returned, and why do I suddenly feel like maybe returning's not the worst thing in the world? I'm losing the ability to discern any sort of context anymore, and for the moment that seems alright.

The university isn't fully awake yet when I drive past. I park in the Taco Bell parking lot and wander down St. Mary. The po-boy has settled in my stomach, and its weight has pulled the rest of the whiskey out of my bloodstream. A girl in a lavender shirt walks past me towards the library, holding a couple of books to her chest. I follow her, then slip behind the building and into the quadrangle, where I lie down on the damp grass.

The quad is bordered on all sides by red arcades and a sidewalk glossed with dew. The bricks of the buildings here used to look cheap to me. They have a smooth matte finish, are nearly as orange as they are red, and could just as easily have been used to build a mid-century insurance office as a university. The ivy is in bloom, though, and the school appears to be sinking comfortably into the swamp. The moisture from the ground has met the sweat on my back. I can already tell that when I stand up I'll leave behind a mass of tamped-down grass. With my eyes closed, I imagine Ben, in a loose UL t-shirt, walking in a hurry from one side of campus to the other, his head on a swivel as he tries to tell Girard from Broussard Hall.

It almost seems like the way to do it, to go to college under the cover of night. Do whatever it is you need to do to stay alive in the daytime, and spread out your books under the unstructured luxury of the late evening, pausing for trips to the coffeemaker or runs to Pizza Hut. I'm not sure whether engineering degrees are as valuable when they

come from night schools, though, or whether they even offer the same classes that are taught in the daytime. Ben's degree might not even say UL if some trade school rents the buildings.

Even so: Ben killing time between sessions, holding court on the maroon deck in front of PJ's. Ben out here reading on the quad in the early evening before class, as desperate to soak up the weather and the mood as he is the coursework. Ben taking issue with some editorial in the *Vermilion* and firing off an angry letter. Ben on his way to Amsterdam for a semester abroad, ready to study the levees. Ben sticking around after class to chat in earnest with the prof about some idea he's just had, an idea he can't quite explain but is nevertheless completely sure of. Ben barely cocking his head and talking out of the side of his mouth in the student section on Saturday night at Cajun Field, just as eager to answer his neighbor's comment about the defensive backs as he is reticent to take his eyes off the game.

I wonder whether his dad even cares which degree he gets and how much he learns. The important thing is just to get there, to get there as quickly as possible with all of the legal qualifications taken care of. Have your papers on you at all times in case someone stops you to look at them. Go to the clubs at night, sure, go to the clubs if you want, but don't come in smelling like an ashtray. This is not your home; it is a place of business. Ben shows up on time and hands the diploma to the receptionist at the front office, who tears it down the middle and hands him back half before motioning down the hall towards the executive suite. No one asks him how his day went, no one thinks to ask him if he saw anything interesting on the road on the way to work, because the only thing that matters is that he got there. He's the boss now.

Ben's father—at least, as far as I'm imagining him—is nobody's daddy.

T-Boy's truck is gone when I get back and there's a small slip of paper on my reading desk. The note has no signature, but ink has been smeared across it under the pressed weight of a left hand. "I wish I coulda staid longer but have to run. I know yall dont work on Mondays if you wanna come over to watch Monday Night Football." And then, just beneath it, more accidental handprints and a thick scratched-out line. I hold the note up sideways to the overhead light, trying to read the original marking through all of the black. I almost let myself be fooled into seeing all the way through it. I almost swear it says, "Love, T."

Six

The food was terrible. Completely tasteless. Spongy slabs of meatloaf plastered to skin-colored plastic trays by their own thick juices, dotted with spilled corn kernels. Nothing to drink but water and instant coffee and Lipton tea, all out of short, yellow-tinted glasses that let the coffee burn my hand and make the water look like strychnine. The meatloaf was only a variation on a theme--mass-produced Midwestern--that the chef at Our Lady of the Oaks had been exploring at least since our arrival on Friday afternoon. Either I was the only retreatant gagging on his own burps during communal prayer, or everyone else had counted retching as a prohibited breach of the silence.

