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Kill Your Sons

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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English/Creative Writing

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Abstract
Kill Your Sons
By Connor Chapman

A coming-of-age novella about a boy who is betrayed by everyone he knows.

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For my family and closest friends—you know who you are.

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Kill Your Sons

Connor Chapman

“Since when do we say yes to love?”

-Meredith Graves, *Interference Fits*

Jackson slid his hand over his face, and then his forehead to push his long, stringy brown hair out of the way. He'd promised his dad he'd run and get a haircut at some point this week. When he realized what an obvious gesture he had made sitting across from him at the dinner table, he pulled his hand back and hoped his dad wouldn't bring it up. He was exhausted, and the plan as usual was simple: choke down the tasteless chicken pesto and buttered noodles his dad, George, picked up from the grocery store on the way home from work, go upstairs, pass out, and then scramble to finish his homework in the morning. He knew it was a bad habit, but he always got passing marks under pressure. Unlike what the greatest staple of American culture, the sitcom, told the both of them, the dinner was absolutely not the place to discuss anything even remotely serious, especially when one of them threw a fit about almost everything. As tiresome as it grew to continually listen to him “mark my words” endlessly about Congress, Hollywood's “hippie liberal bullshit” and all the degenerate things it encourages viewers to partake in, or why he would stay a Bears fan until the day he died, no matter how much they kept losing, Jackson would nod his head and shovel the gruel into his mouth. He couldn't help but wonder whether if his dad had put as much passion and effort into maintaining the house as he did into flailing his arms, then maybe it wouldn't be so damn cold for so much of the year, and maybe his room would be, you know, livable. Some place without nasty water stains on the ceiling or those weird

ants with wings always crawling around near the back door. That said, when George brought himself back to Earth, he'd take a swig of his third or fourth beer and ask his son how things were on his end, just for good measure. Jackson always lamented how long it took for them to get to that point, but when they did, there was little variation in what he could tell his father.

“So, Jacks,” George asked. “How was your day? Do anything cool at school today?”

“Not really,” Jackson replied. “My locker still smells like farts, but that’s nothing new.”

George laughed. “So, same as every week?”

“Pretty much,” Jackson laughed, too. “Reminds me of you.”

George laughed again. He knew how to take a joke and keep it light and take the talk in stride, except when he didn't, and Jackson certainly knew how to dish it, a quality he thankfully didn't have to work too hard to instill in him. A real man always got along with everyone as best he could, he always said, or something to that effect. Among the smiles, though, Jackson's mood flipped to something cold and annoyed as he recounted the week behind him—one day was too watery, even for this exchange.

“And Tommy Wilkins is still a fuck.”

“Language” George said, sternly, and without smiles. Like he was one to talk. When the Bears lost the super bowl a few years before, he smashed, like, two plates. Jackson never could figure out his inexpressible criteria for what was okay and what wasn't, when and where. First it was “Be a gentleman,” next it was, “Treat everyone like a friend.”

“Sorry,” Jackson faked. Suddenly he didn't feel like passing out anymore. His dad didn't say anything, and an uncomfortable silence hung in the air between them. He looked at his dad's plates, and then his own, and offered to clear the table, do the dishes, and get him another beer from the garage to smooth things over and see if he could run a few blocks down to his best

friend Dylan's place for a little bit. He did so quietly and without any complaining—he knew better than to say anything else. Even when his dad's attention was directed at the TV, he could feel the periodic glimpses and his presence, still surprised at his getting so upset about a curse word. After about twenty minutes, he rammed his fist as hard as he could into the dishwasher handle to make sure it would actually stay closed this time, and set down a bottle of beer (the twist-off kind) on the coffee table next to his dad, between the two couches.

“Dad,” Jackson said. “Can I go over to Dylan's for a little bit? I did all my homework already.”

“No,” he snapped. “It's late.”

“It's, like, seven,” Jackson said back. “I'll be back early, promise.”

“I don't care,” he said. “It's dark, you're not going alone, and I'm not taking you.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and groaned quietly.

“You have school tomorrow. You'll stay there for forever,” his dad continued. “You gotta get out of the whole night owl thing, and you guys can't be hanging out together all the time anyway. People will start to think you two are, you know, funny.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and groaned a second time.

“You let Mike do pretty much whatever he wanted during the week. How is that fair?”

George stood up, and stared at his son intently in the face, out of nowhere screaming about how Jackson's older brother has absolutely no bearing on the situation at hand, that he and everything around him at the time was totally different, and that was final. Jackson cowered, realizing he'd been defeated, and retreated back to the refrigerator, where he got one more beer out and set it beside his dad as both a half-assed peace offering and the usual topping off the evening. George didn't make a single sound, so Jackson slowly slithered his way up the stairs

and tip-toed on the front edge of each step to avoid any creaks in the wood on his way up. He slid in through his door and jumped on the bed, returning to his iPod, his bed, and staring at the water stains on the ceiling. He replayed the whole thing in his head, and how it went from weird to pleasant to scary. It wasn't really anything new, but at the same time, it wasn't the sort of thing he ever really got used to. He gazed into the ceiling's abyss, trying to recall what life would have been like if his mom had still been around. His dad always just told him she'd loved him and his brother more than anything, never a detail more, and he never found any reason to question that. He hardly had an eidetic memory, and for so much of what he could remember, it was just the three of them, and they were just like everyone else, except for when his dad would yell too loudly or have a few too many. Even when she was still around, they both knew that you should never fight in front of your kids because then they'll think that's normal, but they never let that stopped them from devolving into yet another evening with incessant shouting punctuated with the shatters of broken plates. Even so, his dad was the one who yelled the loudest, and about what no one could quite remember. It always just ended with her running upstairs in sobs. When Jackson thought about it, it was a lot quieter when it became just the three of them, even more so when it was just him and his dad.

Jackson did this a lot, just going to his room to shut himself off from the world. That was more than enough, and he could hold off on going to the bathroom until the next morning if he really wanted to avoid any and all human contact, but he needed to see Dylan. He calmed Jackson, somehow. Dylan even once said to him, "I could never get sick of you," and Jackson agreed, but sensed less deep camaraderie and more of an addiction. The new plan for tonight was simple: text Dylan, wait an hour for his dad to pass out into a deep snoring sleep, and slide out the window, onto the side roof, and tumble down on to the snow-patched grass. He'd done it

once two months ago to go smoke a J with Macy and company, and no one asked any questions then.

Once Jackson was outside, he zipped up his hoodie, put in his earphones, and slid his hands into his pockets. He walked to the front yard, well away from the front windows of his house, and trotted along quietly. Enough kids his age lived nearby so as long as he kept the hood over enough of his face, no neighbor was going to bring this up later on should anyone run into his dad. He continued to replay what happened at the dinner table, and the stream of tranquility and head banging in agreement with the music and lyrics of Weezer, he felt guilt plunge within him when he remembered how he brought up his older brother. He shouldn't have done that, he thought. Not cool, and for what? Ugh. Now he had to live with that for the next couple of days, unsure if he should apologize to his dad or to just let it blow over—both courses of action sounded as reasonable as they were terrifying. He zipped his sweatshirt up even more, his skin and bones sensitive to the blistering cold. He slowed his walk down to finish collecting his thoughts, because he knew exactly how it would play out if he got to Dylan's with something on his mind: he'd egg him on, and then everyone would leave all pissed off. Jackson took his own advice, and no one else's, so better to get it all sorted now.

Last Fourth of July, George and the boys hosted their annual famous block party. Everyone showed up to this thing—their dad never bothered cooking or doing anything elaborate, because he knew that to have a good time, you had to stick to the classics, taken care of by the pros: pizza, catered by Portillo's, and three tubs of ice cold beer for the dads and alcopops for the moms. Jackson was a little twiggier than he cared to admit, and tried to hide it, even though everyone could see it the moment he took off his hoodie—one of many in a very

diverse collection. He was upstairs doing nothing in exchange for promising to pick up the stray garbage once everyone turfed out, and his dad and brother figured that was a fair deal, since the tubs full of drinks weighed, like, a million pounds. It was about eleven-thirty in the morning once everything was in its right place, and as Michael and George finished setting the last of what they needed in the right place, George looked at Michael right in the eye with his weird crooked smile. Michael flinched, not unusually, but then smiled back. George sighed curtly, the kind that sounded like satisfaction and happiness more than anything else.

“I’m proud of you, you know,” George said without a hint of anything but truth in his voice.

“Hah,” Michael said, trying to treat it casually. That was the first time he’d heard that sentence ever come out of his mouth.

“What brought that on?” he continued.

His dad didn’t really want to extend the discussion beyond that, but realized that Michael was still a little too young to get it. Besides, he *was* proud. The whole point was to do better than your old man, according to him.

“Isn’t it obvious?” George forced a laugh. “You don’t have to be modest, man. Joining the Army Rangers is a pretty big deal. A huge deal.”

He felt a little bit bitter once he heard himself say it. He thought about being a cop or joining the army one day himself, but as he would always put it, “Life got in the way.”

“I get to call *you* my *son*,” he continued. “You know what I mean?”

“Well,” Michael said. “I guess everything you ever taught me finally paid off. What was that one thing you always said?”

“What thing?”

“You know—‘walk with kings, don’t lose the common touch... if all men count with you...’ Something like that. I forget the rest. You know. The thing.”

“It’s a poem,” George said. “*If*, by Rudyard Kipling. One of my favorites.”

Michael always thought that was a really odd thing for his father to know—who the hell cared about shit like that? It was also pretty much the only thing he ever quoted except for Richard Pryor or the countless old movies he watched during his down time. But hey, maybe some things are just that good. Michael walked over to his dad, gave him a brief hug, and retired to his room.

As an hour and a half passed, all of Michael and Jackson’s friends poured into the house and yard, along with their dads, who were nice enough not to invite the kids who were way too old to still be picking their noses and eating it, even if it was technically a *block* party. Michael was always quick to play a game of pickup football with his own friends, and Jackson was amazed how his brother never got tired of it. He completely understood the appeal of sports—it made perfect sense. It was the ultimate way to peacefully duke something out, hang out and talk shit to your friends, get in shape, and have a great time doing all of it, but he was too uncoordinated to ever consider doing it, and avoided it whenever he could. There was an inherent apprehensiveness in being nerdy, true, but at the same time, he felt like it was one fewer thing he couldn’t enjoy, but at least the weather didn’t depress the hell out of him like it usually did. The sky was blue, clouds plentiful, the sun was shining, and the rain from yesterday had all dried up just in time for everyone to mingle and have a good time outside on the patio and the yard without sweating through their shirts. Jackson and his friends did the same thing every year themselves, but they didn’t get tired of it, either. They hung out in his room, played video games, and told each other dirty jokes, only leaving periodically to go collect more food.

“You guys wanna go see fireworks later?” John asked. “It might not be totally gay this year.”

“Dude, it’s *never* fun,” Jackson retorted, also squirming. “I’m not going. Not with you,” he half-joked. He turned to Macy. “Doesn’t your stepdad have a stash of illegal fireworks anyway?”

“Ugh,” Macy said. “*Jimmy* says we can’t use ‘em this year. He said cop cars have been parked at the corner all day and if he gets arrested, he’ll lose disability or something. But I’ll go if you go.”

“His leg’s been fine for like a year,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, but the state doesn’t know that. But he gives me American Eagle gift cards and pays for my gas, so I let it slide.”

“You were gonna tell the cops?”

“...No,” she said, ending her ten-second badass streak.

“What about you, man?” John asked Dylan, hoping he’d say no.

“Uh, yeah. No,” he said. “Definitely not.”

Nice. Jackson was happy for John right there, even if he was a stupid dick all the time.

Well, we can hang out here if you want,” Jackson said to him. “They’re doing a Simpsons marathon all night.”

“Nah,” Dylan said. “I want to, but I think I have to spend time with my folks ‘cause I’ve been avoiding them all day.”

“You always say that.”

“Yeah, but I like. I didn’t even say goodbye before I left the house. I was here at like ten AM.”

“...Oh yeah,” Jackson said, trying not to grit his teeth. He read somewhere that not jacking off for four days was supposed to up your game or something, but after trying that and getting nowhere just now, that was clearly a crock of shit.

“Well, whatever happens,” he continued, “Everyone can just come over tomorrow. There’ll be tons of leftovers, and if my dad has to work, we probably can smoke in the back.”

They all agreed it was a solid idea, and went back to watching and cackling at Flash cartoons on Newgrounds, before they were shortly called downstairs. What for, they didn’t know, but they all went down anyway. It might’ve been something totally awesome, like a massive keg or an M80 for each of them. They came outside, and George had guests all gathered round for a toast, and it didn’t occur to any of them what it was for. He stood next to Michael with his arm, unopened beer in hand.

“Thanks for coming everyone, as always,” he said. “I just wanna say... it’s the Fourth, and I want to make a toast to Mike, who’ll be serving a tour in Afghanistan at the end of the month, keeping each and every one of us safe.”

Jackson rolled his eyes as inconspicuously as he could. Not this shit again. Every fucking week it was some big speech about how great Mike was for volunteering to keep us safe and how he’s the town hero and that he’s gonna go abroad and personally kick bin Laden’s ass until his foot got tired. George shed no tears and was big and dumb and cheerful and clearly already had a few, more than necessary to survive such an emotional feat. Mike rolled his eyes, too, but Jackson didn’t know that—he was too busy rolling his own eyes.

“So,” George continued, popping open the beer and handing it to him. “I know you’re not technically of age... but I can’t help but think no one gives a damn. Cheers.”

Everyone followed the toast but Jackson, who'd forgotten to bring the solo cup full of Sprite downstairs. He understood it was a pretty huge deal to go somewhere and fight an actual war and stuff, but don't these people think about anything else? And why was it suddenly so hot? Why had he thought it was a good idea to wear jeans? He grit his teeth, and went inside. When he was younger, the therapist his parents made him see that if he ever felt particularly upset, it was okay to take a short walk for a little while and cool his jets to prevent any unnecessary outbursts. His friends didn't exactly know how to handle it, but Jackson did his best not to make a scene, so he didn't go up to his room and sulk—he went to the bathroom and sulked there. He felt it was a little less obvious that way, since he could just make a joke about having the runs. He was in there for about twenty minutes, and when he felt ready to come outside, he ran the sink for a little bit, and then came outside and acted like nothing happened. He looked around and hoped no one saw, and if they saw, they wouldn't give him any judgmental looks. He knew it was weird, but it was also the best way he knew how to handle himself in little snippets like that.

Eventually, the evening died down, and the sun began to set. George never had the stamina to host anything well into the night, and fell asleep that evening wondering how the Brazilian family down the street always managed to keep the party going well into the early hours in the morning. Dylan went home, Macy and John went off the fireworks where John would be too scared to make a move on Macy but later act like it was her fault, and everybody else turfed out. Thankfully, a lot of the guests were kind enough to clean up. When no one was looking Michael flipped open each of the coolers, and with a twinkle in his eye, noticed that so much beer and so many Smirnoff Ices went gloriously untouched by partygoers—truly a magnificent sight. He was tired from playing countless games of football, so he figured that he

could put his feet up and hang out with Jackson and watch a movie like they usually did throughout their youth, mom excluded. He slid the back door open and went upstairs to Jackson's room, where he spent most of his time. He knocked on the door using the opening drumbeat from *Baba O'Reilly*.

"Enter," Jackson said.

"Yo, dude. What's up?"

"Nothing," Jackson said, not taking his eyes off his computer screen.

"Whatcha reading?"

"Trying to figure out how to get songs off my iPod and on to my computer."

"Just sync it."

"You can't. They like didn't think of that, or something."

"Can you look at me when you talk?"

"Nope, I'm good."

Michael threw his arms up—he knew better than to argue with him when he got like this. Michael didn't realize, but that's the exact reaction Jackson wanted. Not anger, but for him to just go away and maybe think about his bad timing. It wasn't a complete lie, since he actually was trying to figure out how to get everything onto his computer, but he also had seven tabs open in Firefox, all Google searches of the same thing.

Alice Schmidt. Ten million results.

Alice Schmidt, Niles IL. A hundred and forty thousand results, nothing helpful.

Alison Schmidt, Niles IL. Same thing plus an old grade school teacher who happened to have the same name.

Allie Franczak, Niles IL.

Alison Franczak, Park Ridge IL.

Alice Franczak, Niles IL.

Alice Franczak, Park Ridge IL.

Nothing.

He shouldn't have bothered so many times.

He sighed and didn't even bother to express disappointment in his own brain, used to the dead ends by then, and just went downstairs. He knew he would end up down there in a few minutes anyway. Jackson was severely annoyed, and also couldn't solve the problem with his iPod, which certainly didn't help his mood. After a few more minutes of trying and continuing to be angry, he gave up, and realized that he just did what he promised himself he wouldn't do earlier. He waited a few more minutes, calmed himself, and went downstairs to meet his brother.

"Hey man," he said to him, slightly biting his lip. "Sorry for being a dick."

"It's cool," Michael said. "No big deal. I promise not to interrupt jerking off anymore. You wanna hang out?"

"Yeah," Jackson laughed. "Whatcha watchin'?"

Michael shrugged and didn't give an answer, and sat in the recliner next to Michael, who was relaxed across the couch. The two of them flipped through many channels and movies, none of them any good except for the one episode of Seinfeld they'd seen ten thousand times. They laughed, they joked, they were able to sit together like they always did, and the more Jackson was able to decompress from his own envy, the more glad he was that Dylan didn't stick around. He would've needed the whole house to himself to play it safe, and the one thing that always irritated the hell out of him was that he was the only one out of his group of friends that never had a basement. While he contemplated those, the deeper questions, Michael tossed the remote

on the coffee table. He felt a little bad for Jackson, even though it was his moment, his year, his time, but it made him think for a split second about how he could never hang out with the cool older cousins when he was a little kid. He could never figure out why that stuck with him, but it always did.

“Fuck it,” he said. “You want a beer?”

“Uh,” Jackson said. “Sure.”

Jackson smoked a few times here and there, but he never took any beer from the refrigerator, his or anyone else, because he was absolutely convinced that someone older than him and his friends would notice, and then he'd have to put up with all sorts of crap that he just didn't need to bother with. Michael slid the door open to the patio, and came back with three beers in each hand, still ice cold. He put them down on the coffee table, popped one open for himself, the other for his brother. Jackson took the can, and it certainly smelled enticing. Like a weird bitter coppery garlicky bread, but when he tasted it, he felt like someone was spitting in his mouth. Michael told him to just swallow, and that the taste would grow on him. Jackson protested at first, but he figured that if he held his breath while he took sips, he could look cool in front of his older brother like he wanted, problem solved. Michael sipped, Jackson guzzled, not because he was in love with the idea of getting drunk, but more because he wanted to get the whole ordeal of sipping, tasting, and getting it down all over with. Thankfully, after the second one, he wondered why he ever complained in the first place.

Just as Michael thought to go outside and get more, Jackson stood up and got six more, three more for each. Michael smirked, and was glad to see him take some agency for once in his life, no matter how small. They kept drinking, and Jackson was setting into the chair, happily woozy. Considering the number of cans on the coffee table, he decided it was a good idea to pick

them up and dump them all out in the recycling bin in the garage—there were at least twentysomething people there that day, and a few more empty beer cans wouldn't make a difference. His thoughtful plan went out the window the minute he stood up, stumbled, and fell onto the carpet, flat on his ass. He belly-laughed hysterically while Michael sat there, amused, still sipping on one of his many beers. Jackson stood up, gathered the cans, dumped them out, and sat down again.

As he sat, Michael noticed that his brother's skin grew clammy and pale—paler than usual. Michael asked him if he was okay, and Jackson responded that he was totally fine just before he disgorged all of his effort onto the cream-colored carpet they just had installed. It was funny, but once the putrid odor wafted, it wasn't *as* funny. Michael did his best to keep his cool. He'd cleaned up after so many people at high school parties, people a lot less cool than his brother. He turned Jackson on his side, and snapped his fingers in his eyes, and he blinked, which was definitely a good sign, and did his best to clean up the orange and grey stains in the carpet with the bunches of paper towels he gathered from the kitchen. For the most part, he was successful, except for the very obvious stain outline, which he'd save for his brother in the morning before their dad woke up. Jackson groaned, apologizing for the grief he caused his brother, who insisted that it was fine and that he shut the hell up before dad came down and made everything worse. He could just lie and say he spilled beer, no big deal. Jackson was sound asleep on the floor, and while he looked like a sweet drunken angel, it wouldn't bode well for him if he stayed there. Michael put his arms under Jackson's shoulders and headed for the stairs to take him to his room.

When Jackson woke up the next morning feeling a little concussed and not sure why his breath tasted like dead cats, he stumbled over to his brother's room and asked him what was up.

Michael didn't even mind being jolted awake. He smiled, sat up, and told him to go downstairs and wait there only if their dad wasn't awake yet. Michael dressed, and when he went downstairs, he saw his brother with his face down on the table, hardly moving, and he did his best to stifle his laughter and make sure its echoes didn't make his little brother's splitting (and hilarious) headache even worse. Thankfully, he knew just the trick, and he had everything he needed right there: coffee, orange juice, rolls, and thick wads of the greasiest Italian beef this side of Chicagoland. Jackson protested at first, but when they sat down and ate together, the grease cured the hangover almost instantly.

"Dude," Jackson said. "How'd you know how to fix it?"

"Look at me," he said. "Do I look like an asshole to you?"

"Nah man," Jackson laughed. "You're my fuckin' hero."

"Aww," he said. "Now clean up the rest of your puke downstairs. You disgust me."

When he was about sixteen, Jackson had begun to prefer the medicated boys.

The change of heart was less of a conscious thought and more an acquired taste, never about anything like angst or petty rebellion, even if those were two of his favorite things in the world. They were just a little nicer to him, that's all. He worried constantly about the little things, everything snowballing into tears and heart attacks. In hindsight, though, if it had been up to Jackson, life would've been so much easier if he'd opted for the girls, but it's not like he never thought about it. Take Macy, for example. On paper, she was perfect. They had all the same interests, she was sweet, and certainly smarter than the rest of their friends. She was pretty, too—she had the small teal highlights (but only under her hair so her mom wouldn't see) and a stick-on nose stud she'd wear at school but never at home. Jackson's dad certainly wouldn't have

minded. She was such a nice girl. Jackson never saw her as anything beyond just pretty. One time, when they were about fifteen or sixteen, John crashed at his place, and they were up late, talking about the games coming out that they'd love and the people they hated, and whether or not they should sneak some beer from the refrigerator in the garage. The conversation died down for a little bit to silence.

“Hey, man,” John said to him, nonchalantly.

“What's up?” Jackson asked, trying to sound as earnest as possible. It was almost three in the morning, and John apparently couldn't understand that late night speech lulls mean that's when everyone gets to pass out.

“Real talk.”

“What? What is it?”

“Would you fuck Macy?”

“Uh,” he stalled. What the hell kind of question was that? She was their friend, and at least to Jackson, that meant she was totally off limits, not to mention he had better things to worry about.

“Well?” John said.

“Um, no, definitely not. Isn't that kinda weird? We've known her since we were, like, five,” Jackson said back.

“You're crazy. She's hot as hell. I think I'm gonna ask her out.”

“Dude. So weird. Actually, though.”

“What the fuck would you know? You've never even had a girlfriend.”

He had a point, unless he counted Cindy Mendelsohn from kindergarten, but the two of them at the time knew it wouldn't last forever. She broke up with him and tried to mitigate it with a box of animal crackers. Definitely a net gain.

“Don't be a dick,” Jackson said. “Go for it. But if she says no, then you have to deal with her avoiding you for forever.”

“You don't understand, man,” John said. “It's different.”

It wasn't, but true, Jackson didn't *really* understand, even though it *wasn't* different from everyone else who had the exact same problem—John had this thing about trying too hard to be unique. Jackson shut his eyes, and then promptly passed out. John didn't do anything about it, but that's what happens when you're all talk, but he was a good guy anyway (when he wanted to be), and that's all that mattered. That was at the beginning of the year, during the span of two or three weeks where the summer blends right in with the fall. The colors blend and then everyone start to switch from shorts to jeans, but the sun still shines, and there's so much to be said for staring at the longest branches of the tallest trees right outside the window. Jackson swelled with pride when he thought about his own armchair philosophy, deep and nuanced, though he knew better to repeat any of it out loud. That was then, and by now, it was February in Niles, and clouds in the sky were grey, plentiful and tessellated, the dirty snow on the curb and the piercing cold that froze your nose hairs and the battered, cracked, pothole-ridden roads stained by rock salt were the only things that marked it different. Even when it felt like it should have rained, it never did. Perhaps it was what became of Droopy's soul after Hanna-Barbera finally put him out of his misery.

Jackson's little exchange with John stuck with him for reasons he couldn't put his finger on, always coming back to it while daydreaming in class, and by that part of the year, about how

he'd been spending so much time with their other friend, Dylan, more than usual, which was already a lot. Jackson was at his house one day, and looked at him while they sat in his nondescript room, with its pale palette and the occasional Simpsons poster. Dylan sat near his desk, tall and skinny, and fluttered his long eyelashes at Jackson without even realizing it, all while spinning around in his desk chair and pontificated on the new things he read that week in *Wired* and *Popular Science*. He came off as arrogant and standoffish a lot of the time, but Jackson just found that more endearing than anything else. It's like trying to figure out whether a book or a movie or an album is good or not. You have to figure out what it's going for and if it's trying too hard or not hard enough, and somehow Dylan got it all right all the time.

“So, I got something for you,” Dylan said to him. “Check this out.”

Jackson said nothing; he had no idea what he could've been talking about. Dylan had been learning how to strum whatever he could on the guitar, supposedly to impress the girls and only singing with his earphones in just wasn't enough. He broke out the cheap acoustic Fender his parents got him for Christmas the year before, his hands trembling far more than usual. Either he'd get to enjoy a hilariously awful performance, or he could sit in awe of something spectacular. He couldn't lose. Dylan readied the guitar on his knee, capo on the second fret, pick in his right hand, while Jackson sit on the floor near him.

“Don't laugh,” he said.

Jackson laughed, and smiled. “Don't freak out, man. It's me.”

Dylan smiled. “This one's one of my cousin's favorites. It's kinda hokey, but I like it and you might get a kick out of it.”

“Just play.”

He struggled to push out an old Iron & Wine song, slow and simple, but his nerves made sure the strumming and his voice never quite connected. He switched from one to the other, the strings ringing and echoing beautifully but never on time while his voice cracked on the higher notes. He kept watching as Dylan's fingers continuously slid up and down the bottom two strings. Each glistening chord change bloomed, and never got old. Jackson, a tone-deaf loser, stared at him in awe when he finished playing, and Dylan held up his two left fingers, blood trickling onto his palm from his fingertips. Dylan slunk his eyes to floor and looked at Jackson.

“What?”

His right hand was spread across the body and his other fingers were wrapped tightly around the neck, all while Jackson's heart slammed beneath his breastplate, and neither was ever sure if it was something they knew deep down and decided to ignore or if it was some too-passionate rush of the best neurotransmitters the brain had to offer. He reached for the neck, pulled it toward him, Dylan along with it, kissed him, and then again, and then a few more for good measure.

On the walk home, Jackson continually repeated the evening in his mind while his insides smoldered. In his agony-adjacent trembling, he thought back to the early days. He did that a lot, since his dad always said that those who fail history are doomed to repeat it, or something lame like that. But maybe he might have been onto something. No kid, little or teenage, can tell the difference between getting picked on every now and then or whatever and the singe of a nuclear bomb, and no amount of comfort would stop the routine tears, there and ever smaller beyond: tripping in front his classmates, spilling his milk, when his dad left him behind at preschool, so she could go to the first of his two jobs, but most importantly and most often, for no reason at all.

He did his best to make time for them whenever he could—he cooked, he cleaned, everything, gills of vodka and packets upon packets of Eclipse to mask his breath. As soon as Jackson could form full sentences and walking around all by himself, he knew he could go to him for anything at all, though it was always her who came into his room first after his crying was enough to shake both the walls and his parents out of a good night's sleep, and it became apparent that it wasn't a phase.

Neither George nor Jackson's mother, Alison (Alice for short—'Alison' always felt so forced) knew what to do with him at first, since their insurance hardly covered any physical injury to begin with—psychiatrists were barely affordable, and any dental care beyond a monthly toothbrush replacement was completely out of the question, so George went to the school's social worker at the Catholic school they put their boys in, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. There Jackson and other kids with similar issue and nuances and quirks sat in a circle and talked about their feeling in a room where the post-doc promised them it was safe. They went around in a circle and talked about the time they felt sad or angry or happy for whatever reason, and when the worker gave them general, gently worded tips on how to maintain their happiness, they all got to talk to her one by one, privately.

When they were waiting around, the only two kids who bothered to talk to one another at first were Jackson and Dylan, who bonded over their mutual love for Pokemon cards and Frangos, and soon enough, Macy and John joined in, too. Friend groups routinely morph and flow throughout everyone's formative years, but the four of them always stuck together. Through some miracle, each to the other was an anchor to Earth and adequate sanity, always on the same level of bitching about this or that, ranging from the absolutely unfair amount of work the enrichment program gave to them to why each of the medications their parents made them choke

down, tailored to each of their souls, sometimes (but not always) made them feel more dispensable than usual, Zoloft for Jackson, Fanapt for Dylan, and SSRIs for the others. Even so, Jackson and Dylan were slightly closer to one another, Macy and John the same, and the four of them knew that, but nobody minded, because it always worked so well, the worst of their conflicts usually erupting over mutual crushes and always resolved through guilt, concession, and the sliding of a Fruit Roll-Up in someone else's direction. Jackson was the most removed from that, though. He never really cared about crushes back in the day. The only thing ever on his mind was drinking Coke and eating chips and playing video games with his friends, and keeping up a Xanga blog on whatever thoughts of the day he genuinely felt worth sharing, whatever those may have been. Among the circle, he and Dylan were attached at the hip, and so were Macy and John. Macy enjoyed pointing out how nice it was that even when they were little kids, they never treated her any differently because she was a girl. How nice of them.

When they got older, onto the middle school machine, she explained butterflies to Jackson on their way to lunch. She had a really big thing for a kid named Tommy Wilkins, who was taller than every other kid in the grade, having his growth spurt about a year ahead of everyone else, a lower voice, an athletic build, and big beautiful bustling bellowing brown eyes, never quitting, just like how Macy never quit shutting the hell up about him.

"I don't even know, Jacks," she would always say. "It's like a good kind of nervous, you know?"

He'd always tell her the same thing: "What are you even talking about? That kid's *mean*."

"He's sweet once you get to know him, you know."

"He always tells me he's gonna beat me up, or something."

“Has he?”

To Macy’s credit, she was right, Tommy would probably have never laid a finger on him, but the worst part is that whatever tactic Tommy had up his stupid sleeve always worked.

“No,” he said.

“So?”

“Hold on. One time I sat in front for a science presentation his group gave, and he as like, ‘I wanna fight you.’ I asked him why. He said, ‘Cuz you’re a fag.’ I was like okay, and then I told my brother’s friends to keep a look out.”

“And he never beat you up, did he?” Macy asked derisively, as though his next move were for him to kiss her feet and tell her how right she was. She always had to be right, even when she wasn’t.

“...No.”

That wasn’t the point, though, and she never really got that, but he couldn’t figure out how to get through to her at the time, though it stopped mattering once a rumor went around that his feet reeked of you-know-what, not to mention that once the hormones subsided and the picking-on never really stopped, suddenly he wasn’t the hunk she had monolithically sculpted in her mind every hour of every day. Tommy might have still continued being a grade-A asshole, but Jackson remembered their conversation for the little takeaway it had: the butterflies. The weird thing was that for her, even starting in middle school, they never really went away, even as she found every excuse she could to talk to him as they got older, never giving up, though to her credit she never made Jackson hang out with him for her sake. When it came to Dylan, it never really went away, either, and now it was all exploding in front of Jackson’s face.

As far as anyone else was concerned, especially after that, it was just a bromance, until they decided to tell Macy and John. They knew that something like that couldn't ever travel to any of their parents or other friends or, God forbid, the school staff, but not being able to tell anyone but each other started to burn them inside. Dylan repeated that to Macy and John unabashedly, and Jackson with less enthusiasm, only because he hated how true the cliché was. When they were apart, either in class or sitting in front of their computers or Xboxes and not doing their homework, Jackson often thought back to the days before, way back, in fourth grade, when his friends at the time one day just couldn't stop staring or talking about the girls in their class, like they had them under some trance, for whatever reason. Before Jackson and Dylan started seeing each other quietly, Jackson often panicked about how he felt and if he should tell him and wondering if there was any chance he felt a shard of the same, dancing between extreme bloodrush and forced indifference, and to his relief, he didn't have to, and everything was okay.

The sun really only shined when he came out of the local H-Mart with a Ramune and a bag of those weird squid crackers with Dylan or Macy or John by his side, sometimes more than one of them, but even then, only for a second, and rarely during the week. He walked home by himself every day, alone, only because everyone else happened to live in the opposite direction, but the joke was on them, since he only had to walk about a block and a half, straight shot. He never fared well in the cold; every year his knuckles dried into sandpaper, cracked and bled, but it was still better than the summer's humidity. Every day, when he stepped inside his house's tiny foyer, the cheap plastic floor pattern stuck and unstuck beneath the soles of his shoes as he ran up to his room, past old beaten and chipped wooden coffee tables and particleboard countertops up to his room to hop into bed, plug in his iPod and stare at the ceiling, a nap and his Zolof usually to follow, his version of meditation.

He always wrinkled his nose at the still-unfixed cracks and water stains in the ceiling and his dad never putting on the heat, no matter how much he or Michael complained, but he reasoned that he had his friends, he had Dylan, and if those things were the worst things in the world to him, then everything else in this world was there to cushion his fall. Whenever he heard anyone say anything that sound even remotely like “Dylan,” his heart would swell again. He scoffed at the little hearts and stupid badly spelled notes his peers threw at one another on MySpace and AIM group chats, but the same choked-up punch and surge and sweat between the ones he both loved and hated was finally there for him, too. A lot happens without you even realizing it, he supposed.

That was the best part of the whole thing. He didn’t and couldn’t care about who Dylan had been with or had a thing for before this, or what would happen after, and when he was alone, all he could do was squirm in his bed or his desk chair and think about his angular jaw that connected to his full lips, which overflowed with curse words and encyclopedic knowledge of *Lord of the Rings*, and their mutual addiction to Tic-Tacs, and each thought of him was like a Christmas present. Maybe he was wrong about everything, and it was going to explode in both of their faces, but even then, he didn’t care. He wanted to keep holding his hand, and flutter their stupid little eyelashes at each other, and maybe he could reciprocate his infinite smarts and cool one day, and complement the way he twirled his fingers and the way he walked, each movement as warm as it was intimidating. He would sigh, smile, fall asleep, and dream of seeing him again at school as he did every day, and woke up shooting out of bed knowing that this was reality. Maybe all that love shit he heard about on every Top 40 song on the radio was onto something.

It was Friday, Jackson's (and everyone else's) favorite day of the week, until Saturday. At the end of the week, he always shot out of bed in the morning to shower and shave and run out of the house to get the day over with, all too familiar with the extremely dangerous five extra minutes in bed. On his walk to school, he decided he was going to follow through with one of his big ideas and ask him if they wanted to be official, everyone else be damned. They'd get used to it. It was going to be perfect: he was free right at 3:30 to do pretty much whatever he wanted, until his dad got off work to bombard him with texts about how his day was and who he was with and where he was going and when he was going to be home, even though that never really changed. Eleven PM, sharp, and not a minute later, because God forbid, the Niles Police Department surely never had anything better to do other than to hunt down kids in their minivans for smoking weed and driving around listening to Rise Against a little too late and a little too loudly for the sake of any real decency for them the community at large, and the world by extension. To Jackson's utter despair, not only was she right, that wasn't until three-thirty, and from seventy-forty in the goddamn morning until then, he'd have to drone from one class to the next learning about useless formulas and at what date, time, and temperature Napoleon ate his brioche.