We had respite this morning. Four large king cakes were unsheathed from their white packaging at breakfast and situated side-by-side on the serving table that spans the length of the dining hall. Unlabelled jugs of orange juice were placed between each cake. Someone had run a string of purple, gold, and green foil letters that read "Happy Mardi Gras" from one ceiling panel to another over the table. There was a gleam in our eyes as we lined up: a pair of elderly Catholic women shrinking into their skin who blinked and smiled as if having just come in from a long journey; a men's group from New Hope smoothing out their untucked golf shirts with one hand while holding Styrofoam plates to their chest with the other; a few stray and starry kids with dreadlocks and baggy pants who, at our final dinner before the silence, told the group that they had come to retreat into the mystic. I took my slice and a glass of OJ to the corner seat that had become my de facto home base. I sipped at the juice and stared at the white frosting smeared over the whorls of cinnamon-bread. Flecks of green granulated sugar already littered the plate.

Even the minor festivity of this triangular slice seemed too much, too garish. It was evidence of the world outside, of a place we'd all be returning to in the morning, ashen crosses wiped onto our foreheads and covered by bangs.

At least, this was what I wanted to tell myself as I licked my index finger and picked up the sugar granules, brushing them into my gums like a numbing agent. I briefly considered asking for another piece and even began to rise from my seat, but brought myself back down, remembering that there was no polite way to ask for seconds without speaking. There would be time for more king cake later; if not today, then next Mardi Gras.

One of the New Hopers, a short man in a vertically-striped western shirt and a bulging Adam's apple, stood up suddenly with his hand raised overhead. The plastic baby had ended up in his slice. His buddies gathered around him and patted him on the back, smiling and laughing quietly among themselves in non-vocal understanding. Per custom, he would have to buy the next king cake. The men's group would be its likely recipients. Without a sound, the rest of us returned our gaze to our own plates, smiling in the way of outsiders acknowledging an inside joke.

I had been the first to arrive on Friday afternoon, settling the Volvo into an unmarked space in the oyster-shell driveway adjacent to the main building. There wasn't much to see: one small white-walled chapel whose only decoration was an ebony crucifix; the main dining hall with its louvered windows; and outside, cement statues of saints planted beneath a sprawling collection of oak trees. Whoever designed the grounds had done so carefully; it was beautiful enough to keep the soul from cruising, and austere enough to keep from being distracting. I had the entire place mapped out by vespers on Friday

afternoon and felt no need to explore any further. The priest leading the retreat instructed us to be patient with the silence. It would at first seem oppressive, he said, and we'd find ourselves distracted in the same way we're distracted in prayer when out of practice. But once we grew accustomed to the silence, we'd find a space within it.

I rose early and suddenly on Saturday, with an intuitive need to watch the sun rise through the oaks. I'd seen a sunrise only once before, on a trip to Florida the summer after my freshman year of high school. While my mom and Aunt Brenda and T-Boy slept inside the condo, I stood ankle deep in muddy sand watching the Gulf water approach and retreat as the day gradually lightened. I remember it as great bursts of color over the quiet white beach, the sun large and close and strutting its status as a star. I fell onto my knees, ignoring the warnings we'd heard all week about jellyfish, and let a morning wave bat my face before receding. It had taken fourteen years for God to notice me.

As I stepped into the misty pre-dawn under the oaks, I realized I'd forgotten not only my Bible but my notebook and pen as well, but had somehow managed to stuff my iPod into the front pouch of my hoodie. I found an elevated spot on a red-slatted park bench and sat down, draping an arm across the bench's back as if around the shoulders of an invisible stranger. Within minutes, I was slumped over, asleep, my cheek resting where the stranger's thigh might have been.

It was only 6:30 when I awoke again. The park was spread out before me: dark blue trunks like thick and wandering lines in the lighter blue air. Overhead the stars had faded and a patch of white was growing in the east, blurred like the paint of a neglected fresco. Our Lady of the Oaks was bordered by a forest of upright and sturdy pines whose height

was blocking the view. Soon it would be daytime, simple daytime, same as any other day, and though the light would sharpen and heat up in transition, the pines would cause me to miss seeing the sun itself.

An oak branch draped a few feet from the ground several yards away. I traced its path back to the trunk, where it was neatly aligned with several other branches in a kind of ladder. I leapt, wrapping my hands around the branch, pulling myself up, feeling the play and give in the branch as it drooped closer and closer to the ground until it eventually steadied itself. I wrapped my legs around it and shimmied its length, and stood up when I reached the end, one hand holding steady against the trunk. I did not look down. I reached for the next branch overhead, and pulled myself up again.

The space between the forest pines glowed as I climbed. It was a white light that suggested something walking through the forest. My grip slipped at one point, and flecks of bark stuck to the sweat that had formed on my forehead and at my temples. I caught myself, holding the trunk again. It was important to be still, the priest instructed us, to treat the noise in our minds as a stream we stand near, not a river in which we're submerged. He warned that it would take a while to climb out of the water and onto the riverbank. The point was to be patient, to trust that God, when He saw us treading and trying to stay afloat, wouldn't push us back under. I brushed the bark off of my face and settled into a spot near the top and waited for the quiet to arrive with the bursting sky.