Until he could meet up with Macy and John at one of their houses, and he could hide the smirk on his face when the two of them would complain about how neither of them would ever get a boyfriend or a girlfriend, respectively. It was the same thing every weekend, at least every Friday, sometimes a bad excuse for party in between the weeks, but never anything the American Pie movies made them out to be. Macy once said that it isn't where you are, but who you're with, and Jackson fervently agreed, but a lot of the time, something still felt a little amiss, even though he also knew there wasn't a whole lot he could do about that. He knew that somewhere down the

line there'd be a night so wild and crazy that each one of them would walk away with a life-changing story, but until they could get there, did the same thing he did every day, and quietly wrestle with himself on comparing his life to everyone else's. So many other kids sounded like they kept aiming so high, shooting for so much, wanting to be pre-med this, and Brown that, whatever. He found himself unable to care about that sort of thing, no matter how hard he tried, though he always pounded his fist on his desk and grit his teeth when, every Friday, his pre-calculus teacher would hand back a quiz with yet another C minus scrawled across the page's top right corner. Somehow, though, the fear never stayed put, because it was the same problem every time: whenever he had to bury his nose in any textbook in class and out, he could look up after five minutes, and the wall was suddenly so much more interesting than it used to be. Something about it kept him hooked until his phone buzzed and his computer beeped over and over again before he went to sleep too late for his own good, and his dad, as he did before, always brought up the night owl thing, and Jackson wondered if after a certain point it was just to irritate him. Dylan wasn't anywhere to be seen before school officially started—weird, since he was normally irritatingly early for pretty much everything. Jackson thought little of it, and sat thorough an hour of math class focusing on perfecting a doodle of Homer Simpson at the top of the notebook page. Eventually, the bell rattled, and he stuffed a flurry of things into his backpack. Every other day he asked himself why he bothered doing that, since everyone packed and crowded at the doorway like a bunch of animals, and it wasn't like he was going to get out of class any faster. Every time he thought that, he also thought he might be trying too hard to imitate JD from *Scrubs* subconsciously, and that maybe he should go outside every now and then, but it was way too cold, so maybe that could wait a little while.

When he was finally able to squeeze through the doorway and into the hallway a drop among the flood of faceless bodies, he waded and elbowed his way through to see his hazel-eyed beauty. When he did, they locked eyes, Jackson burst into a smile, but Dylan was taken aback, as though he were a stranger. He crinkled his nose and forehead, almost in disgust, and spent the rest of his time in the hallway starting at his feet and making it a point to get to chemistry downstairs. Weird. That never happened before. Jackson went to turn around and go after him, but the crowd made that impossible after Dylan already turned the corner. He called his name, but the squabbles in the hallway drowned it out, no one paid any attention, and he just had to wait until they all got together later and ask him what the hell his problem was. The thing is, though, that isn't what got to Jackson. Dylan had a habit of being in one of his famous moods, nothing terribly unusual, but not today, and not that intensely. Jackson went to his European History class and sat in his seat in the back left corner of the room, the desks arranged around the teacher. He knew that spot would one day have an advantage other than sleeping incognito during in-class movies. He slouched in his desk, whipped out his phone, and texted Dylan to see if he was okay. He counted exactly forty-one minutes before his phone buzzed with a two-word response: "it's fine." He said he wanted to talk to him (especially now), and to meet him down by the music department after school, and then came one word: "sure." He wanted to snap his pencil in half, but it was mechanical, so he gave up on that pretty quickly. He could stop thinking about what God-awful thing he might hear come out of his mouth after school, but the horror made the minutes run together in his head.

He headed straight over to the row of lockers in the music department right next to the massive chapel, desperate to find out what the hell Dylan's problem was. He waited a little bit after the standard Friday afternoon rush, where the same onslaught of people would ricochet in

and among the rooms and lockers nearby. When it does down, Jackson put his foot up against a locker, his small and subtle attempt to look cooler than he knew he really was, and played Tetris on his phone with alarming speed and accuracy, and shifted his eyes up from the screen every twenty seconds to see if he'd arrived yet. Time had switched—every minute felt like an hour, every five minutes made it feel like the weekend already passed. The paranoia almost made Jackson want to pass out, but he reasoned himself out of it each time the desire hit him by reminding himself that he was just being a drama queen, as always, and he was right when Dylan did finally show. He took a while, even for him.

“Hey, man,” Jackson said. “Are you alright? What’s your deal?”

“Nothing,” he said. It definitely wasn’t nothing.

“It’s me. Just give me *something*.”

His excuses were all flimsy. His parents were saying stuff? What kind of stuff, he didn’t know. His sisters were saying stuff, too, but he didn’t know much about that, either, and that on top of that, he wasn’t sure if he was really okay with this anymore. Odd, considering he’d been fine with the back and forth back and forth for about a month and a half, and when you’re seventeen, empires rises and fall in that amount of time as easily as the wind changes.

“...Sure, dude,” Jackson said.

“What,” Dylan said, annoyed. As though he had anywhere pressing to be. Please.

“Have you been taking your meds?”

Dylan looked at him like he wanted to kill him.

“It’s just... you’re acting weird. Even for you. And you know that’s one of my favorite things about you. Cuz it’s not like I can just talk to Mike whenever I want anymore.”

Silence.

Jackson crossed his arms over his stomach, like he'd just been ripped open there, guts spilling out. How could he just stop caring like that? Asshole. It wasn't his fault, and he knew that, but the emotional wound was still real, still there, and it existed outside of him, and maybe this could be one of those Lifetime moments or something where love and feeling could overcome all those other stupid shitty forces that no one likes in their lives anyway. Some boyfriend he is. Was. They weren't even together, technically, but they could have been, might as well have been. Ugh. Jesus. Jackson didn't know how to react or how to handle it so he did something crazy and impulsive and pulled him in by the shirt to kiss him, and their lips bounced for a split second before Dylan shoved him away and stormed off. He knew deep down that wasn't going to work, but it was worth a try until Tommy Wilkins strutted over, his partners in crime quietly lurking behind a hallway corner. He bragged about how he saw the whole thing, even though he only saw the last two minutes of that interaction, which was enough material to last him for ages.

"I knew it," he said to Jackson. "Fag. You trying to rape that poor guy or something? The fuck is wrong with you?"

Stand your ground, Jackson, and be a man. That felt like less of a thought than it should have.

"Fuck off, dude," he said, staring him in the eye. He wasn't scared until his two other cronies showed up, smirking. Then he was scared, and Jackson did his best to lie his way out of it. He turned around to just walk away and ignore them—no one had to know about that part, and who'd believe them anyway? Nobody liked Tommy and his gang of assholes. Right? They began to shout at him everything they could think of: cold, sharp "faggots" and how bad his mom and dad fucked up in parenting him, and how his big and noble brother wasn't there to save him no

matter what he did, all the good stuff. He kept walking, and Tommy didn't like that, and neither did his friends. He pushed him down onto the floor, and kicked him in the stomach, and then the groin, while the two others waded in between cackles and silence. Tommy threw another fist into his mandible, and Jackson crumpled to the floor. They trotted off, and Jackson disgorged the four chicken nuggets he had for lunch onto the carpet. Dylan, who apparently never really left, passed by from afar. Jackson tried to get his attention, to no avail. When he could finally stand up on his own, he stumbled home. The cold bit his skin, but that was nothing compared to the blood and the bruises. His father wouldn't get home until well into the evening, and he'd be out of there by then. When he got home, he dropped his things immediately by the front door, went upstairs, and collapsed on his bed, holding his stomach and crying silently as he plugged in his iPod and listened to his very fragmented music library. He repeated *Mr. Brightside* eleven times, give or take, and when he was ready to stand up and answer his phone and walk over to Macy's house, he walked over to his mother's old medicine cabinet, found some of her coverup still in there, and dabbed some of it on his face and under his eye. He looked up how to do it on YouTube, and he sure as hell wasn't going to let anyone know he got his ass kicked, as much as he could help it, anyway. It didn't show too much, but any movement that was slightly wrong or off made him wince in agony. Normally, he'd wallow alone, but it was Friday night, and he wasn't going to waste that. Besides, it was better than sitting at the table with his dad, just jumping to catch him say something off-hand that was worse than usual, sometimes heavily on George Clooney's politics, sometimes about "those fucking queers," how they ruined everything, and why there were so few real, true, noble men left in America like Michael.

Jackson threw on his winter coat and a hat, and zipped it up. Before he left the house, he examined his body, looking down, and made sure the cuff of his jeans was draped over his sneakers, because the last thing he needed was for the cold to make him flinch, which meant pain, which meant having to explain what happened to Macy and John, which would lead to a conversation about Dylan, who, according to her text messages, wasn't responding to anyone for whatever reason. He stepped out, locked the door, and decided that he maybe needed some new jeans or some boots or something, since it was only getting colder, and he knew it would stay the same until spring. Thankfully, she didn't live all that far away, and her parents always kept the heater blasting in the winter. Jackson didn't understand how they managed to afford that, but hey, that was their problem. In his ears blasted the second half of *American Idiot*, where the cold and the mud-speckled snow on the street banks became less strictly depressing and something he wanted to revel in more than ever, like the grey and the black and the cold and the nips were extensions of his hard, dark, brooding soul. There was immense beauty in how awful it all was, and the only reason anyone ever went outside was because tiny groups of people were switching houses, or, in Jackson's case going over to a friend's house secretly hoping one of them had already rolled a joint. The art of the relevant song, at least, made him feel that way. Sure, staring out windows made him feel more important than he knew he really was, but add music to it, and suddenly he was on the Nobel committee until he removed his earbuds, and this time around, he walked slower than usual to time it just so the last chords on Whatsername would echo their last waves as he hit her driveway, and, to his fortune, they did.

He removed his earphones and text Macy to come outside, and she greeted him with an enthusiastic hug, as she always did. He reciprocated, and her love made today's events seem a

little less real and more like a bad dream. She ran away into the house, and when he bent down to remove his shoes (her mom's strict policy), he grunted in pain, and it was all reality again.

"You okay?" she shouted from the kitchen.

"Yeah," he grunted, again. "I pulled something in gym today."

"Oh," she said. "Sucks. Anyway, come down here. No one's getting home till late."

He met her in the basement, where she was watching a rerun of Scrubs. It was lavish and cozy, more so than the rest of her house. He sat next to her on the couch facing the television.

"When's John getting here?" he asked her.

"He said he was like fifteen minutes away and just got home from walking the dog."

"Cool," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "What's with the coverup?"

Shit.

"Popped a few nasty zits when I got home. Couldn't go out like that, so I found some my mom's old stuff."

"Ew," she said. "I didn't need to hear that."

Jackson laughed. "Maybe you shouldn't have asked."

"I'm not an idiot, Jacks," she said. "What's with the coverup?"

His eyes sunk, and as much as he didn't want to, he explained the whole scuffle between him and Tommy, even though 'scuffle' is as euphemistic as a euphemism could be. She recoiled in horror, though she was hardly surprised, since she knew Tommy had always been giving him trouble in one way or another. She still had a thing for him, too, and that made her feel even worse, but she knew this wasn't about her, so she kept her mouth shut about it, and didn't ask any questions. She didn't need to know why it happened this time anyway.

When Jackson was done recounting the end of his day, the two paused for a minute, while the characters onscreen blabbered into white noise.

“Got any weed?”

“Upstairs, but let’s wait for John to get here. That’d be kinda unfair.”

Unfair. Sure, whatever. John often prided himself on never having to pay for weed, but that was just a cover because his parents routinely searched his room after he snuck a beer one time a month ago. Jackson would slip Macy five bucks every now and again, even though she always insisted he didn’t, but she always ended up taking it. It was more of a courtesy than anything else. Macy was hardly a libertine, and it’s not as though her parents were more lax, but rather that they trusted her, and to her credit, she never gave them much reason to worry. “If you don’t tell anyone what you’re doing,” she always said, “you can get away with a lot more.” Jackson took that to heart, and when his dad texted him, he kept his story vague, and thankfully for him, most of the time, she bought it, and that’s all he needed. Macy’s phone buzzed, so she went upstairs for a moment and brought John down. Jackson and John exchanged their hellos while Macy ran upstairs and returned momentarily with a small old Altoids tin. She opened it, took a nugget out, ripped a roach from a notecard, placed it on a rolling paper, and sprinkled what she had left onto it. The boys watched in awe as she did it so expertly, since neither of them could ever figure out how to do it right. They made fun of Jackson more than once for sneezing all over an unfinished joint, blowing the weed all over the carpet the first time he ever smoked. John opened a basement window near the ceiling, and turned on a small fan while Macy flicked the lighter and lit the joint. She took a drag, passed it to Jackson, who followed suit, and to John, and so on and so forth.

Jackson sat there quietly for a little bit and receded into himself while Macy and John sluggishly chatted and giggled all on their own. He was glad to be in the company of good friends, in a comfortable basement on a couch that always smelled a little lemony, but he couldn't help but feel like his night would substantially improve if he could just curl up in bed, alone, with a bag of those honey barbecue Frito things and an episode of The Simpsons. There was so much to keep track of, but at least no one was harping on him about his day like he expected them to. Not that they did that regularly, but he thought they would've noticed the coverup by now, sitting so closely together. When they weren't talking to him, which was a lot of the time, he kept replaying the day in his head, trying to figure out where it all went wrong, and what did and didn't make sense, but he couldn't come to any meaningful conclusion. Maybe it's because he was baked; he had no way of knowing for sure. After sitting there for a while, laughing at the TV and cackling to one another, he noticed both of their faces light up when they looked at one another, every few seconds, like they hadn't seen each other in days. What assholes. Rubbing it in his face like that. But if he said anything out loud, it would make everything horribly uncomfortable, and no one needed that, no matter how much it made him squirm even more than he already was (and trying to hide). Another hour or so passed, and it grew dark outside. Jackson wondered what it would be like if the three of them were, say, an actual party, where he could eat up some juicy gossip or become less distracted from... something. Did he take his meds? Shit. That's not good.

“Hey, Jacks, wanna go to McDonald's or something?”

No, not really.

“Yeah, man. Sure. Definitely.”

They all put on their things after remembering and figuring out which pieces went on which parts of their bodies. They went to their garage and stepped into Macy's beaten old minivan. She drove, since she could handle herself than the other two, and went very slowly to the drive-thru where they could all gorge themselves on a feast unheard of men and women. At least, it seemed that way, but it might as well have been real, and that's what really counted. As she drove, Jackson did what he was best at, glaring out the window, where it was dark, but the signs of tacky old diners and business and Korean letters he had no hope of reading glowed along the strip, stars on the ground. Macy didn't bother putting on any music or the radio—she was gabbing away at John, and he was reciprocating, and it was so sugary sweet that he couldn't stand to listen one more minute of that shit, lest he go insane or something or maybe the world would end and then if he got out of the car, his mom would definitely know that he was out doing something that he shouldn't have, and that would've given him yet another thing to deal with, not to mention she was for sure going to ask about who went through her medicine cabinet. Ugh. God. He had to calm down for a little bit after that, so he quietly took out his iPod, and listened to an advance of *Midnight Souls Still Remain*, a fitting score for his gazes. He was so protected behind the window, in the heat, from the lone walkers outside in the cold, from Macy, from John, who thankfully never asked him why he was being so quiet or about his fucking brother, hero this, hero that, even though he loved him and felt shitty for even thinking that. Maybe God was being nice to him for the rest of today, but he felt iffy when he thought like that, like he was one of the weirder super religious kids who have to go to bed at ten o'clock still.

“Yo, Jacks. What do you want?” John said.

Jackson jerked out of his head in response.

“Um. The usual.”

“Which is...?”

“Whatever you’re having, I don’t care. I’m starving over here.”

John was a little confused as to why he was all frantic and dismissive, but whatever. Two McDoubles each, plus a shake, plus a few apple pies, plus all the fries they were going to throw out anyway. When they got their food, Macy pulled off to the side of the parking lot, and they all scarfed down every last bite in about five or ten minutes without saying a word to each other, even after they finished, not only because they were so focused on their munchies at first, but because they didn’t need to. There’s that little line in Pulp Fiction when Mia Wallace talks about how it’s nice to not “have to yak about bullshit in order to feel comfortable,” even then, when Macy began taking them back to her place. When they all did, though, they never got sick of it. Well, John did, at least that became apparent, when he opened his dumb mouth again.

“Where’s Dylan, Jacks? Aren’t you two attached at the hip or something?”

Jackson didn’t really feel like answering. She didn’t mention how he was being a hermit?

“I know,” Macy giggled. “They’re, like, lovers. It’s cute, really.”

Oh, that hurt. That hurt a lot.

“Shut the fuck up, guys,” Jackson snapped at them. “I don’t know. I don’t know about every waking fucking minute of his life. God.”

Macy and John gave each other the eye and wondered what the hell that was all about.

“You alright?” John asked.

“Yes. It’s fine.”

Somehow they didn’t believe that.

“We’re just trying to help,” John said. Jackson looked down at his feet, and saw they were right near Macy’s, and before she could even stop, he ripped the van door right open,

slammed it shut, and went home, hands in his pockets. This wasn't anything *completely* out of the ordinary for him, but when Macy and John looked at each other, they knew that someone said something that was a little too on the nose.

“What was that all about?” John asked. “God. Make a little joke and he loses his mind.”

“Yeah,” Macy said. “Even for him that was super weird.”

“Should we go roll up and talk to him?”

“Nah,” Macy said. “I’ll text him. He’s always good about responding no matter how pissed he is.”

“He is?”

“Uh,” she said. “Yeah. Sometimes. Usually.”

Jackson was careful to not stomp his way home, plugged in his iPod again, trying to keep the afterglow of the high in his grasp. He checked his phone, with two texts from his dad which each read “?” It was just before eleven, so he didn't bother texting him back—he'd hear him just fine, all good and pissed off when he swung the door open. He went through the foyer and saw his father draped across the couch with four or five empty bottles scattered around on the coffee table next to him, gawking at the episode of *The Amazing Race* he taped earlier that week. He could've gone up the backstairs right away, but this was tactical so he wouldn't stop by his room later on before he went to sleep, provided he didn't pass out on the couch.

“I'm home,” he said. He secretly hoped he didn't smell anything on him. He never did, but the paranoia never went away, either.

“Hey, Jacks.”

He didn't get up. Not that he was going to, but he went to her and gave him a hug so he didn't have to struggle for it. They had a quiet understanding for that.

“How was your day?”

“Same old,” he said. “Got home late, but one of the guys dropped off dinner for me at work, so that was really nice.”

“Oh,” he said. “That’s cool.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say, and immediately regretted not sneaking by him and just quietly getting something from the fridge to take upstairs.

“How was your day?” he asked him.

“Uh,” he said. “It was fine. “History quiz, that was fine. Not much. You know.”

“Are you okay?” he asked Jackson. “You look... off.”

“I’m really tired,” he said. “I’m gonna go to sleep.”

“Wow, you’re actually raking my advice,” he slurred slightly enough to ruin the joke he was trying to make. He forced a chuckle and went to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator for something, and saw there wasn’t anything to drink in there other than milk that had definitely spoiled by now and some iced tea, a disgusting slimy concoction he couldn’t believe people actually drank.

“By the way, I poured out all the Diet Coke,” George called to him.

“Um, why?” he called back.

“Jeff was telling me all about it. Artificial sweeteners cause a ton of health problems. Headaches, diabetes, cancer, everything you could think of. Didn’t even know how bad for you it was.”

Jackson was routinely annoyed at how his father always told him not to believe everything he read, especially on the internet, which was odd, considering he ate up everything he saw.

“By the way,” George told him, “the guys all wanna see you, so I’m thinking you should get dinner with us next Friday or something before we all part ways for the night, sound good?”

“Uh-huh,” Jackson said. “Definitely. Talk tomorrow. I’m gonna die if I don’t pass out. G’night.”

He tried as best he could to find comfort or sweetness in the little things he said, as weird as it all was, but he couldn’t. As far as he was concerned, they were just clones of his father. That’s not to say he didn’t love him or anything extreme or awful like that—it’s just that one of them at a time was enough to handle as it was. When he did make the smart move and go along with it, all they ever did was meddle and ask about his personal life and tell Mike what a big man he was and how he was so brave and heroic for going overseas, and his friends all said the same thing, the only difference being that to them he went to fight the good fight—the worst part is that they actually said stuff like “fight the good fight” like some old-timey actors or something. Whenever his dad had them over for lunch, he could hear them talk about superficial bullshit and whose kids around town were “going down the wrong” path, mean things about being gay, and shooting the Filipino kids crooked smiles, as though they were afraid they might overrun the community they spent so much time (in their minds) holding together. He wished Mike were by his side like he used to be all the time, and maybe then it wouldn’t be so bad. They could roll their eyes quietly at each other. His father was trying too hard, and Jackson couldn’t figure out what he was trying to do. Jackson just liked to think that every passing day he was just a different version of himself. Even his dad always said that all sorts of things make us better people: boredom, pain, all that, but Jackson was starting to wonder if that really applied to everyone. He was proud of Mike, really, but he was tired of hearing about it all the time, how great he was, and surged with guilt whenever he thought like that. He was still a little kid,

working his way through high school, and his brother went out to God-knows-where doing real things and fighting real fights. That was worth a hell of a lot more, and he couldn't wait for what wisdom he'd have for him this time around.

Jackson went upstairs, plugged his iPod back in, sat at his desk, and fixated on the computer screen with anything he could think to find. He was ready to pass out, but all he could do, again, was replay the day in his head. After about twenty minutes of trying, he flipped the switch on his desk lamp, reached for a notebook and a pen, to scribble any and all of his scatterbrained thoughts down. Sometimes he found it helpful and reflective, but at the moment, nothing was coming. He remembered the days when he's reach into his nightstand for a Red Vine, chew on it, regret it because he already had four, and (mostly) pour his heart out onto paper to make sure his brother was up to date on everything in his life he could possibly think of. He remembered the last letter he wrote, how he got nowhere, and how suddenly forced it all felt. His phone buzzed on his desk with a text from Macy.

“You ok? Something going on b/t u and dylan?”

“Ya well just dont tell anyone,” he texted back.

He thought about how idiotic that all looked onscreen and wished he opted for one of those phones with the fancy keyboards. He got up, turned the light off, and went to bed taking his phone with him. He opened the web browser on his phone and Googled Alice Franzak again, still with no results. He set his phone on his nightstand and just tried to fixate on the ceiling in the pitch black so he'd fall asleep and forget everything around him. He fantasized, as he did every night, about Mike's spontaneous return, thwarting a big government conspiracy to keep down the truth, and what would happen if his mom were still around, and if she could soften every blow. He could dive into it as much as he wanted, and maybe one or the other would really

come true, even for just a second, but even when these things were a live, he could still sleep for a thousand years, minimum.

On October 13th, 2015, the Rolling Meadows Police Department will post a statement on Facebook declaring that those who walk in with their needles and heroin in hand and asks for help will not be criminally charged, but will get the treatment they need, no questions asked. Every year, from second grade all the way through high school, they bring someone in once a year to talk about all the things no one ever wants to talk about. First it's Officer Friendly, and then it becomes a super hip kid from D.A.R.E. when everyone's a little older, or when that didn't happen, whomever the administration gave a free lunch in exchange. They deserve some sort of change. Not in their entirety, but they evolve, certainly, and it makes us ask where all the time went, how we got here, where we went wrong, and we can bug sociologists all we want, but we'll probably never get any useful answers. For Michael, the deal was a no-brainer: ship off to some godforsaken shithole on the other side of the world, get in shape, build character, become a bigger, better man with true compassion and good stories, make the greatest nation in the world even greater, all while getting free college out of it.

For Michael Schmidt, basic was a breeze, for the most part. He, along with his big brown eyes and hair, was already built like a football player, and went through his growth spurt when he was fourteen, and was captain of the wrestling team for all of his four years in high school, heavyweight division, but even then, his massive hands made pinning any schmuck from any school in the area made it easy for him. He rarely lost, and he had to remind himself to remain humble and that wrestling probably wasn't going to get him the money he needed to attend anywhere he wanted, but he had to admit, at the end of the day, it was a great stress reliever,

from school, from dad being a crazy controlling dick, from missing mom, from girls, all of it. When he first arrived in Kabul, he hated admitting to himself that he was expecting a lot more. Maybe it was Rambo, maybe it was Call of Duty, something, anything. And no one told him that it was going to be so cold. The more you know. That's not to say that he wandered around the base doing nothing like Clinger, but even when he was sent on his first patrol shift, something didn't wear off. They were sent in teams to patrol and keep secure different parts of the city, though no matter where he was assigned, someone else always suggested that they split up to "cover more ground," which was a line he thought only cheesy horror movies would use to kill off the characters no one liked right away. Thinking back again, he felt there was something to gain from this right away. As he trotted through the city's dirt roads, he did his best to admire it. It wasn't big and beautiful like Chicago or New York, but it went out as far as he could see, surrounded by cliffs and mountains, dirt roads, men in kufis and women in burqas going about their lives as if neither he nor anyone else in their kevlar and their helmets and their big guns weren't even there.

He expected scuffs and trouble from the locals, at least, but there wasn't even that. A week or two into his tour, an old man selling fruit out of the back of a battered truck even made him a cup of tea without even asking. Michael did his best to politely gesture no, but the sweet old man insisted—Dari, Pashto, Arabic, whatever, he couldn't speak it, so he went with it. He walked along, pointed his rifle downward, and sipped the paper cup he'd been given. It didn't taste like much, but its echoing warmth on his cheeks was a nice counteract to the chills and the wind. It made him feel almost at home until he finished the cup, tossed it aside, and checked in with his CO that everything was fine, that there was nothing going on, except for maybe getting stares every now and then, but he read somewhere that that was common in this part of the

world. Or maybe that was Pakistan; he couldn't even remember. He wanted to interact with the locals, maybe learn something about a society that was so completely different from his own, at least get a good story out of it, but none of that was remotely possible if he couldn't speak the language. Any of them. They say that the best way to learn any language is complete and total immersion, but he was bombarded with so many, and even when he stuck to neighborhoods that spoke mainly Dari, he couldn't even pick that one up—all he could do was smile and say *salaam*.

On one of his many patrol tasks, he wondered why he never got to do any of the cool stuff, like diffusing bombs or rescue missions or anything like that. Bullets didn't even whizz by his head. Not then, anyway. Well, he knew *why*, but he felt bad about it, since normally he went out and got what he wanted, but here, he wasn't even sure what that was. He knew he shouldn't have been complaining about something so stupid, wishing for a near-death experience, but Jesus Christ, it was so fucking *boring*. Then he thought that maybe he didn't go out and get anything for himself and wasn't ever that ambitious, in high school, even before that at home, maybe he thought it all just fell right into his lap. Girls, B plusses, “party” invites, and so on. He reminisced about the days when he had to keep himself awake studying for tests, and when he looked away from the books, the wall was suddenly fascinating, with no end to the wonder to be found until he actually went into school and got the exam over with. Here, there wasn't even anything to look away from. It all surrounded him in a big austere blur. He had his laptop and his DVDs and a couple of books, but even so, they mitigated next to nothing. He then immediately remembered that so much of his downtime in high school was spent with Jackson either watching TV or doing nothing, and only then did he realize how much he was used to having him around. He didn't think it would be so dull if all the buddies he made in basic actually ended

up being stationed in the same place he was, but they weren't. He had to start all over again, and being stationed in the middle of the Afghan mountains hardly has the same social appeal as, say, a frat party or dinner at your girlfriend's house.

His shift was over one evening, and he walked all the barracks, standard procedure. He lay on a bottom bunk, in the corner of the facility, alone, returning to binge-watching every episode of *The Office* for the fourth time. After an hour, he got up, took a piss, returned, and jammed his headphones back into his ears. He was sucked in for another ten minutes or so before someone tapped him on the foot.

"Simpsons?" he said.

"Yeah, man. No laws against streaming out here," Michael said. "Wanna sit and watch?"

The man shrugged. "Sure. Why not. Just don't get weird about it."

Michael gave him a look. Was that supposed to be a joke? Or a threat? Was this middle school, but worse?

"I'm fucking with you. Andy," he said, extending his hand.

"Mike," he said. "Pleasure."

He unplugged the earphones and put the computer on the bed across from them, and turned up the volume. The evening was still young, so anyone who complained about the minimal noise could blow it out his ass.

"Where you from?" Mike asked him.

"Rolling Meadows, Illinois," he said, "the other other city of light."

"Hah. No shit. Niles here."

"Wow, man, that sucks. Sorry to hear that."

"Like Rolling Meadows is any less of a shithole than Niles."

Andy shrugged playfully. “Fair enough.”

Two more episodes and they were already laughing and joking like they’d been friends for ages. Andy made it clear that this wasn’t his first time around and that he liked Michael enough to show him the ropes, whatever that meant, since he was pretty sure that was the entire point of basic, but hey, no need to shun a new friend. Andy stood up for a bit, and paused the stream.

“Hold up,” he said. “I got a bottle of Jack I’ve been meaning to break out. But you gotta be quiet.”

“Fine, dude. Whatever you’re into.”

“Seriously—everyone has a stash of *something*, and no one wants to pay the insane prices they charge at the bazaar. It’s like when everyone and their mother bugs you for a piece of gum in grade school when one kid finds out you have a pack.”

He was gone for all of five minutes before he strutted back over with a bottle of Jack Daniels. Afghan customs permit two liters of alcohol into the country for every foreign national, but they were in the United States Army, so fuck that, they were gonna do whatever they damn well pleased. Neither of them had anything resembling a shot glass, but even so, they took turns happily glugging the copper slurry as if it were the last thing they’d ever touch. They exchanged more stories and told more jokes, and the two of them were amazed they never interacted with each other even though they were in the same unit in basic, though Michael knew it was mostly his fault, since he kept most of himself, a change in himself he was still unable to explain. Andy told his favorite story about how in boot camp, he snuck out and went into town without a pass to go get laid, something to that effect, and got caught. They thought he was sneaking out—he was actually sneaking back in.

“Wait,” Michael said. “So *you’re* the asshole that made us have to scrub the fucking toilets with our toothbrushes?”

“No regrets,” Andy laughed. “Except, she was kind of a lousy fucker, but... actually, nah, no regrets.”

The two shared the last bits of the whiskey, promptly passed out, and nevermind. It was all good.

Michael found that the growth of friendships and acquaintanceships was greatly accelerated here, and accepted that maybe there was at least some truth to the whole brothers-in-arms thing. A day meant a week, a week meant a month, a month meant what felt like an eternity. He first struggled with its genuineness, but he grew to accept it; he wasn’t so alone—he met someone with common ground, common interests and a common voice in a place where he felt surrounded by rednecks and people he couldn’t even talk to, no matter how much effort he put into learning the language, which ever one of the day it was he felt he needed to absorb, internalize, and regurgitate like some soulless robot. All to keep America safe, sure, but every man has his limit, even the toughest and most uncompromising among them. Thankfully, he and Andy found that they couldn’t really get sick of each other. Well, they did—they just found it difficult, and soon enough, Michael didn’t even have to go out on patrol by himself anymore, and his CO even let him go into the more dangerous parts of town, places where some of al-Qaeda’s stragglers were ambiguously hanging out. The city never changed, even though it was vibrant and bustling in its own dusty, depressing way—at least, that’s the view that Michael couldn’t shake. Andy told him the old adage, that it was the graveyard of empires.

“Yeah, I could see why,” Mike said back. “They all die once they figure out what a boring shithole this place is.”

Andy jabbed him on the shoulder. “Never do standup.”

“What?”

“Just never do it.”

“Seriously, though—“

“Seriously don’t do standup.”

“Alright. Point taken. Jesus. As I was saying, I don’t know how you’ve been doing this for so long, man.”

It wasn’t that long. Two year-long tours for him. The bonds flew by, but not the time.

“Seriously, though,” Michael told him. “How the fuck can you hold out this long?”

The only thing that kept him going was the idea that, once he was able to do something other than walk around, he really would be able to make some sort of difference in this world, in a way that doctors or cops or presidents never could. World War III, good versus evil, whatever you want to call it, no one ever mentioned the glory would be so drab. Andy contemplated Michael’s incessant complaining for a little bit before he gave him an answer.

“Whenever you’re ready to quit your bitching,” Andy said. “Y’ever been to Shor?”

“To what?”

“Shor bazaar. The big-ass outdoor marketplace.”

“No, never been.”

“How the fuck have you been stationed in Kabul for a month and not been there?”

Michael shrugged and said nothing.

“Seriously,” Andy continued, “it’s fucking massive, and crowded. And interesting, And there’s all sorts of cool shit to check out there—stuff to take home to your folks, stuff for you, us, whatever you want, and it isn’t even that far out of the way.”

“Is anyone gonna care if we go over there?”

“Who gives a shit?”

Fair enough. Andy knew the ropes and he didn’t, so he figured it was best to swallow any lumps standing around in his esophagus and just trust the guy. He couldn’t figure out what it was about him that made him so nervous, but by the time they got to the bazar, all the doubt melted away. There was no way every single person in any branch of the military obeyed every little thing their commanding officer said all the time, because a hundred bucks says they got just as drunk in secret as everyone else did even though they were the only ones with the authority to get pissed about their subordinates doing it without them, or more importantly, at all. They made their way through the whipping cold to the bazar, where the weather and pocket snowflake flurries weren’t stopping anyone from selling produce or bootleg Seinfeld DVDs. Michael had never seen anything like it before; it was massive, and he thought that being in a soldier’s garb with big guns, not alone, he’d be able to walk through like he owned the damn thing, but no one paid them any mind. They were nothing new, and nothing so petty was going to halt them from making ends meet and feeding themselves and their families. Andy pointed out to which shops sold what—old VCRs, scrap metal, tools, guns, ammo, all the cool shit left behind by the Soviets, anything and everything. A few shopkeepers shouted at him, and he shook each of their hands as the two of them passed by, which he always gracefully reciprocated. Michael just listened carefully to everything Andy was telling him, observing and quietly gawking at those shuffling past him in crowds packed at stands and in the alleyways shoulder to shoulder, where

the men vastly outnumbered the women, and he could have sworn he was the only one who thought that was weird.

They walked around for a half hour, no trouble, and the novelty began to wear off a little bit before they finally stopped. Andy apologized for taking so long to find the right spot, tucked away quietly among the hustle and bustle, and insisted that it was a lot easier to speak Dari than it was to read or write it. He exchanges hellos with Ramesh, a friendly middle-aged man hanging out on the little turf he managed to wedge in the middle of this metropolitan wilderness. They laughed, they joked, and Andy pointed at Michael for an introduction, where he stuck his hand out for a handshake, but was corrected by the both of them—hand over the heart, but they knew he meant well. Ramesh dug through a few of his things, went through a small chest, and handed him a small twined baggie, which he exchanged for a note. Michael wondered what the hell it was, since there was no way it was what he thought, even though it looked eerily similar to all the stuff the DEA got on drug busts when he and his dad watched Cops on Saturday afternoons.

“If you’re as bored as me,” Andy said, “I got something for ya.”

“What’d you just buy?” Michael asked him, genuinely confused.

“I promise you’ll like it.”

They veered away from the bazaar to a quieter side street. When enough people were gone and those who lingered weren’t looking, though none of them would have cared in the first place, Andy took a knee, sat on a step, and undid the twine. He unzipped a pouch on his hip, containing a smaller black one, from which he took a small syringe and the upper half of a spoon. That’s when Michael began to squirm and wonder how the only decent friend he made was also completely out of his fucking mind.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he whispered forcefully.

Andy turned up to him, all while he sprinkled pinches of the whitish powder on the spoon and cooked it with a lighter, all automated.

“Jesus, dude, relax,” Andy said. “Everybody fuckin’ does this here.”

“No they don’t, dude. That’s not a thing.”

“Everyone smokes in France, don’t they? Same difference.”

Michael wasn’t really sure if he agreed with that or what the hell Andy was on about, but he decided to just stand, keep an open mind, all the things his dad said to him. He knew he would see some weird shit—he just didn’t think it could come from someone who looked the same as him. He wanted to ask questions to show that he wasn’t some goody two-shoes, but he couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t make him sound like a jackass.