I was stuck near a slippery rock, pinned into submission by my river's grand rapids.

Once, in high school, an arborist visited our biology class. She was explaining how trees grew. "If you carve your initials into a tree trunk," she said, "they'll stay at that height forever. You could go back to that tree in fifty years and still be eye-level with

where you marked it." Before our gasps had subsided, she shushed us and explained. "I know it sounds romantic, and maybe for you and your beloved it would be. But you should never carve into a living tree. When you make markings in a tree trunk, you're disrupting the flow of the phloem, and nutrients will no longer be able to travel with ease through the entire plant. Eventually, the roots will wither and the tree will die. It's not really worth killing a perfectly healthy tree for the sake of your future memories. Besides, if you and your sweetheart truly love one another," she added by way of consolation, "you won't need markers to remind you. Your love will be a monument." At the time, the point had seemed irrelevant to her lecture, a cruel and anti-romantic thing to tell a bunch of sixteen year-olds. I clapped my hands to steady my mind. The sun would be here soon; I refused to let my thoughts pull me back under the waves.

Last Sunday, two things that shouldn't have happened did: The Saints won the Super Bowl, and Ben was allowed to work the bar during the game. He had never been much of a football fan, and he apparently retained his seniority with Vincent despite having not worked a shift since Christmas Eve. Apparently he realized on Saturday morning the economic effect that the Saints being in the Super Bowl would have on the bars of south Louisiana. When I came in at the end of the lunch shift, an hour or so before kickoff, he was already behind the bar, kneeling on a plush red barstool and pointing a remote at the flat-screen TV across the room. He was wearing a black cap with a gold fleur-des-lis stitched across the crown, which I'm certain I'd seen for sale in the grocery store that week. "Don't you check your voicemails?" Vincent said by way of apology.

All of the bars on The Strip had pitched together to rent a cinema-sized screen and

were showing the game in the middle of the street. I'd seen them setting up when I left for work, and by the time I got back an hour later, McKinley was already wall-to-wall with people. It sounded like someone had brought along a tuba and was trying to accompany the spattering of "Who Dat" cheers.

Back at Sam and Wayne's, I put on a pair of jeans from the floor and tossed my work pants onto an unopened box of books. I hadn't yet decided whether I wanted my name to go on the lease. I hadn't bothered unpacking--hadn't even taken everything out of the Volvo--and a pair of apple crates tilted onto their sides were serving double duty as a nightstand and dresser. Out in the kitchen, I picked through the fridge. I had brought home a chicken parm from work the night before and had left half of it in there to congeal, but the foil dish seemed to have disappeared. There was nothing in the fridge that wasn't a condiment or uncooked component: a half-empty carton of beef stock, a vacu-packed set of pearl potatoes, a bottle of Cajun Power garlic sauce crusted red near the top. I grabbed a slice of processed cheese and unwrapped it as I walked into the living room, crinkling the cellophane into the pocket of my jeans.

Sam was sitting at the end of the couch with his stocking feet resting on the particle-board coffee table. He had a beer bottle wedged between his thigh and the couch's arm. The pregame show was on and nearly silent.

"This is all you're doing for the game?" I said as I dropped into the brown recliner in the corner where we'd once had our impromptu Courage Chair session. It had become my spot since moving in. I made myself ignore the reading lamp that loomed overhead.

"I thought you had to work," Sam said, looking up and across the couch.

"Ben came in. So you didn't make any plans?"

"Too tired."

"Long day chasing around high schoolers?"

"Those kids are insane, absolutely insane. Little heathens."

"You tell their parents that?"

"Oh yeah, all the time. I told them that that's what we're renaming the youth group."

A pop singer I didn't recognize was strutting to mid-field with a wireless mic woven into her hair. I leaned over from the recliner to take the remote from the table and turned the volume up just as the stadium's P.A. announcer signaled the beginning of a moment of silence. I tossed the remote back onto the table.

"Hey, so, remember that retreat I was telling you about?"

Sam shuffled up in his seat so that we were at eye level and looked over. "Retreat?"

I sat up, too, clearing my throat. "Yeah, I told you about it. The silent one?"

"That's right, out in--where was that? Ville Platte?"

"Grand Coteau."