“You can forget that D.A.R.E. shit right now,” Andy told him, half-jokingly. “Don’t be a pussy. This is nowhere near as bad as everyone says it is if you aren’t a retard. Let me ask you. Are you a retard?”

“No,” Michael laughed. “It’s all good, trust me. Maybe you could not be a dick for once.”

Andy shrugged.

“Fair enough.”

The batch took up most of the spoon, and Andy guided him through the motions, the ropes. As the tar bubbled on the spoon, he uncapped the syringe and pulled the plunger back. He tapped it, too. He wasn’t sure what that did, but everyone he’d ever seen use a needle did it, so he didn’t think it was too bad of an idea. Both of them had big arms with big veins, so sliding the needle in wasn’t a problem. Michael, following Andy, pressed down on the plunger slowly, pulled it back again, and watched the tar and his blood flow and dance in the barrel together in clouds of crimson ink, and pressed it back down again, first a little bit, then the rest. Not so bad,

he thought. He sat and waited a minute for his pal to finish up. They tossed the syringes, and Andy put away everything he needed to—the half-crumbled façade they were sitting behind made excellent cover. Andy picked up his rifle, and walked along the side of the street like nothing happened at all, wearing a slight smile.

“Is this it?” he asked Andy.

“Is what it?”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Just wait.”

He rolled his eyes and couldn’t figure out what all the fuss was about. Well, maybe not fuss, but all the stories he ever heard back home about it seemed too ridiculous to laugh at. Robbing banks to buy more, running around the projects looking for a hit or a dealer or something, Vietnam vets losing their goddamn minds because they got hooked on it during that war, all of it just seemed like a huge crock of shit. He thought back to what everyone told him while he was still in school. At parties, his friends and the odd girl always told him, that he was a drunk who loved everyone, even his exes and the guys whose asses he so badly wanted to kick, and insisted that his love was infinite and that all the pettiness didn’t matter, and kept that attitude until he woke up on someone’s couch the next morning, regretting everything he ever said and did in his life as he picked up beer cans in the kitchen and in the hallways. Just then, he didn’t have to worry about stupid shit firehosing from his mouth or anyone else’s.

Andy clearly knew what he was doing, and having him by his side—literally that afternoon, even—made him feel all the safer, all the better, and that maybe the worst of the war was over and no one really said anything about it, that maybe so many of them were here just to keep up appearances and maintain stability across the world. America always surprised him, and

suddenly, so did Afghanistan. Every building, ruined and intact, tattered and not, was, in truth, built and sculpted by God, big blatant in-your-face features of the foreground with the clouds in the greyish sky to complement it perfectly, the dust, the little kids tagging along aside their dads, the base, the bunk, the bed. He remembered very little, but he woke up the next morning feeling better rested than ever, and it was made even sweeter when he didn't have to go out and do anything, not right away. Every once in a while he got to sleep in, and he did, and he stared at the ceiling, and the nondescript room that enclosed him, and it dawned upon him that there was love and grace in that too. Maybe that was the click that made everyone worth their salt grow up. Or maybe not, he still had a little time to figure that out.

Every night, George slept with a framed picture of his wife by his bed, even though she only lived an hour and a half away and they seldom ever talked. Every morning he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood awake, ready to shower and jam a piece of toast into his mouth and get the day over with, all too familiar with the very dangerous five extra minutes in bed. He usually did it all without any fighting, because he knew if he resisted, it would have a hold on him all day. He dressed and went outside, ready to get in the car and go to work. The clouds sheathed the sun as they did every day, but the glowing rays found their way through the clouds and onto his face and hands, and he was just fine with that until the freezing wind blew and ruined his day all over again. On his way over to his beaten, boxy old sedan, his phone rang. He hit the button to answer it on reflex, more concerned about getting rid of the incessant buzzing and abrasively low-bit noises than the person on the other end. He head throbbed.

“Hello?”

“George,” the man said from over the phone. “I got someone to cover your shift. You’re good for today. See ya Monday.”

Thank Christ for that. He only managed to get something like four hours of sleep the night before, and there was no way in hell he was going to be able to put on a show for a whole six-hour shift, even if it was just a desk job. He had a hard enough time fooling everyone else as it was. He was hourly, and he regretted the monetary loss, but he knew he would look like an idiot in front of his boss if he changed his mind at the last minute. Best not to fight anyone on it, and besides, the years of accumulated change all over the house was probably more than enough for him to get by for today, he thought. That sort of thing happens all the time, and he hadn’t bothered to clean the house in forever. He sighed, put his phone back in his pocket, and went right back inside. It was eleven in the morning on a Saturday, and Jackson had already gone off to his friend John’s house, and he texted him that he wouldn’t be back until late. He took off his boots on the rug next to the front door and threw his overcoat on the couch. So, there he was, all alone—not that he minded, for the most part. He sat down on the couch and seriously considered calling some of the guys to maybe go get lunch, or secure plans for later that night, but he couldn’t. They were all really nice, supportive people, way better than anyone from his school days so long ago, but getting out of bed or off the couch was always so much harder than it should have been. He knew something was wrong with this world when he became an adult and his only two endgames were sleeping and working things out with Alice somehow, despite everything. He surveyed the family room, and so much of it felt so sterile and empty. He got the reruns all day and in the evening, everything. Everyone he knew was out either spending time with their families or going to work or doing something interesting now that they had some modicum of financial security, or doing *something*. No one rubbed it in his face, but he sensed

that other people were doing other, better things with their lives than he was. God damn it. Why bother? Why feel this way? Why anything? He wished Jackson would come back and hang out with him like they used to when he was younger, but he knew last night he was more than tired, and he thought maybe he was too harsh on him the other day, even though he was doing his best to work on his temper with some stress management exercises he found on the internet. He figured it was best to just let him be for now, unwind on his own, and pry later. No, not pry. He'd figure it out after today.

He went back to the garage and looked at the watch Alice got him for their anniversary, though he couldn't for the life of him remember which one. Eleven-thirty. He didn't have to be anywhere at all if he didn't want to, and any errand in the back of his mind would take an hour tops, and maybe afterward he could go unwind, provided Jackson responded to his frequent (though Jackson would argue intrusive) check-ins. He opened the refrigerator in the garage and took a bottle of lager out of a case of twelve, and brought it back into the living room, and turned on the TV. As he sipped the crisp and cool texture never really got old for her. It brought him back to his true bachelor days when he'd do the same thing alongside his roommate who, with the wisdom endowed unto him by his biochemistry degree, told him that in many cases, beer was not only more hydrating than water, but also estrogenic. George sneered at that and thought, I am woman, hear me roar, and then laughed too long at his own joke. He flipped through the channels. The Price is Right, Days of Our Lives, Oreck infomercials, the wealth was endless, especially since he hadn't even eaten a real meal yet. He sipped on the last drops of the bottle, crumpled it, placed it on the coffee table, went to the garage, and repeated herself. On the fifth, when it was half-empty, he grew tired of taste, which became more like watery molasses and less like a Dos Equis. He was never *that* big on beer to begin with, always more of a cocktail man,

but he certainly never minded it, and always had some lying around. It reminded him of Alice—it was a household staple. She could sit on a Sunday afternoon and guzzle two six packs of it while watching a movie with Michael and Jackson and never gain a single pound, a source of playful envy for him, and she always made him smile, but it irked her a little bit that she was never his entire world, but even their little differences worked when they both wanted them to, which would all come and go in waves.

George twisted off another beer and remembered their first date like it was yesterday. They kept passing each other when they were taking bus to work, where they turned out not to be so far away from each other. She, short and twiggy and tough, was suddenly all shook up when she looked him in his eyes, blue like aquamarines, and his grace and coordination and his beard and everything there was to admire in a man. When he asked her out finally, he didn't have anything elaborate planned—he enjoyed the simple pleasures more than anything else, and later regarded all the fancy stuff as a waste of time, flowers, chocolates, candlelit dinners, spa treatments, gifts, lingerie and their bows, whatever his inexpressible criteria were on whichever day. He only wished, even now, still, that she said something calmly about it. If he knew he were upsetting her so badly, he would have done *something* about it. It was a beautiful summer night, and they didn't do anything but go for drinks and sit on the balcony of somewhere nice while they people watched, and later walked in the park with ice cream cones in hand while the backdrop of pinks and yellows and blues pillowed every step on the gravel path. They weren't even there for that long before they noticed the valleys (even though they were definitely put there by the finest ditch diggers the post-grad market had to offer) reached as far as they could see before bleeding into a backdrop of evergreen trees and oaks. They exchanged their stories and their likes, going so far beyond the small talk and snappy jokes they shared every day, just as

she wanted. Even though he did most of the talking, she certainly didn't mind. All the stories he told, he stood up for himself, all the times he'd been tested, he prevailed, no matter the cost, except for when that was his family or friends. When he talked, he performed with vigor and truth and he was the realest person she'd ever met, and after that, just the one evening that ended in just one kiss, no tongue, they were completely inseparable, and moved in with each other after just seven months.

He got up and stumbled just a little bit, but the carpet helped her maintain his grip on his balance and reality, and then collected the bottles, one between each pair of fingers, and tossed them into the recycling bin, and he flinched when they clanged in the recycling bin all at the same time, a sound that was all too familiar to him, and living with George made it go from charming and kind of funny to grating kind of quickly, but even so, it brought back memories. They say that when you love someone, you fall in love with their little quirks and mannerisms. It was true then, and it was true today. The refrigerator in the garage didn't have anything good left in it aside from a few popsicles and a frozen pizza he was probably going to cook for himself later, so he went back inside, rubbing his hands together for a snippet of warmth. He went upstairs and looked for something in that refrigerator, and no, nothing good. Up top was the freezer, and tucked away behind a side panel was a bottle of vodka. He ripped it right out of the door, and put it on the kitchen countertop. He forgot all about it, so it was like a present. He threw a few ice cubes into the glass, poured himself a healthy dose, and sipped it. Gross. Like daggers in his mouth. He had no idea how anyone, including Alice, drank anything like that straight. He looked around in her haze for something she could use, and reached for one of the limes sitting in a bowl. Gimlet. Easy. There was a bandaid wrapped around the tip of his left thumb, and he didn't much enjoy the idea of getting any citric acid on it. So, feeling rather

daring, he cut off the ends with the knife in his left hand, halved it, once more, and sliced his other thumb open. He yelped and squeezed it with her other fingers, and gulped what was already in the glass. He bandaged herself quickly, poured herself another jigger, this time with lime in it, flinching whenever the air hit the nerve under his skin.

He didn't bother cleaning up the blood on the countertop—he could do it later when she prepped dinner or heated up something for herself, and sat back down on the couch with the bag of limes, bottle, glass and a bowl of ice in her hands. He put his feet up on the coffee table, a rule he forbid for Jackson and Michael but never for Alice or himself. In a small way, it was like being the duke of the household. Special privileges for special people. He rested in the same spot Alice always sat whenever she watched anything for hours at a time. Whatever was on, she'd watch it, and so would he. Old movies, the Food Network, even golf, (something she never understood), were all anchors to Earth and sanity. When they sat down together, he always had Jackson on his lap, Michael by his side while she was doing something else, and she next to him when she wasn't. Maybe she was knocking back beers, as per her gruff and real charm. He'd always have one or two, and maybe Michael could have a sip, but he always recoiled in disgust each time he did to his amusement.

George enjoyed thinking about all this, really. It was soothing. Back in the day, he never understood anyone who stayed in on Fridays or Saturdays—he could do that five days a week. Where was the fun in not going out and being with friends, she thought, when that's where all the action was? He concocted another gimlet, slouched a little more, and took a deep breath. When he got into the working week, he discovered that sitting around and doing nothing was everything he ever hoped it could be and more, and the more he sat on that thought, the less annoyed he was with himself for having someone cover for him. He could swear she was able to

smell Alice's old perfume in the couch still. Perfume is supposed to be discovered, not announced. That's the rule, but she had a hard time with that. He couldn't fault her for that when they went out together, though, because so did he. No matter what, at least one of them was sprits over the limit, and it always came into full force when Michael and Jackson went to sleep and he stood up or walked around or she slapped the shit out of him and when he couldn't take it anymore, he threw her against the wall and rammed his fist into her rib cage because it was really she who couldn't do anything right. At first it was a fluke. Everyone says and does dumb stuff when they're drunk or emotional, double if you're both, but it was almost comically similar to a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde scenario. At the end of the evening, after the ethanol had been coursing through his veins for hours, he would stand up and complain about this or that. Emasculating him, and for what, she could never figure out, but it was always something. She always apologized, as she probably should have, but never followed up on it, but that didn't matter. She only meant it sometimes. All he could think to do to stand his ground—women are crazy, and she wasn't a special snowflake. Love comes in all shapes and forms. George looked up, feeling woozy. There wasn't a whole lot left in the bottle, so he took a swig and puckered it down. He left the glass on the table, and clutched the lime, the bottle of vodka, and the remaining beer bottles into her arms. He opened the front door with her back, and stepped outside into the snow where she looked around outside. No one was around, and she dumped everything into her neighbor's garbage can, and went back inside. As much as he enjoyed reliving memories alone, as he wanted (and didn't) to remember them, a nagging feeling sprouted in his belly that said he had to do something productive. He went to the kitchen table and looked at the mail scattered all over it, mostly bills and all sorts of political action this or that begging for his money.

He picked up one of the open, unpaid bills and held it in his right hand. Simkins Funeral Home. Six thousand four hundred and ninety-seven dollars and forty-one cents for everything. The neighborhood promised, with great success, to pick up the costs for him, and he was more grateful than he could ever express. He just wished they sent the goddamn bill to someone else, because just isn't what he needed. Michael was a hero, that's for sure, but at the end of the day, in the real world, right in front of him and Jackson, that didn't change a thing, and couldn't help but feel like everything was supposed to be different. He didn't know how—just different. Better. He put it down when he noticed that the blood from his hand seeped through the cheap plastic bandaid and onto the paper, staining it. He went to change the bandage to something thicker, and checked the time again. It still wasn't even that late. He turned off the TV, and staggered his way to the bedroom, deciding finally that he'd just finish the rest of the bottle straight away, no delays.

Everyone came to the funeral. His friends, Jackson's friends, family, the whole town, the church, the PTA, everyone. He and Jackson both barely remembered it, since George had to keep it together while Jackson wailed in his brother's room, and when he wasn't, he was running off to the corner of the yard smoking joints he had Macy roll for him a week before and sipping beer whenever he could, not only a reminder of his older brother, but something that helped him better maintain a steady buzz, and on the day of, he didn't say anything, or even cried. George knew, since Jackson didn't even try to hide anything, but he didn't even bother saying anything. Even if either one were sober, they would've been cried out anyway, so as far as Jackson was concerned afterward, it wouldn't have made any difference. He did remember going into some side door, in the big chapel where the after-school religious education teachers forced him and his friends to memorize prayers, whose steeple spiked into the grey clouds and little drizzles, the

Niles he knew. The ceiling arched almost in blackness, and it loved gold and purple, with a massive illuminated cross suspended above the altar. When Jackson couldn't keep squeezing his eyes shut any longer, he kept looking around making those observations to distract himself and forget where he was, but it always lingered in the back and front of his mind, and his father did the same thing, only more quietly.

George remembered the open casket, and saw that Jackson could only breathe in little tiny bursts, unable to the same air as the corpse, no longer his brother, or any one the ones embalmed before it. In the parlor stood packed together like blades of grass family and friends. George towered over everyone else, dressed in blacks darker than everyone else's wailing that she didn't know how she was going to get through this. He was heavily medicated, professionally and on his own terms, swaying his head around, trying not to fall off the Earth. The way he swayed and swung made Jackson think for a second that maybe he really would.

Jackson hated the body's new haircut—George chose to ignore it. It's like they'd didn't even bother to give him a rinse or anything like that—they just chopped it up into something like a stock photo. Whatever they caked on the face couldn't hide that something had withered. Jackson hated looking at it, and, almost thankfully, it wasn't looking at him back. Their uncles stood and said nothing; he knew that if he even said one word, the whole tough guy act would have crumbled in front of everyone, and he couldn't let that happen. For their wives, for their nephew, for Michael's friends, they had to grit their teeth and be men, whatever that was supposed to mean. Jackson stood around for hours, and decided he couldn't handle it anymore. He didn't really feel like it. He was tired of the sobbing, of the roses, of the standing and the sitting, and the faint smell of uncomfortable perfume and the haunting feeling he would be buried with it. Even so, that didn't allow him to leave like he kept wishing for in his head.

Actually, in retrospect, he remembered all of it, no matter how much he fought it, everything but the big speeches or the condolences strangers tried to shoot his way. But he wouldn't have remembered those if he had been all there anyway. Nobody knew, and if they did, nobody could blame him. It took George days to get Jackson to come out of his brother's room except for to eat, shower, or try to make it through two thirds of a school day before breaking down again in class quietly, and sneaking out on the first door through the one door to which the administration forgot to assign a watchperson.

“And please,” said the priest. “Go in peace.”

George leaned forward just a bit, with a knot in his stomach, and shed a few tears. He stepped inside the bathroom to watch himself cry in the mirror, but he could hardly see it, and then pivoted to his right to disgorge the contents of his stomach into the bathtub. He cried out in pain, in slapping his sliced skin on his thumb against the corner of the sink's countertop, and before he fell to his knees to throw up in the bathtub one more time. When he finished, he ran the water, but fell asleep draped over the side of the porcelain before he could get most of it down the drain. No matter—he'd be fine before he had to go anywhere. What was that thing Michael always used to put in his letters? S.S.D.D.?

It wasn't that far into Michael's tour until it was “him or me.” A few weeks after his first taste of content sanity, he didn't need it or anything else, just the once off now and again to boost him through the terrifying boredom and help him adjust. Nothing sinister. The afterglow of the feeling rippled like tiny waves through him, and that was all he needed. We all have our moments of weakness and gall, and if that was what every teacher and mentor ever told him to avoid then maybe his mom telling him not to talk to strangers and not go outside when he was

little, all that, was so unbelievably overblown. He remembered the Polish exchange student in high school one semester had no idea what any of them were talking about when Michael and his friends complained about age curfews and drinking laws for kids their year. When Michael got drunk with his friends (and his best to hit on girls he could have sworn had a thing for him, no matter how many times each of them denied it), he always made it a point to crash at wherever he was making questionable decisions. The kid didn't understand what was so dangerous about staying out, and while Michael agreed, he never protested, and a little bit of that paranoia was instilled in the back of his mind. Now it was gone, mostly.