"Grand Coteau, that's right."

"Yeah.

"What about it?" He slouched back into the sofa.

"It's next weekend."

"Already?" he asked, looking at the screen. The singer had begun the national anthem.

"I don't like the way people sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner,'" I said, without really paying attention. "It's too triumphant."

"It's the national anthem. That's what it is."

"It's a song about being a prisoner of war. Francis Scott Key wrote it in jail. 'O'er the ramparts we watched.' That's not exciting, or happy. Plus it's to the tune of a drinking song."

The crowd roared as the singer wrapped the anthem into its final high sustain. The camera closed in on her face, and the veins in her throat tightened as she bent her voice higher. "Damn," I said. "She can sing, though."

Sam took a pull from his beer and sighed. "I don't know why I'm letting you pull me into this, but you do know it's not just about being in jail, right? That 'The Star-Spangled Banner' is in fact about America being triumphant in the face of adversity? Hence the bombs bursting in air giving proof that the flag was still there?"

"Oh, I know that. But don't you think it's a little weird that that's what Key chose to write about? And that this is what we've made our definitive statement as a nation? At the beginning of every football game, we remember war. Which I'm not even going to go into the obvious similarities between the two because it's beneath both of us."

"We remember the struggles of a war that we eventually won."

"Yeah, and we remember, or choose not to remember, or are blissfully unaware of the fact that we're singing from the point of view of a man stuck behind bars who takes comfort in the light of bombs. And we do it proudly! It's depressing."

Sam rolled his head around on his neck and rested it against the couch, staring at the ceiling. He stayed like that for a few more seconds, his eyes wide open, in complete silence. I had forgotten what arguing with Sam was like, how he refused to accept the darker truths behind things, that he marshaled all of his considerable intelligence in order to defend the status quo. He wiped his nose with the end of his sleeve. He seemed to be

letting the moment pass. I reached for the remote again, to turn the volume back up.

"Here's the thing," he said. He was still staring at the ceiling. "The fact of the matter is, you're right. Francis Scott Key was in jail when he wrote 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' and he was watching the bombs explode just outside of his window. And there is something odd about that, of course." He gestured with his hands as he spoke, still at the ceiling. In the shadows, it looked as though his face were reddening.

"It doesn't matter, it's fine. We don't have to talk about it. Seriously."

"No, but this is the thing. What you don't understand, and what you never understand, is that there's a difference between the facts and the truth, and that the truth is made up in the way you look at the facts. Yes, Francis Scott Key was in jail. So the fuck what?" He didn't catch himself, didn't even flinch. "I mean, seriously: did it ever occur to you that a dedication to the facts doesn't mean that you get to ignore their context, or the reason why we've got this set of facts to think about and not another? Did it ever occur to you that the reason we sing that song all the time in this country is for that very reason--*because* Francis Scott Key was locked up, and *because* he took great comfort in the fact that America would go on, with or without him?" He wasn't looking at the ceiling anymore, but had turned to look at me. His eyes were clean white, like the white of a deep burn, and his upper lip trembled where it met the tips of his nostrils. Even the sandy wave of hair he'd haphazardly brushed across his forehead seemed to quiver. "The point isn't the one person in jail, Corey. The point is what's going on outside. As harsh as this may sound to you, some things are bigger than the suffering of a single person. And when that person can recognize that, like Key did, and can not only accept it but glorify in it, that reality is bigger than what they see through the bars of their cell, and

that their suffering has a purpose, then there is cause for rejoicing. Just because you can't see all the way to the end doesn't mean that confusion is the total sum of reality."

He paused and shook his head once, violently.

I knew the answers, that suffering for America or any country was dubious at best. Sam's argument opened the door to totalitarianism and any number of inhumanities. But mostly, in that moment, I knew that even though he was looking at the TV, Sam wasn't watching the players running out onto the playing field. He was listening to the crowd. Not only on our TV but out in the streets, where car horns were honking, stereos were rattling windows, and half of Lafayette seemed to be out on The Strip yelling themselves hoarse as the Saints flooded the picture. He was listening to the sound of people expressing a joy they'd never known and hadn't thought possible, and that was only made possible by the forty years of frustration that had preceded it.

When Sam finally spoke, after the coin toss, he had to clear his throat. "If you go to that retreat, you're going to miss your cousin in the Independent Parade," he said.

"He'll understand, though. Don't you think?"

Sam didn't answer.

Outside, scores of voices crescendoed into a booming "Oohh!" at the opening kickoff. The Saints received.

I had remembered it wrong. Sunrises, it turns out, are not majestic. There were no bursts of color or shocks of light. The park was instead becalmed by the eventual decrease of darkness, from cobalt to cerulean to azure to day. The blue light seemed to stick to everything, even the statues of the saints and my own bare arms. I pulled myself

into the tree's uppermost branches and settled into a crook against the warm trunk. I dug into it with my hips, shuffling myself into position. The knots in the tree massaged my lower back, and the dull sensations of it were somehow conciliatory, as if the tree were reaching into me and extracting a long-hidden pain. The sun had risen in direct view of only the tall outer pines, but it was perfectly light out now and its heat spread across the day. A firm breeze brushed against the upper leaves of my oak and all the others in the park and passed through the pine forest with great ecstatic whooshes. All the trees of the field were clapping their hands.

Four years ago, after he'd talked me back from the edge of the cliff, Matthew Major had given me a flyer and invited me to check out Reformation Ministries. They met on Sunday nights in the large lecture room in Angell Hall.

Most people were wearing jeans and t-shirts. They were spread out in clumps around the room. A group of guys who looked like they might have been in a frat were standing in a circle near the front with their hands in their pockets, looking down and laughing and shuffling their feet. I sat in the same chair near the front that I'd sat in on Thursday for Professor DeVos' lecture. We had moved away from strictly Christian thinkers and were reading Karen Armstrong's *History of God*. I stopped paying attention once DeVos read from a passage that said the early Christians had re-shaped their Jewish concept of God in order to meet their particular social and political needs. Jesus, DeVos told us, served as a kind of justification for the Jews who wished to rise above their station, to transcend in spirit the rule of Rome, if not also in fact. Like all other gods, Jesus was a convincing escape route from the challenges of the believer's particular historical moment.

The worship leaders played acoustic guitars with all of the lights on and no microphones. I felt nothing. Matthew stayed behind Professor DeVos' podium the entire time and spoke in an even voice, and I felt nothing. I draped my legs over the wooden-backed chair in front of me and waited.

The following Sunday night, I found myself again heading towards Angell Hall, walking with all the emotion of someone going to the corner store to buy a loaf of bread. I'd been studying, and had suddenly stood up and walked out of the door, barely pausing to check the lock before I left. The same thing happened the following Sunday. The Sunday after that I scrambled to find a scrap of paper on which to write notes during the sermon, eventually nudging the guy in the Detroit Tigers cap next to me and asking in a quiet voice for a sheet from his notebook. Matthew was preaching about Zaccheus, the wee little man from the youth group songs who was so desperate to see Jesus as He walked through town that he climbed up into a sycamore tree. When Jesus passed by and saw him up among the leaves and branches, he asked Zaccheus to come down; He wanted to have lunch at his house.

Wayne had once talked to us about Zaccheus, whom he called Zach, noting that Jesus couldn't have seen him had he not climbed the tree. He was small in stature but did what he could in order for Jesus to see him, and so Jesus blessed him with his presence.

Matthew only briefly mentioned Zaccheus' having climbed the tree. "Look at what Jesus is doing here," he said from behind the podium. "He wants to eat lunch at Zaccheus' house. He tells him to come down from the tree, to let go of the branches and climb down, and why? Because He wants to see Zaccheus' home. He wants to be with him in his home. Jesus is saying, 'It's okay for Me to be with you in your environment.

It's okay for you to have a place where you feel comfortable, a natural setting. In fact, it's a blessing. Because you can only receive guests if you have a home.' And not only that, He wants to be a part of that environment. He's not saying that He should be there because it's the right thing for a home to be centered around him; he's not trying to bring Zaccheus' house up to code. He's saying that he wants to be there with him. It's His desire."

At the end of the night, I had a page full of notes that I taped to the bricks over my desk.

The evening before I left for Grand Coteau, I downloaded a recording of Johnny Cash reading the King James Version. In high school, we heard that people who made recordings of their notes and listened to those notes while sleeping did better on tests, so I'd had big plans to have the Cash Bible on throughout the retreat, at a low volume. I took it with me into the crook of tree, where it then poured out the rich lather of Cash's voice. He told me stories.

Faithful Joseph was an arrogant man whose brothers sold him into Egyptian slavery. The story appears in the final few chapters of Genesis, still early in the Bible's long narrative. Cash read from the book in a steady voice, as if he were unaware of, or apathetic towards, the weight of the pages in his right hand. He was in no hurry; he had all of the time he needed.