His CO decided it was time to elevate him just a little bit and have him be a part of an effort to secure the more dangerous and chaotic parts of Kabul. It Michael and Andy, it sounded like a crock of shit, and it probably wasn't anything more than what they'd already been doing. They always talked shit, constantly building up jobs to make them sound a lot more crucial to the whole operation than they really were, and the worst part is that that a lot of the guys actually bought it, the jackasses from Alabama in particular. No matter, though. Even if Michael wasn't cut out to be a solider like he thought he was, this was nothing until his service was over, and if he could grit his teeth and bear break-ups and his dad's death, he could handle anything. Part of being a man was being broken so that it would build you up to heights you'd never even thought possible from yourself, and when he thought about it like that, it made it better. That, and the occasional mainline, but those were so few and far between, and it didn't take much to do the trick. They hardly counted at all. Andy and Michael made their way onto the sidewalk one shift, as they usually did. Their olive drab uniforms illuminated their bodies against the dark red brick wall behind them, and even more when a few bricks exploded behind them as they walked around, and then again in front of their feet. Michael crouched and scurried behind a parked car

and fired his gun. He didn't know where he fired, but they were warning shots. Maybe that would be enough to scare the shit out the other guy. When he fired again, and then another time, he knew that didn't make sense, since he wasn't going to stop until both of them were dead. Another bullet whizzed into the hood of the car, and then another through the window. He didn't know where Andy went, but it didn't matter, he needed to get the fuck out of there, with or without his help. With the butt of his rifle, he busted the side mirror off the car, and looked at it to see where the shots were coming from. Building just up the road. Corner office. No windows. He fired again, and as soon as he got close enough, he tossed a cooked grenade into the window. The room popped and fingers and limbs drizzled like confetti, all bouncing on the pavement. He almost rocketed a fist made of MREs and swallowed chewing gum onto the curb, but he swallowed it and ran back to the moving blur far away, his best friend, no one else.

Andy was comforting at first, telling him he was going to be okay, but when Michael didn't stop the shouting or the shaking, he batted him across the face with the ball of his wrist, if not just to get him to shut up. He was only attracting unwanted attention. After that, he told him over and over again that it was him or the other guy, no in between. That was it. This was war. People complain about the boredom every time they can open their goddamn mouths, but would they really swap it out for this if they had a choice? Not a chance in hell. Andy radioed for backup while he held Michael, who trembled for forty minutes, in an alcove on a side street not far from where they were. When they got there, they drove him back, and he sat down by himself on his bed. He insisted that he be left alone, and considering the situation, they let him call the shots. When he *was* finally alone, he trekked out to an old cracked fencepost just far away enough to be a complete pain in the ass. He scratched the dirt with his hands, and dusted off a little pouch of bad of bad brown leather. He stuffed it into his waistband, walked all the way back,

and sat on a toilet seat where he walked himself back through the basics, just like Andy told him. Lighter, spoon, syringe, in, out, in. Simple. When the usual serenity set in, he was quickly able to reconcile the guilt. Given the situation, it *was* him or the other guy. He did what he had to do, and remembered one of many things his dad taught him. He struggled to remember the exact words, but it was something about how terrible things and hardships make us better people in the long run. The more he bounced that thought around in his head, the sooner his heart rate dropped, and he dozed off to sleep. Worst case scenario, he'd get used to this sort of thing, and be a better, tougher, stronger man, and that was the endgame, after all. Nothing to worry about.

Every hour of every day felt like it repeated itself. The hours dragged on even more than they used to, and Michael couldn't figure out why. It transcended just boredom—it felt more like a very offensive purposelessness, like they sent him and thousands of others halfway around the world as a really crappy practical joke or something, even if the heroin's afterglow lasted for days. He and Andy would do their thing, make their rounds, the same routine every day, and every day, nothing changed around them. The same people wore the same clothes and went the same route to do the same things. They slinked along, trying to stay awake, though Michael certainly fought harder than his friend beside him. He had no idea how he managed to stay so composed all the time, and wondered what he was doing wrong or what he was missing. It was the early afternoon, and the two decided to take a seat by the side of the road, just for a little while. Just up the road there was parked a shiny blue sedan, a BMW, not too old, maybe a little too nice and clean for where they were. Or maybe they were just being ugly Americans. Andy mentioned that his dad had one of those, and when he was kid, he and the old man used to work on it every Saturday afternoon.

Michael listened intently, though he had no idea what exactly it meant to work on a car, or why it was a weekly thing, but it was another guy thing he'd get into sooner or later, so he did his best to absorb, and maybe that would make the day go by a little faster. Both of them walked over to take a look at it, admire it, the tiniest possible trip down memory lane. At the corner of his eye, Michael saw a man pull out a cell phone, and when he raised his rifle to get him to drop it, the sedan burst into shards and flames, chunks and rods of searing hot steel and flaming puddles of gasoline all in and around it. The guy with the phone didn't run fast enough, and neither did the little girl accompanied by her father, shredded into halves, decorated with the texture of the brick and mortar from the adjacent storefronts, now crushed into dust. Both boys ducked, paralyzed with fear, and both prayed to God that was all of it. Michael sweat and hyperventilated while a swirl of rage and fear simmered in his brain and back. He saw the detonator twitch, just a little bit, and when he did, he filed over to him and unloaded most of the magazine into the man's back. "Better safe than sorry" is how he would justify it to anyone who asked, he decided. He walked back to where he was, and said nothing to Andy. He gripped his rifle as tightly as he could, and the walking became a jog, which became a sprit. On his way back, he remembered lying in the grass in the nearby park district one early summer evening with one of his many high school sweethearts. They held hands, fingers interlocked, and she told him how amazing it was that he'd do something like that with her—no other guy would have ever done that.

"Do you ever look up at the sky," she asked, "and just... think about nothing?"

"Nothing?"

"Yeah. Just like pure thoughtlessness."

"Yeah," he said. "Totally."

He didn't care about a single thing she said, but God, was he good at faking it. He never knew what she was talking about before this, and when he sprinted back to base, suddenly everything made sense. Getting home was the only thing he could think about, and the only thing he could think about soon diluted itself into a vague greyed ideology until there was nothing there. The peace and numbness he quietly begged for was there until he had to stop himself and sneak back to his bed quietly. He knew he could get into serious shit if anyone ever found out that he ran away from duty like that, but fuck it, he thought, a good soldier needs to be in good health, like it or not. The Japanese have a saying: you can't fight on an empty stomach. When he went into the bathroom and shot up again, doubling his last dose from a few days before, and then a little more, he figured that this was basically the same thing, since it was about the principle, not the practical. He shook and he quivered, trying to process what happened to him just now and a few days before, sweating, pissing himself, before the opioid receptors in his brain took note. Something clicked, and everything withered away. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that his walking away wouldn't have mattered. It's not like Andy was going to rat him out or anything like that—men don't do that to each other. They take care of their own.

Michael always thought the shakes were something that was made up for the movies or those stupid anti-drug commercials, but he then realized there maybe was truth in television. He could've gotten more to keep them at bay, but he heard through the grapevine that some sorry piece of shit blew off Ramesh's head over a quantity dispute. Heroin wasn't at all difficult to get in Afghanistan, but that purity at that price certainly was, and he had to duke it out until he could figure out how to keep himself sane for as long as possible. If he could get through the other

stuff, he thought, he could get through this, with or without anyone's help. Michael apologized to his friend whenever he came around, running away like such a pussy like that, and each time, Michael smirked, gave him a handslap, and insisted that it was no big deal—shit happens, that was a lot to handle the first time around, don't pull shit like that again, and don't worry about it.

The thought of standing up made Michael want to vomit more than he already had been, but he also knew he wouldn't be able to stay bed-ridden forever, lest someone catch onto everything he'd been doing and dealing with these past few weeks, and nobody needed that. He did his best to distract himself by streaming more shows on the internet, straying off the beaten path while on patrol or moving things around base—little things that would distract him, even for a second, until he could go to sleep. He figured that the amount of time he could sleep soundly was proportionate to being normal again, despite the shaking and the vomiting and soaking his sheets with cold sweat every single night. As hard as he tried, though, nothing seemed to work, or, if it was working, it was taking way too long, and there wasn't anything he could do about it. No junk, no substitutes, alcoholic reserves ran dry, anything that could've helped him wasn't available. Andy began to take notice—he figured everything was just his way of responding to everything he'd been going through, before he started to catch on a little bit. They were out one evening, and Andy told him they were going somewhere off the beaten path.

“You find a guy?” Michael asked.

Andy laughed. “Not exactly.”

Michael wasn't sure what to think of his response, but he'd been a guiding light for this long that it felt almost wrong not to trust him. They trekked to a part of Kabul Michael had never been to before, and while he thought everything looked the same as it did in the areas he saw every day, something felt colder and more austere, but he also couldn't tell if that was the

aesthetic of the place or his gut was telling him something, which was only right about half the time. The cold at night was starting to be a bit much for him to handle, but as he thought about vomiting again quietly, Andy informed him that they were there, and through a back door with a broken lock, they walked into the first floor of an apartment building, run down, dingy, dusty, and alone. In through another door, and then another, paint chipped off all the walls, but at least the place had heat. It wasn't good, and the place smelled like chlorine and cumin, but it was certainly better than freezing to death outside. Andy, in front of Michael, quietly twisted another doorknob, and they entered what appeared to be someone's bedroom.

He had no idea what they were doing there. Michael guessed that maybe she was a friend of his or an escort or something, so he didn't say a word. She sat up, paralyzed with fear. Maybe she just didn't know who they were at first. Michael looked around. There wasn't much to decorate the room, but it looked like a girl's room, just like it would have at home. She couldn't have been older than fifteen or sixteen. She sat under her sheets, cowering in terror, and Andy just kept his handgun pointed in her face. Every two minutes or so, her voice would creak something along the lines of "Please go" in broken English, but that wasn't enough for him to stop pointing the gun at her and smiling at him. She and him would lock eyes, but only hers would flood with tears. They'd seen each other before. Michael wasn't sure if the withdrawals were starting to fuck with him, or overnight Andy had become a completely different person.

"Hey man," Michael trembled. "Let's get outta here. This place is a shithole."

"What, you're not gonna stay?"

"Um, no, I'm not."

He didn't know what to say. He had to be strong. Nonchalant.

“Don’t be a faggot,” Andy said. “You said you needed to take your mind off shit. This is me doing that for you, since I’ve held your hand every fucking day.”

He wanted to kill him, but he couldn’t argue with it. With each passing day, Michael had no fucking idea why he ever thought he was cut out for something like this, but it’s not like the two were going to a rational, organized debate right then and there. Something was wrong with everything and everyone he could think of, and the more that sunk in, the more his hands trembled, worse than they already were. The girl squeaked out a “please go” one more time, and Andy suddenly decided it was hateful, annoying, and more offensive than charming, so he jabbed the butt of his gun into her skull to keep her head straight.

“Jesus, dude,” Michael said. “Come on, man. Let’s just go.”

Andy said something about saying no to free pussy, and wrote off Michael, who tried to steer him away as delicately as possible. Andy reached over to her, but before his fingers could even touch her, Michael, who was still holding his rifle, pointed it at him, though his trembling made it impossible to keep a steady crosshair on him. She yelped, he hit her again and screamed at her. Michael tightened the grip on his gun, but did nothing.

“You won’t do it,” Andy told him.

He was right, and he hated himself because he was right. Michael lowered his gun, but said nothing and walked out. The minute he stepped outside, the cold made him shiver even more, and he vomited onto the sidewalk, and he trembled his way home. He tried to sprint his way back like he did the day before, but when he did, his knees locked and he fell face first onto the dirt. He curled up on his side, and the tears ran silently. The wind blew, and the dust settled. Gunshots. Vague and distant yelling, gunshots, some directions more than others. He opened his eyes every few minutes and thanked Christ there wasn’t anyone around to see him like this.

When he did finally make it back, he didn't go to sleep. He stayed up all night, trembled, and hoped he didn't have to look Andy in the eye ever again.

By the next morning, Michael had vomited five times, excluding whatever little morsels of food he forced himself to keep down. By now, his skin had paled considerably, circles wearing into the thin wisps under his eyes. He was amazed he didn't attract any trouble, but he guessed everyone had too much running around to do and too much to take care of than worry about him, which relieved him until the fevers came back. His grandmother quit smoking cold turkey, and at the beginning, he thought that if she could do it at sixty-something, he could do this too—he read somewhere that cigarette addiction and heroin addiction are equally difficult to break, but examining himself, always reeking of sweat and cornflakes, he somehow found that harder to believe than he did before. He couldn't focus on anything anymore. Any excuses for entertainment or interacting with others were replaced with shaking and staring at the wall, trying to figure out where to get some more, which would be substantially easier if he actually bothered to learn a language those savage pieces of garbage spoke around there. He held his head in his hands, and stared at his feet while he sat at the side of his bed. How did he get there?

Today was a little different. He had to venture somewhere outside of town, somewhere that required a humvee to get to. Michael grit his teeth, and whenever everyone was ready, he walked outside and waited, as he was used to, and got into the passenger seat of the truck. At least they didn't task him with driving, he thought. He definitely wouldn't have been able to focus on the road, or whatever was left of it, certainly not over all the creative variants of "Jesus, Schmidt, you smell like a dead dog's ass." He couldn't even fight back. He just ignored them. Andy got in the front seat, and he made some poorly delivered, smart-ass remark about how he missed out last night. "Heh. Yeah," was all he could force out of his mouth. He didn't want to

speaking too much because his teeth wouldn't stop chattering. He looked over to Andy, and noticed how his masculine profile jutted out of his uniform and his helmet, and while he didn't exactly wear a smile, he had no idea why he wasn't nearly as bothered as he was, how he could shoot up and not feel like he was, any of it. He couldn't think. That was nothing new, but at the same time, it wasn't something he ever got used to, like living in a constant anxiety attack, everything shaking, like he knew he was about to trip and fall on his face but never knowing exactly when. He squirmed in his seat, and sweat rained down his face. He checked his side pocket for any Advil, Tylenol, Aleve, anything that would make the headache or the shakes or any of it go away, just for a little bit, but all the little plastic tubes in his pocket were empty. Shit.

He tried to stare outside and admire the scenery, but considering how far out they'd driven by now, the roughly hewn mountain landscape repeated itself mile after mile, with the occasional stray sheep running around by itself or maybe a nicely-grown wormwood halfway in the shade somewhere just close enough for him to see. He felt the rifts of something rising from his stomach, and then he guessed he should have saved one energy bar for later instead of trying to down two at once. He struggled to keep it inside his body. He couldn't handle it anymore. He needed a smack, and he needed it right fucking now. He looked over to Andy, with his shit-eating non-grin, and the two guys in the back who he suddenly hated with all his life for not knowing what goes on beyond not-even-closed doors. Michael could only handle the glare of the sun for about a minute at a time, but when he looked up, he saw what looked like two tires nuzzling each other on the left side of the dirt road. He shifted his eyes to the left, and Andy didn't say anything. No one in back did, either. As they got closer, with the last ounce of strength left in his body, Michael shot over Andy's lap, who screamed at him with the other two to follow suit, and jerked the steering wheel over to the side of the road. The car spun out of control, almost flipping

over, and its wheel nudged the tires on the side of the road. They ignited, the sound and thunder blowing out all of their eardrums. The steel dented and melted from the heat, and the glass shattered when the car tumbled over, crushing the two in back, breaking Michael's left arm and gashing his stomach and chest. He looked over, and Andy wasn't conscious, either. Good. One fewer thing to deal with. With his right arm, he fiddled with whatever buttons were on the dashboard, and hit anything that looked like an emergency somethingorother. He spoke to someone—he wasn't sure who, but it's not like it really mattered. He unbuckled his seatbelt, and slowly inched his way out the door, swung open, clutching his arm across his chest. He lay his head down on the ground next to the back window, the bones and the blood.

Jackson's wounds from the week before were all mostly healed, and what he smoked and joked about with his friends made the process a lot easier. That is, except for Dylan not texting him back. In fact, he didn't text Macy or John back, either. He was really good at falling off the face of the Earth, sure, but this was something else. The more he thought about how to approach Dylan in person, the only way he to get in touch with him, the less he could speak without his eyes watering up. . He remembered the days back when he was a little kid and he'd get into an argument with his best friend, and then he'd want to go complain about it to his best friend, only to remember and realize that the same person was the problem and the solution, hence the pain. This was nothing at all like that. If Michael were there, everything would be okay, but there was something about death that made it so much scarier, so much more awful. It was one thing to have him on the other side of the world, and it's like he'd sort of grown used to not seeing him, even though he did miss him, so how was this any different? Dylan was pretty much the same thing, too. He tried to force himself into thinking it wasn't, that people drop off and that's life,

and maybe that would trick him into not feeling so awful, but all the brain tricks he ever tried to help himself study more efficiently never worked, so this wouldn't, either.

Jackson awoke the next Monday morning, even groggier than usual. He shuffled around under the covers hoping the darkness underneath would keep him right here he wanted to be: alone, and not in the company of anyone or anything else, except for his computer, and maybe some Skittles. Even with all the shuffling, it only delayed the inevitable, and he would have to go tromp his way into school and agonize over what choices and forces got him to where he was. He showered, dressed, and walked out of the house onto the pavement outside without even the usual piece of toast or coffee or whatever. He simply walked—he did not saunter or sashay—he walked, doing his very best to put him out of his mind. The skies, like the ever-blackening circles under his icy blues, like the way he felt about Dylan and the morning and the day before it, were charcoal and black and not letting up. It didn't ever rain, though. He plugged in his iPod into the hand-me-down sedan Michael left behind for him, and he got to school just on time, without any hitches, though it often seemed like he was the only one on the road. He considered swerving into a head-on collision, but he decided that was too Lifetime, too much, and he didn't really want to die, but it sure felt like it most of the time.