In Egypt, Joseph spent many years in the service of a man named Potipher, who trusted him with his life. God was with Joseph, and helped him to become a faithful servant to Potipher. Joseph's skill had earned him such a reputation in the household that

Potipher's wife herself had come onto him, and when he refused her advances, she accused him of rape and had him thrown into prison. God was with Joseph still, and the young Israelite found favor among his fellow prisoners, over whom he was put in charge. In his Egyptian cell, he interpreted the dreams of Pharoah's cupbearer, who was so overjoyed by this that he promised to arrange for Joseph's release. "The cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him," Cash read. For two years the cupbearer held the Pharoah's cup to his lips and drank, testing for poison, Joseph less than a spot on his memory. At every meal, with one hand gripping the base of a broad bronze dish, the cupbearer sipped from Pharoah's wine, some small part of him surely convinced that tonight would be the night. Did he grow accustomed to that acidic, ammoniac taste of fear that budded at the tip of his tongue just before it touched the wine? Did he take large gulps? Did he still feel it?

And all the while, Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his brothers and arrested on false accusations, and who now sat in a dim near-eastern jail waiting, ignorant of the cupbearer's lapse in memory, trusted God. And Johnny Cash, with the next thousand pages of the book left to read into his microphone, moved on, as slow and unstoppable as the climbing sun.

In the morning after the night I had spent under that Nietzsche poster, I went straight to Matthew's office. It was on State, in a converted apartment that shared a wall with a record store. It had been a couple of weeks since I'd been to RM; I'd gotten busy with school and hadn't been able to attend, and had then gotten used to having my Sunday nights free. I confessed to him what had happened the night before. He asked why it had

happened, and I started to tell him that I didn't know, that it just happened. Instead, I heard myself saying that it might have had something to do with a deep boredom. I'd spent too long in the church, I said, and God had lost His flavor. Either that or I'd grown accustomed to a lifestyle of extremity. It's like if you only drank Mountain Dew. At first, the sweet citrus of it would have you hyped, and the caffeine rush made you invincible. But if you drank it every day for, say, four or five years, you'd get sick of it. The taste would make you nauseous and your body wouldn't be able to handle it. But after five years, you'd need it to function. You'd need the caffeine, just to operate at a normal level, just to be able to think. Without it, you'd never be able to get out of bed. So, I told him, I had jumped into another bed.

He nodded in the manner of someone receiving the answer he'd expected.

"Is that bad?" I asked.

He leaned back in his chair with his face turned towards the ceiling and exhaled. "Well," he said, nodding in affirmation and drawing out the end of his word as he shifted to sit upright again. "I'm just wondering what it is you were drinking in the first place, is all."

The feeling of expectation one gets upon waking up on Mardi Gras is different from that of Christmas morning. There's no nervous tingle, no twinge of curiosity about the abundance that sits waiting for you in the living room. The feeling you get when you wake up on Mardi Gras is almost the same as the one you get when going to sleep after a long day spent with close friends. There's a certain peace to it, a kind of calmness in knowing that there will be celebration, and that all of your friends and family will be

there. Before you awake, men in red aprons have parked trailers near the parade route and are setting up portable butane burners so as to have the jambalaya ready by the time the crowds arrive. While you are still sleeping, fathers are claiming spaces against the metal police barricades that demark the route. At home, they've added little seats to the crowns of their ladders, in which their children will sit to watch the parade; no float rider can resist tossing beads to an elevated child. In the early morning hours, before the sunrise, stay-at-home moms drive downtown in their robes to put the finishing touches on the floats. With straight pins at the ready between their lips, they fluff purple crepe paper and laugh quietly at the morning show, which is already broadcasting live from the parking lot of the Cajundome. You wake up with the quiet knowledge that these things are being prepared, and that they will come to fruition, and that you will see them all and in so doing know that you're at home. And you don't think of any of this.

The retreat center had been slipping notes under our doors each night detailing the next day's activities, as if we were on a cruise ship. Last night's mentioned that there would be king cake today in celebration of Mardi Gras. I wrapped my headphones cord around my iPod and slid down the tree in the full-morning light. A few other early-risers were already wandering around the break room with their coffee cups drawn up to their faces. Each of them had the same earnest and concentrated look and I wondered whether, at night in their beds, they too worried that their perceived lack of love was an affront to God.