He walked into school and examined the all too familiar, all too run-down walls and lockers and fluorescent lights in front of him. It was such a contrast from the chapel, which had just been recently renovated into something distinctly beautiful and modern, with its towering stained glass and stations and pews down to washed out tiles and yellowing drywall, both gaudy and drab and depressing at the same time, clearly untouched by calculating human hands since 1975. Everyone gathered in the main hallway that made a cross-section for the school before class. That's where in the morning, everyone would gather round and talk about the episode of

South Park they watched the night before, cracked jokes to avoid the reality of having to sit in class all day, maybe sleep in the corner for five more minutes, or frantically do the worksheets they forgot about. He saw Macy and John in the morning like he always did, and they talked joked like they always did. Among the flood of people, Jackson saw Dylan's head sticking out of the crowd, and gestured toward him to his friends. From afar, Dylan had his hands around a girl's hips, Jackie Muller, and he was staring her in the eyes just as he used to do to him. Jackson began contouring beneath his clothes, pitting out his t-shirt and unmoving in his quiet fury. Macy and John kept talking, but their conversation tapered off once they noticed that Jackson completely spaced out.

"What's with you?" Macy asked him.

Jackson kept looking over, and people cleared. Macy and John both looked over there, and saw why Jackson would be annoyed, but not why he was shaking with rage.

"What the fuck is he doing over there?" John asked. "And who the fuck is she? Never seen her before."

"I don't know who the fuck that is," Macy said. "You know who the fuck that is?"

"I'm gonna go talk to him and see if this is why he's been ignoring me," Jackson said.

"You?" said John.

"Us. Whatever."

"Fuck him up," John said.

"Stop saying 'fuck,'" Jackson grunted. She walked away, and Dylan stood against the lockers, and he went over to see what his issue was.

"Hey," Jackson said to him. "Who was that?"

Dylan rolled his eyes and folded his arms. "No one."

“No one?”

“Yeah. No one.”

“You’re a dick, dude,” Jackson jabbed. He got quieter. “Suddenly you’re all troubled and confused and then suddenly you’re all over Jackie Muller? She isn’t even that cool.”

“Why do you care so much? Leave me alone.”

He asked him that without any jest or irony in his voice. Wasn’t the ‘why’ obvious?

“So that’s it?”

Dylan walked away, and he gave Jackson a quiet middle finger while he shouted after him, trying not to call him anything too awful that would’ve garnered the attention of some menial authority figure. The bell rang, he lost track of his friends, and all he could do at that point was sneak into his math class undetected into his usual empty seat in the corner, and when the bell rang, he repeated his daily routine, eyes pointed at the floor. He didn’t want to talk to anyone, except for when it was time for lunch—he didn’t want to be the single loser sitting by himself, and even worse, if someone heard about what happened, the absolute thing he wanted or needed to be bombarded by a bunch of people he barely knew asking him if he was okay or if he needed anything. As he walked from class to class, he thought about how great it was that he still had Macy and John to count on, but he still missed Dylan terribly, whom he felt he could tell anything, and when no one was around, he could lean on him without any judgment from anyone else. Those times were already so few and far between, and now they were gone, nothing to replace them.

Macy and John sat with Jackson at lunch as they always did, and knew he needed them more than ever. Macy, being the motherly type she was, policed Jackson’s food intake. Long after the funeral, he still wasn’t eating, and she did her best to keep him in line, and it generally

worked. John mostly sat in silence, partly not knowing what to say, partly out of fear of someone offending Jackson so badly that one of them wouldn't leave school alive. He had a bad habit of washing his hands of any involvement with anything. He couldn't deal, and even as he sat there with his two friends, he didn't think to try to talk to Dylan or anyone else. He was more concerned with all the kids giving Jackson, and by extension, him, weird looks from across the cafeteria, as they had been the past couple of days. Each class dragged on as monotonously as the other, and slouched in every seat in every class even lower than usual to avoid being called on. The thought of talking made Jackson want to cry his eyes out. Thankfully, he didn't need to unless it was absolutely necessary, which wasn't that much. When he got out of school, the plan was simple: go home, take a nap, ignore any work, and watch cartoons on the internet. He waited a little bit for the traffic to die down because he didn't have the energy to elbow past all the people he didn't want to talk to. His gym teacher had a knack for never letting them go early; changing out of uniform was deceptively time-consuming, and he never got out of there right when he wanted to.

He passed by the music department to get to the other side to the set of double doors closest to where he could walk home. In the distance, he saw Macy. He was going to run up to her to say hi and maybe walk home with her, but she was talking to a tall guy, and smiling widely, brushing his arm and laughing. His nostrils flared, but he decided he wanted to live, so he could just take the long way to go outside and bitch her out later. The straps on his backpack whipped around and dinged the lockers loudly enough for him to want to turn around. Tommy called after him cordially. Jackson was just going to ignore him—why give that asshole any time of day? He kept walking, the rage seething inside him, and he called after him again, Macy still

standing behind, frozen. Jackson turned around, and they locked eyes as he approached further, and that's when Macy ran away.

“How are ya?” Tommy asked.

Jackson said nothing in response, and Tommy called him a faggot with his patented phony cough. Jackson stopped slowly, and felt a certain tranquility inside himself. He walked back to Tommy, and slid his backpack down his arm onto the floor, lying up against the exposed brick wall. He approached Tommy slowly but confidently, trying to hide his trembles to the boy who was armed with his famous shit-eating grin.

“Sorry to hear about Dylan, by the way,” Tommy said to him. “Sucks, doesn't it?”

“Maybe you should just chill out,” Jackson said to him.

“Maybe you should just run home to your brother,” he said. “Oh, wait. You can't.”

He thought that was just *hilarious*. Jackson stared at him directly in the eye, all while the son of a bitch was cackling himself to death. He stepped closer to him slowly and confidently, until they were right at eye level. Just as Tommy was going to shove him away, Jackson beat him to it when he slammed the front of his forehead into his nose. The snap and the warmth of the splatter were oddly soothing to him. Tommy yelped, holding his nose, and Jackson threw a punch into his stomach. It was even more soothing when he kicked him in the groin, and again and again when he was on the floor, only stopping when he ran out of breath and was forced against the wall by two teachers holding his arms. They screamed at him to stop what he was doing, and he would have, but it didn't matter, since they both restrained him anyway. They brought him down to the principle's office, and he complied as best he could. The adrenaline was still rushing and suddenly a big weight was lifted off his shoulders. He remembered overhearing the radio one day on relationship advice. A minister who was trying to figure out some wedding

family dispute said, “God is all about forgiveness, but God didn’t want you to be a doormat, either.” He figured he could roll with that philosophy and not feel bad.

The principle and the big burly teachers all stared at him while he avoided contact with any of them, and any time they asked him any questions to either press him for info or provoke him, Jackson said nothing and quietly twiddled his thumbs; he knew better than to whip out his phone or his iPod. The principle called in his father, who arrived not ten minutes later, and asked him what the hell had gotten into him, and that it was so unlike him. He explained to them that he’d been under a lot of stress, with the death of his brother and everything, and managed to keep herself from tearing up while she did so. After waiting a while, Jackson decided he didn’t want to be there anymore. He just couldn’t muster the strength to give a shit, so he told them all the truth they needed to know.

“He’s been doing this the minute I got to high school,” Jackson said. “I got tired of his shit. Simple as that.”

They didn’t look satisfied.

“Ask him yourself,” he continued.

Thanks to the school’s zero-tolerance policy and it being one word against the other, Jackson was suspended for another week. At the same time, they threw in the whole Michael thing, and that mitigated it for the most part. George and the counselors at school agreed that maybe one week wasn’t enough time to emotionally rebuild. He drove him home, and they didn’t say anything to each other the whole time. When they got home, he went to his room, standard fare, and he downstairs, and the minute he heard him slam his door, he cracked open a beer.

As per usual, Jackson spent most of his out-of-school suspension in his room, alone, and his father certainly wouldn't allow any visitors, but worse-case scenario, he'd see them next week at school, even if he had to deal with blossoming rumors, now truths about his affair with *some* boy, and Tommy's degenerate friends, also now hellbent on beating the living shit out of him whenever he least expected it. Downstairs, George finally worked up the nerve to try and work together with him and figure out what was going on, to see if he was alright, if he needed to be put back on medication, anything to help him function better and be happy. He went upstairs to talk to him, whose door was creaked open. He was in bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to his iPod, flipping through Google results of his mom's maiden name. George motioned for him to take it out, and asked him about what he said in the principal's office earlier that week. Jackson had been less and less reserved, finding that to hold himself back was outmoded and unrewarding, that maybe he didn't have to get a second opinion all the time on everything.

"I don't know what there is to explain," Jackson said. "It was self-defense."

He wanted to believe him, but at the same time, he also didn't give a shit and had no idea what he was thinking. This was the first time he ever felt so angry that he receded into tranquility so stiff he almost couldn't speak properly. Something was amiss, he sensed.

"For what, Jacks?" he asked. "You never had any issues with other kids except for John every now and then. What happened?"

Jackson put his head in his hands. No point in hiding anything. He'd find out through the community's grapevines and little birdies eventually.

"Like I said," Jackson continued, "not the first time Tommy the asshole picked a fight with me. He made of Dylan, and when I told him to chill, he brought up Mike."

"Oh, Jesus," his father told him. "I'm not gonna give you shit for that."

Jackson sighed in relief.

“But why did the Dylan thing make you mad? You make fun of him all the time.”

Nevermind.

“That’s not the point, dad.”

George’s eyes widened. His fringe suspicions suddenly weren’t those at all anymore.

“You okay?” he asked his dad.

“Yeah. Fine. It’s just,” he stuttered. “I’m not mad. I’m disappointed.”

“Disappointed?”

“I want grandkids.”

“What?”

He took a moment to hold back the tears.

“Michael. I mean, Jackson. I want grandkids. And. I don’t know. Kids your age go through all sorts of crazy stuff, and Mike probably isn’t helping.”

They sat together in silence. George was afraid of what this might all lead to, the people he’d meet to get away from this, his treatment from school, family, friends, everyone. He’d never feared for anyone’s life like this before, and it took every bit of self-control he had not to explode in anger and frustration. Every little thing he read on WebMD rapid fired through his brain to keep him calm, collected, and soothing, just to be there for him, but suddenly none of it was working anymore.

“I think we should start going to church weekly again,” he told him. “It’s probably just a phase, and it’ll help.”

“A phase?” he asked. “What the fuck? You know what, go ahead. Make it seven times a week. See if it makes anything better. I’m not going anywhere. You poured out a bunch of Diet

Coke because you think it'll give you cancer," he snapped. "Are you fucking retarded, or something? Ignore the packs a day you smoke or all the shitty beer you drink while you're busy not fixing the house. Maybe if you cut back, I'd have a nice place to live."

He batted him across the cheek and the nose with the ball of his wrist, and again with his fingers, where the bandaid had come off, but the wound hadn't quite healed itself. He got up from the bed, shoved him into the wall behind him as hard as he could, and stuffed a bunch of clothes into a bag. He was so angry he could barely see or say anything at all. He went into his dad's bedroom and rifled through the little dish on their top dresser for his keys. His father stood in his way to keep him from getting out of the room, but he shoved her and went past. Jackson just said he was staying at a friend's place. The shouting got louder, louder, louder, until he sped off down the street. There was a remark about him and anonymous men in there somewhere, but he didn't bother to process what either of them said. He sat in the bathroom, thinning hair ruffled, with a plastic gill of vodka he had leftover way back from the fourth of July. He'd come to his senses soon enough, and everything would get back to normal again and everything would be just fine because the Lord made us resilient creatures for a reason—that's what they taught him in Sunday school and maybe that stuff was finally gonna become useful. He'd be back within the week, and everything would be fine.

Jackson, outside in the freezing cold, texted Macy, John, and Dylan to see if he could get a place to crash for just one night. The first response was from John about 40 minutes later, who called him a psychopath for doing what he did to Tommy Wilkins for no good reason. Macy said the same thing, and Dylan didn't respond, naturally.

Jackson stirred in his sorry excuse for sleep and shot awake, sunlight poking him in the retinas. He awoke when he sniffed the unfortunate odor of the couch he passed out on the night before, stained with spittle and cheap vodka. He was there only for the night, but one night felt like an eternity. He swung his legs over the couch cushion, observing everyone else in the cramped corner space, barely held up by almost-cardboard support poles. He decided that, after a little bit of fidgeting and crinkling his nose, that it wasn't such a terrible idea to plug in his phone and let the people at home know that he was alive sooner or later. Not alive and well, but alive.

Chicago has a nasty habit for its dry winters; blackened snow and slush up against the street banks and the houses and little office spaces crammed together while everyone else walked about their days, and in this part of the city, often with the same parkas every day, every day staring at their feet. Jackson was diligent enough to leave the house with his snow boots on, but not gloves. Not that it would have mattered. Even if the shelter, where he was sleeping weeping the days away, had insulation and heat just like everyone else, his knuckles would still have cracked and bled; his thumbs each wiping away at them were the only things there to help. He put his backpack in the little space between the wall and the couch, hoping everyone else there would overlook it, and stepped outside to escape the pissy sweaty smell ringing from and throughout the house's cushions and carpets just as sulfur and charcoal live inside subway walls. Larry, one of the handful of Vietnam vets, sat outside on the porch at 7:30 every night, not a second too soon, in the very same denim jacket and sweatpants garb, to chainsmoke whatever passerbys would offer him—usually cigarettes. The woman who ran the shelter wasn't particularly thrilled with the habit, especially when whatever he smoked wasn't a cigarette, but she knew it was best for everyone to just let that slide. And good, more for him. Not paying for any of it? Sounded like a win to him.

Jackson was all right drinking a few of his dad's beers and Smirnoff Ices with Michael when he wasn't looking and maybe passing around two beers between himself and two of his friends from time to time, but he promised he wouldn't ever take up smoking, because according to him, it would just be one more thing he'd have to deal with in the long run. Without the luxury of a computer, a desk lamp late at night, or a place to charge his iPod without it getting stolen, though, he realized that part of being practical in the shittiest situations like these meant that enjoying the little things were crucial to staying sane. A lot of these little things, unfortunately for him, were cigarettes. Drinks were harder to come by, so he replaced them, thinking of Mike and the good he did during his tour with every drag, sometimes wincing, but never in tears. Larry understood—that is, Jackson was pretty sure he understood. He always handed two or three to him, no questions asked, and sometimes with a smile on the right side of his face, the left inert from muscle paralysis. He would do his best to share what he could with him, but his mind and his mouth weren't doing him any favors. The wind blew and bit their ears and lips, and, just as usual, Jackson would try to talk to him, maybe draw him out like an armchair therapist, something, anything.

“Hey, Larry.”

He grunted softly.

“What'd you do today?”

“Applied for a job,” he said. “Call center. Gotta get a job at a call center.”

Jackson nodded, and asked for a cigarette. Larry handed him two, snapped one of but a few matches left in his book, and lit one. His drags took longer, produced more smoke, and puffed away as though it would stop the droplets of blood seeping out of the fissures slithering along his knuckles.

“Why a call center?” he asked.

“Need a job. Need an address for a job. Need a job to buy an address. They don’t care. It’s a call center,” he said, ashing his cigarette, and lighting another.

“Wanna hook me up?” Jackson asked, half-seriously.

Larry laughed curtly, and shook his head.

“I don’t need more competition,” he said.

Jackson forced a smile. He knew nothing like that would ever happen, but he would be lying if he said that some small part of him didn’t hope he could just forget about everything sitting twenty or thirty miles for himself, and start something else somewhere not completely unfamiliar to him. He wouldn’t reveal that to almost anyone, but the feeling was definitely there, dormant in his mind. Jackson had been there for weeks, and he was by far the youngest person there. No one seemed to mind, save the weird looks and quick uncomfortable stares everyone else would give him.

“You don’t even need a job,” Larry said. “Didn’t you say you were in school?”

“...Yeah,” he said.

“Then get to it. School sucks, but maybe you just gotta get to it anyway. Better than this shithole, that’s for sure.”

Larry adjusted the single pin on his jacket upright. “Give a damn,” it said. Jackson slinked his eyes to it, and then to Larry, who stared straight out to the beat-up building in front of him, where across the street a mother and her child or a student or someone inappropriately in sweatpants would pass by. Jackson extinguished his cigarette, and put one in his ear for later. He stepped in side, blood on his hands, and reached for his phone, charging and neatly tucked away inside one of his backpack’s side pockets. He blocked all of his dad’s texts, naturally. He knew

he'd summon support through the church's and the community's endless grapevines and little birdies, so he blocked all their numbers, too. Jackson knew it would be awhile before he would come to terms with everything and do what he could to find him, and even longer to succeed. He knew he, any of the priests, his friends, whoever, would say whatever they needed to him or whomever to get him to come home on his own accord, but Jackson was smart enough to know that had he even set foot in Niles again, it would be so much worse than what blew up in his face when he left the first time. Think of a nuclear bomb versus, say, a firecracker, something along those lines. Or maybe not. There was no way to tell for sure, and his gut was hardly reliable. Not then, anyway. Maybe his dad was right all along, that maybe he should be back on meds—anything—and it was starting to fuck with him. He always did his best to reason himself out of his feelings, his wants, his fears, everything. That never worked, and he knew it, but he repeated himself daily, never stopping. It was just intensified without it, and it wasn't anything he couldn't manage, but the Zoloft made it a hell of a lot easier back when he was still using it regularly, and kept the now-and-then shaking to a minimum when it wasn't from the cold outside.

But he might have been wrong. There was always that. As much as the place reeked of piss and there was nothing to do besides play Tetris on his phone (which he kept under his paranoid, watchful eye constantly), he had to admit that there was something liberating about being there. Maybe liberating is the wrong word. Egotistical, but in a good way. He felt like he was making a statement to everyone not so far away—they had no idea where he was, and he got a morbid kick out of at least one person feeling at least a little bit bad about him running off. When he stepped outside again and looked around, he thought that maybe the weather and the concrete and the slushy snow weren't so depressing after all. There was something hauntingly

beautiful in how horribly run-down everything was, but maybe that was the whole charm of the city's north side, and it was then that he figured out why no one left in the winter. At the same time, he didn't trust himself enough to remain on his own forever. And besides, he wanted to see the look on everyone's (whoever that may have been—he couldn't get bothered to get lost in semantics) faces for himself at some point anyway. Assholes. To his surprise, however, he received a text from Macy, who he couldn't bring himself to ignore, She told him to meet him in the school parking lot.