They couldn't keep me there, of course, so I left. After cake, I went back to the room, stuffed the scattered shirts into my bag, and walked out to my car. It had been my instinct to turn the radio on to the local Cajun French channel when I got into the car, but

the joyous twang of the accordions that ripped through the silence had felt vulgar. It was as though the players had been sawing away forever; they'd played straight through the sunrise. Now, as I drive, KBON is another sound in the background, barely louder than the motor and the rush of air past the car.

It's still early enough. It took Sam a few minutes to text back, which means he was either in the shower or not yet awake. He and Wayne plan on meeting near the corner of University and Johnston, at the Baptist Collegiate Ministry next door to the Taco Bell. Wayne's buddy Micah is the chaplain there, and has offered free use of the bathrooms.

Even something so innocuous as Sam's message, even the capital letters of the proper nouns, feel inappropriate. Their particularity, their deference to the material world, are a disruption of the holy. They belong to another time. They were sent to another person.

But they weren't. They were sent to me, in this time. It's an effect of the silence to flatten out exterior life, and while on retreat it's a positive thing. The silence makes communication easier. But I'm not on retreat anymore. Words and the structure of the world can loosen up again. They can become tensile. And that doesn't change the truth of what happened at the retreat. My eyes sting at the realization. I want to pull over, to walk out into the field that borders the highway and bawl in thankful rapture. It is a good thing to live in the world.

Evangeline Thruway is blocked off, which means that Gabriel, the first parade, has already started to roll. Anyone who planned on taking the Thruway down to the Gulf either has to discern a detour through the area we used to call the ghetto, or wait. Chase Tower, our one tall building, juts up from among the downtown storefronts to my right. I once flew into Lafayette from Ann Arbor, and as I looked down on the city through my

double-paned window, it seemed to me that the tower was just a cigarette butt snubbed out on the prairie, and that the city surrounding it was the ashes of previous smokes. I don't know the streets in this part of town, though; Chase Tower is my lodestar.

Parking is impossible. Cars are up on everyone's lawns. Middle-aged black men in thick glasses and mesh-backed caps smile on their front lawns while holding signs that advertise secure all-day parking for $30. Their sons take the keys and park the cars while the driver and his family pay the father and laugh. All the side mirrors are folded in, and the cars are parked no more than four inches apart from one another. The families wave over their shoulders as they walk to the route. People scatter in and out of the street. From everywhere comes the vibration of bass; it's like driving through a ringing cell phone. Small patches of smoke drift from outdoor burners, people mill around with beers in their hands under red UL tailgating tents. At least a third of the people I see are wearing the "Champions" shirts that the Saints players had been given only moments after the game ended. More than a few of the tents are crowned with black-and-gold fleur-des-lis flags that whip and flap as if flown from the stern of a ship.

I have no money and so park in a residential neighborhood off of St. Mary, half a mile from Taco Bell. It is the last few moments before I open the door and lose the silence. There are no breadcrumbs to leave behind, no markings on the wall to follow back to this spot; I'll have to remember it.

I open the door.

The neighborhood is quiet and smells like pine. I step out and begin to walk.

A gaggle of UL students sitting in lawn chairs around a keg raise their red cups to me as I walk past their lawn. They're loaded down with beads, serious free jewelry. A few

people straggle past me, headed in the opposite direction. A young mother with rings under her eyes guides her son with her hand pressed against the back of his head. His plastic bag is so full that he struggles to carry it with both hands.

The back of King Gabriel's float is rounding the bend as I finally intersect Johnston. The Independent Parade should be only a few blocks away. My phone buzzes in my pocket. Sam says they're inside at Taco Bell but will be out shortly: just wait. The line for the bathroom flows out of the building and snakes across the parking lot. Through the windows, I can see taco wrappers balled up on every table. A scrawny girl pushes her teal cap further up her head as she mops up overturned Pepsi. Johnston St. is nearly invisible in the crowd. Against the barricades are the kids riding high on their ladders, eating funnel cakes and pointing excitedly down the street at the approaching parade. The dads stand as anchors on the lower rungs, unable to see much of anything besides the ladder's aluminum slats. Behind them, other dads and moms sit in camp chairs in tight bunches, one grounded teenager on top of a cooler that he stands up to peek into when he thinks he can get away with it. I wonder whether he plans to steal a beer from his parents, or if he thinks that simply looking at the can and seeming to want one will give him the same cachet, should any of his peers pass by. Clumps of people in their mid-twenties stand behind the parents, their arms folded across their chests. Every now and then, one will stand on tip-toes to look down the street and report the parade's proximity to the others, careful not to fall over into the camp chairs. Sorority girls strut the sidewalk, texting with both hands. Under their arms they cradle plastic cups that they look to have spent half the night decorating with paint markers. Packs of guys follow.

The parade is here now, moving past. There are no marching bands, only the sound

systems rented by each float. Seven seconds of "Single Ladies," then the sound warp that comes as it moves along. Seven seconds of a zydeco novelty song about women with big butts gets a big cheer from the crowd.

My phone's still blank. Nobody has walked out of Taco Bell since I started watching.

Something has happened further up the route and the parade stops and I realize that I'm here. I'm standing in the middle of a Mardi Gras parade in Lafayette, Louisiana. My hometown, on a day that belongs to few others. The engine on the diesel truck that's pulling the float turns over and the parade starts rolling again, to our cheers. A group of shirtless men have smeared black body paint over their chests and are marching past, trying to batter out a drum cadence on pots and pans with wooden spoons. One is wearing a dirty bra, which he snaps off and fling into the crowd, hitting the ice-chest teenager in the face. A little girl looks down from her ladder, concerned. Today's Hit Music has the next float and the best sound system. "Stand Up And Get Crunk," the official anthem of the Super Bowl Champions, is articulate from half a block away. Everyone--the young professionals, the moms and dads, the kids on their ladders--gets down. "Who dat!" everyone cheers to the beat. "Who dat, who dat, who dat, who dat, who dat say dey gonna beat dem Saints!" My head is bobbing on a string, I'm jumping up and down. "Stand up and get crunk!" I shout making accidental eye contact with a ladder-dad, who cheers me on. "Throw me them beads!" I shout at Hit Music's yellow float. "Gimme dem beads!" The ladder-dad notices my lack of jewelry and digs out a space for me near the barricade, motioning me to come over. His daughter, blonde with pigtails sticking out of the sides of her head, is waving her hands like she's distracting

someone from a free throw. "Beads!" she sings. She's pointing at me. "Give him beads!"

Hit Music passes by and I am beadless still. The next float is a flatbed trailer wrapped in aqua-colored crepe. A large vinyl sign duct-taped to the side says "Oceanready." My newest, littlest best friend begins her litany again. A sharp ping hits my hand and I'm screaming in triumph before I even examine my catch. One slim strand of dark-blue that I immediately ring over my head. I pick at the little balls nervously, waiting for the next float. "You watch the Super Bowl?" ladder-dad asks me, and I nod back, my head shaking vigorously. I'm sure he can see my eye teeth I'm smiling so big; I can see his. The absurdity of it all, of being here.

A teal GMC prowls, the windows tinted so you can't see the driver. Black and orange plywood walls wrap around the float it pulls. In the middle, on an elevated platform, is a black leather La-Z-Boy. A sign made from posterboard that arcs over the throne reads "Terrence Paquin, King of Rigs." My cousin.

"That's my cousin! That's my cousin!" I'm shouting, banging my hand against the ladder. The little girl sees me and starts screaming, "Cousin! Cousin!" and waving her hands, trying to get T-Boy's attention. "T-Boy! T-Boy! T-Boy!" I shout. I nearly knock out the ladder-dad on the other side of me. My arms move by their own weight, like pendulums. "T-Boy! T-Boy! Down here!"

He sees me. He points at me. "Right there!" he yells back. "That's what I'm talkin' about, right there!"

The float keeps moving.

He reaches into a cardboard box and pulls out bundles of beads still in their plastic

bags, three bundles in each hand. "Cuz!" he yells, pointing with the beads, motioning "no" at the ladder-dad to my right who thinks the bundles are intended for him. T-Boy pulls back, ready to toss. I jam my sneakers between the bars of the barricade for height, pushing up on its top bar with one hand to get an extra inch. "Right here!" I shout, my head turned upward to catch his every move. T-Boy points at me again with his free hand and I close my eyes and scream. Despite the crowd, I don't see anyone but him. We're here to play pitch and catch, like a father and son, and our backyard is a public street. He launches the bundles, putting himself into the toss. Several of the bundles burst, showering purple, gold, and green beads on the middle-aged couples to my left. From the corner of my eye, I see the teenager lurch under a ladder to grab scraps dropped by the boy sitting above. Confused and embarrassed shouting comes from some of the college girls who have stopped to watch the spectacle roll by; one has broken from their pack and is running down the street, following the parade and waving her raised hands. Strands of beads are tangled in the branches of the oaks that scrape overhead.

And there's still a package coming my way. It floats against the sky. I wait for it with my arms outstretched. I will catch it.