Sigh. Nothing to lose, nothing better to do. And where was the fun in leaving stones unturned? He didn't bring a whole lot of things, so he could come and go as he pleased, but before he caught the Pace bus back home, something caught his eye on his way out. The shelter, formerly a single-family Chicago-style bungalow, was shelves lined with books, though the guy upstairs would get annoyed if anyone ever took them off the shelf. He always said he wanted the place to look "respectable," though as Jackson picked up an old, tattered copy of the Yellow Pages, he had no idea what kind of respectable place would have this sort of thing on a front room bookshelf and not think it was at least a little bit stupid. He took it back down to the couch and sat down with it, carefully flipping through it to not tear the pages or smudged the well-faded ink. He jolted back and shifted his eyes, hoping nobody saw that, and especially hoped any of the creepier guys saw his finger pointing to a Franczak, Alison.

Jackson, against his better judgment, made his way back to school after a quick stop at home. Thankfully, his father was a heavier sleeper than he cared to admit. He ran through the cold, hands in his pockets, and got to the parking lot near chapel. He waited outside next to the same two steel doors he walked through for his brother's funeral. The cold froze the hairs in his

nose and his eyelashes, and his knuckles dripped blood, and he stared into the blackness of the night and the stars' sparkle, then the cars in the parking lot, and then the moon until its light started to warble in front of his eyes. To fix that, he picked up the stray rocks and hunks of asphalt and hurled them at the brick walls as hard as he could as Macy and John pulled up in her van and got out, Dylan nowhere to be seen. Jackson wanted to unleash all of his rage upon them, but he couldn't, because he loved them before, and he still loved them, even though their support was lacking at best. Even so, there was no way he was going to speak first.

“Look, Jacks,” Macy said. “I’m sorry. For whatever it was that I did.”

John stood and said nothing. He couldn't blame himself for just being the mediator.

“For whatever it was you did? For still being all flirty with Tommy Fuckface. I heard you say my name.

“I just told him to lay off.”

“Oh, yeah, because that'll work, especially after you run away didn't bother to even yell at him to stop.”

She tried to speak again.

“Fuck you, Macy.”

John tried to jump in, but Jackson cocked his head at him with a scowl that stopped him right where he was standing. They all stood around and shrugged after that. John saw a chunklet of asphalt lying astray. He wrapped his fingers around it, and lobbed it all the way up and through the window of the second floor math room. The group all giggled, even Jackson. that was the sort of thing they always wanted to get away with but were too afraid to actually do. They danced around and looked around for cops or security guards or anyone who might want to ruin their fun, but at the same time, knowing you could get caught was all part of it. Each one of

them one by one picked up whatever they could find: rocks, bottles, chunks of cinderblock, anything, and hurled what they could at the windows of the school and the chapel next to it, the big beautiful haunting room where Michael's grab, grey, ugly casket was placed not so long ago. Each one of them had fairly lousy aim, and when Jackson busted one of the massive stained glass murals, that's when someone came outside, and that's when the three of them took off sprinting in the opposite direction without him. Jackson managed to get home safe by hopping fences at just the right time, but maybe they weren't all as great as he thought they were.

George called Jackson relentlessly, and had about one drink for every call he didn't answer. He came to the next day at about two in the afternoon. He managed to sit upright with relatively little discomfort, and thank God for that. To think he once slept without a pillow and he couldn't look all the way forward for a week, lord knows how this would've turned out. He threw his sheets in the washer to get rid of any excess vomit and mucus, and turned on the bathroom fan when he got back upstairs. Before he was going to the authorities, he checked his phone one last time, and to his relief, he got a text from his son. Jackson curtly informed him that he was very much alive and just had to think a few things over. When George called him again, he still didn't answer. He didn't want to hear his voice, but George couldn't really blame him. At the same time, with that, he was absolutely convinced that Jackson would come back eventually, and that only after another day would he really have to worry about something. He wanted to continue his regular check-ins, but he couldn't. He didn't want to risk upsetting him even more than he already was. He rolled over, sat up, and dug through the drawer on her nightstand, which was filled with empty bottles of Tylenol and Advil and Midol and a few stray Skittles. He waded his hand among them, picking up each plastic bottle and rattling it, and after about five, he found

a few liquid capsules thick and intensely green, like emeralds, and choked them down with a beer he cracked open when he got downstairs and sat in front of the TV. As usual, one turned into two, two turned into four, and four turned into seven or eight, he could never remember.

Four days a week after work, he'd he would do the same thing, with only slight variation: slink over to the bar after work with some work friends, and, after they left, with whoever else would sit next to him as he down glasses and shots of this or that, and continue his journey home at about seven-thirty, give or take. For him, it was just a hobby. He never good too out of control or anything like that. Three beers over the span of a few hours was nothing, and everyone in Europe did that anyway. Alice could smell it, but she never thought anything of it, because too often for her it was difficult to tell where the reek of booze was coming from, though it was usually her, and she was too preoccupied with weird little voices floating around in her head. They were together for a reason, and they knew it, and their bond only strengthened then, always and every night. He prided himself on being a member of the old guard. The world to him boiled down to what, in truth, it meant to be a *man*. He upheld his principles and protected his friends, never faltering—if someone hurts my friends, I can't be held responsible for what I'd do, he'd always say—and he loved his family so much that it strained his aorta when he feared anything for them, and she felt it even more than he did, because what was best for her was best for everyone—a woman's touch. He respected that as best he could. The kids were heavy sleepers, so it never bothered them, and when she batted the ball of her wrist across his face, the bastard, it was because he was certainly a man, he was only a man. He could always be better, and he knew it, and when he said he would do anything for her, he meant it.

His last birthday with her was on a Wednesday, and she decided they should do something, just the two of them, since Jackson was busy sleeping the days away until he could

walk, and Michael had preschool together. The evening was perfect: they were going to go to his favorite Mexican place two towns over and just enjoy each other's company. They both enjoyed the romantic cheesy stuff whenever they had the chance, except for when he didn't, which could have been any time he decided otherwise, usually not, except for when it did. This year was standard: they went to a little place over in Edison Park, El Verano. She, petite and twiggy, he, big and burly, plopped down together at the same time with the same grace. They wore their smiles as they usually did, and he ordered a beer, she nothing. The place was more run down and less festive, but the fountain bubbling faintly in the background still felt inappropriate, but at the same time, it should never have been there at all. That was the place's frustrating charm.

“So,” Alice asked him. “How are you? How was your day?”

“Ah, you know,” he said back. “Just trying to maintain, same as ever.”

She forced a smile. She kept hoping he would say something else—he said the same thing every time she ever asked about his day. He was a smart guy, but she secretly desired a sort of injection of original thought he would only feel comfortable staring around her and never his guy friends, or what was left of them, but one was enough, Someone and her, and maybe the kids. He ordered a double margarita, but that was it for him. She slurped her Dos Equis, another, and then another, and then a margarita. He never tried to keep up with her, because he knew he never could, though she did her best to egg him on whenever the mood was right, which was always. Whenever he did try to catch up, though, it never resulted in anything good, usually him holding his stomach until inappropriate hours of the night while his wife was out like a light. She sipped her margaritas, and he did the same, all while they made their small talk and he did his big belly laugh, enough for others to look over and wonder what the commotion was about. By the time they were finished, they paid the bill, and she insisted that she drive since it was her car.

At first, he saw no issue at all. She did it all the time, what the hell difference did it make? He walked over to the car, no more trembling than usual, and she got into the passenger's side. She flipped on some old country music, a little too loud for his tastes.

“You sure you don't want me to drive?” he shouted over the music.

“I got it,” she insisted. Insisted. Always insisting.

She drove and he clenched onto his seat, hoping she'd get them home safe. Lord knows what would happen if he tried to take the wheel from her. It's not like anything *that* bad happened, but still, you never know. No one ever died by being too careful, haha. She drove straight and held her lane but then he began to swerve a little bit. Her eyes and her head, not the car, not right away. As she drove, she slowed down, and George screamed at her to pull over right now, God damn it, before someone else did. She thought for a minute, and gently told him to shut his fucking mouth, but she eventually relented. They loved each other; remember that. She slowly pulled to the side of the road, swung the door open, and he could hear her forcing air through his nose over and over again, a quirk he would eventually make his own. She stood up, waddled around the car, slammed the door shut, and he scurried to the passenger's seat and sped off home. She wanted to be so angry at him, but he just didn't have the energy for that, dosing off in the passenger' seat next to him, music still blaring in and out. All he could focus on was getting home, getting to Mike and Jacks, and nothing else—he'd slip the babysitter a few extra bucks for her trouble. Weird. Usually she'd be livelier than ever, cracking jokes and ensuring that she was recording his observations about every day life, but to his credit, he did just come home from another ten-hour workday, so he was hardly to blame for anything. It was about him, and that's all that could be said for today, except for when she made it about her, which, again, was always.

When they finally got home, he parked the car in the driveway, and he gently shook her shoulder to wake her up. She woke up, and waddled on her own out of the car, into the house, where the babysitter was quietly watching TV alone. Alice meandered over to the kitchen to fix herself another drink, vodka and tonic, her choice. George slipped the babysitter her thirty extra dollars and apologized, to which she rolled her eyes and left immediately. The smile she had forced upon her greeting faded, and turned into something a little more agitated. He just wanted him to go to bed at this point, and maybe she'd join him, but that wasn't really the point. She didn't know what the point was, but that wasn't it.

“C'mon, let's go to bed,” he said.

“After this,” she said, curtly.

“You've had enough.”

“Just this.”

He wasn't sure what to do. Maybe he should let her live a little; then again, he wasn't sure what exactly that meant at this point. He knew that telling her it put it down wouldn't fix any problem or whatever right away, but at the same time, it was better than nothing. Like each word that comes out of someone's mouth to fix any broken feelings, every little bit helps. Gradualism is a real bitch, but it could just save the world one day, he thought, but only then and there. It was one thought that permeated the rest, but he loved her, and any little nick and splinter down the line was worth it, kindred spirits both. She lifted the glass to her mouth and he put her hand to it, trying to stop it from going in, and she held there, steady, stiffening, almost ready to fight him. She looked him in the eye, and he said nothing, looking back as best he could. Why was he trying to take away the only thing she enjoyed away from her? Honest question, no

bullshit. She pushed him, glugged away, and fixed herself another, no skin off her nose. He insisted again, he pushed again, and his eyes narrowed. Two shots.

“Stop,” he said. “Come on. The kids are asleep. Let’s go to bed.”

It’s not like he actually wanted to sleep in the same bed as her anymore, but maybe the idea was enough for her to pass out somewhere first that wasn’t the couch or the battered LazyBoy they picked up at the Salvation Army for a really good price. She glugged what she could, but he just wouldn’t fucking back down, and frankly, that was his issue, not hers. She rolled her eyes, and poured herself another—a double of the Russian Standard she treated herself to for her birthday the month before, hoping he would just give up and go to sleep. But even that wasn’t her focus. She was going to have a good time—it was time to celebrate, wasn’t it? Even so, he was her world, and she wanted to spend her life with him, except for when he wasn’t and when she didn’t. If he kept this up more consistently, maybe they would’ve divorced by now, but he just can’t stick to his guns. That’s what really got her. Either do or don’t. Friends and wives stick together, that’s what makes them what they are. Good Lord.

“Stop,” again, he said, firmly, standing his ground, for whatever reason. Why now, though? She was tired and so was he, for overlapping reasons, though neither of them would ever admit that out loud. She sipped what he could from the rim of her glass, sure not to spill it, and thudded her way to the couch in the family room. George tried to get in her way, but she put her hand on his chest delicately before pushing him and kicking him in the knee and groin as hard as she could. He stumbled and landed with a thud and slammed the back of his head against the wall she was behind, a burst of blood to follow on the paint and on the back of his light blue shirt. It’s not like she didn’t want to help or anything like that—her eyes swung over to her left to get to the couch, the rest of her body to follow. She let the last drops of vodka soak into the tip of

her tongue before he passed out. George stood up, holding the back of his head, nothing serious. He walked over to the kitchen sink, ripped a few paper towels from the roll, and held it to his head, and if he did that long enough, the bleeding would stop, and they could talk about it tomorrow. He went to go to bed, and he saw Michael sitting there on the staircase in his pajamas, spacing out like he usually did. She jumped back startled, and told him to go to bed. He did, and so did she. When she was out cold, he took the kids to his mother's house for a few days while the two of them sort it out. Michael innocently asked his father why they were being so loud the other night, why there were so many crashes and thuds and why no one would help him get back to sleep like one of them always did. His mother wasn't around for this conversation, so his father did his best to smooth it over.

“Mike,” George said to his son, “when you get older, you're gonna find out that a man stands his ground whenever he can. That's what makes him. You gotta stick to your principles when it counts.” When he said that, he remembered how everyone else said the same thing to him when he was younger, and how little often he stuck to it. Michael nodded his head and went back to his room, not understanding a word of what his father meant, not then and there, but with his photographic memory, he will latch these words onto his back forever and stand his ground for those he loves: his brother, his mom, his dad, his friends, everything. All you can ask from a man is that he does his best.

Jackson did his best to drive slowly and conserve as much gas as he could when he drove around Chicago. He had about seventy dollars to his name and a packet of Jay's potato chips. He stopped by a local library on the way and someone left their card on the desk net to the computer where he was able to print directions from MapQuest for free. The more he drove, the less

frequent the skyscrapers got, and so did the cars, and the landscape blossomed with golden fields and stems of wheat and soybeans all the way to the end of the universe. He didn't know that something as boring and awful as rural Illinois could be anything remotely interesting, but whenever he stopped to refill, he could gaze into the distance and watch the plant stems ripple like the ocean tide, and the air was just warm enough for him to stand and admire a little longer than he could an hour and a half north ago. He unfolded his directions as he stood outside the Route 66, waiting for this gas to finally fill up. He only had something like ten miles to drive, and that wouldn't put a dent in his gas tank. There wasn't anyone around except for the guy running the gas station on the inside and the Subway attached to it. He liked that. He could spend as much time in his room as he wanted, but something always felt looming over him like a fever that would never quite crest. When he was done filling up, he got into his car, and didn't bother to plug in his iPod. He creaked the windows down just a little bit to hear the wind rushing past his car. The speed limit was seventy, not something he was used to on such a deserted road. He figured that life's simple pleasures were the best.

He pulled up to the side of the road near the same number and address listed in the old Yellow Pages book. 51 Norman Street. The little ranch house was run-down, beaten, but there was something familiar about it. It reminded of his own place, sort of, if not a little shabbier. A lot shabbier. It was a shithole, but whatever. He glanced at the mailbox, and it said, "Francisco." No one else was there. He walked up to the door, rang the bell, and a frail woman answered the door immediately.

"Hullo?" she said, annoyed.

"Um," he said. "Hi. Do you know if Alice Franczak lives around here?"

She gave him a look, but not right in the eyes. She reeked of booze, stared at him, trying to focus on him, but she was so fucked up that she had a hard time making out his image. It was a miracle she was even standing. Without saying a word, she slammed the door, went back inside, and Jackson heard a muffled thud. This was it. Without any second thought, he turned around, walked back to his car, started it, and gunned it as fast as he could as hard as he could, screaming and shouting as loudly as he could. It was getting dark, but all he wanted to do was drive. It was the closest thing he had to sanity in far too long. His dad texted him again, but he ignored it. He just drove. Maybe one day soon he could go home and everything would be back to normal, like it used to be. When there weren't any problems, and everything was kept under wraps. It was so easy to hide everything from his dad until everything got complicated. Maybe one day Macy and John would get together and go to Illinois in the fall, and knew they'd starting holding hands as more than a lame joke at some point or another, and he was proud that at least one of them had the chutzpah to finally say it out loud. Maybe Dylan would confess his love to him in a blaze of glory and it would trump everything, just like every awful romantic comedy he watched for five minutes. Maybe Mike was there all along, he was crazy, and it was all a bit twist ending in a bad dream in a stupid movie. Maybe not.

He pulled out his phone and called Macy, who picked up right away. He told her he needed a favor, and she agreed even before he could finish his sentence. He said that he was going home, but she owed him huge. She needed to come hang out with him at his place, alone, even in silence, and chat with his dad. She didn't want to do that, he didn't want to do that, but he knew at that point that the bastard was so desperate that anything that seemed even remotely like "normal" or "good" was, in truth, a return to form and happiness until he pulled some shit like that again. And by his standards, he would. But that's not the point right now. Jackson got

off 294, impressed with himself that he was able to go thirty-five miles over the posted speed limit and not see a single state policeman picking his nose on the shoulders or between those little divides where it's harder to see them. He swung, picked up Macy, who walked him to the door. George came rushing down the stairs, yelling and cursing but also crying from relief. Jackson held Macy's hand the entire time, and his father immediately stopped the yelling once he saw her there on the front door.

"Thanks," Macy said. "For everything." She really knew how to ham it up.

Jackson just forced a laugh and a smile.

He pulled back, gave her a kiss, and no one asked any questions. When she left, George didn't yell. He trembled this time in speech, and out of what, Jackson didn't know. Relief? Sort of. He walked up to his dad and gave him a hug against both of their wills.

"Sorry, dad," Jackson said. "Things have been all sorts of messed up."

His dad didn't say anything. There wasn't any reconciliation, no fighting, no cursing, nothing. George just nodded, with one hand on Jackson's back and quietly clenching a fist.

"You know I'm here for you no matter what, right?" George said, which was the first time that ever came out of his mouth.

"Of course."

Beat.

"I'm exhausted, though," he said. "Let's talk tomorrow."

George nodded again, and Jackson went into the garage to fetch him a beer, which brought a smile to his face. He resigned himself to his room, and stared at the ceiling. He wanted to cry and punch his pillow, but he just didn't have the energy. He was gonna go to school

tomorrow, make up all his lost work, and trot along each day, just like he used to. What else was he going to do? Fight back?