



12-2016

Little Left of Normal

Nicole Archambault

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Recommended Citation

Archambault, Nicole. (2016). Little Left of Normal. In *BSU Master's Theses and Projects*. Item 46.

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Little Left of Normal

A Thesis Presented

By

NICOLE ARCHAMBAULT

**Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies
Bridgewater State University
Bridgewater, Massachusetts**

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In English

May 2016

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Chapter One**Aimsbury, Delaware. 1969**

The smell of pigs isn't something you ever really get used to. It's a physical reaction, a wincing and turning away. A watering of the eyes. Maybe that's why I despise them so much.

This occurs to me as I shoulder the pen door open, to the noise of them--a chorus of grunting--which gets louder as they realize it's breakfast time. They push their wet, dripping snouts against my legs, and my stomach turns. I heave the slop into the trough as they nose up, jostling for position. I am not a morning person, and yet this farmer's life that I've inherited is a job that gets you up before the sun. I bang the bottom of the slop pail harder than necessary so the last few globs of leftovers and cornmeal slide out, and hang it back on its peg.

I used to name them when I was a child. The great-grandparents of this snorting, heaving bunch were Muppet and Bob and Evelyn. Names that were hilarious to a child who didn't know any better. A faded memory of my father's face presents itself, that unhinging of the eyebrows that managed to make him look at once angry and disappointed. That look gave me the same shameful feeling as the moments after jerking off did, when the warm splat would land on my stomach and the tantalizing veil of fantasy would crash and burn around my twin bed. The realization that reality would never live up to such fantasies has a curious effect on young boys, or, at least, it had a curious effect on me. As one of the larger pigs nearly knocks me over in her

hurry to eat, I conclude that it is still having an effect on me. Perhaps that is the one thing we as people can never truly make peace with. Didn't Shakespeare say that the root of all heartache is expectation?

They don't notice when I leave them to their breakfast. Not when I shove through the crowd of them, the points of my knees connecting with and sinking softly into rubbery, bristly flesh. Not when the doors shut with a creak-slam, closing them in. They don't realize they're trapped, despite the walls.

My back aches mildly, and I plant a palm against the base of my spine. Along with being altogether way too early, the farmer's life comes with aches and pains that my twenty-two-year-old body feels are insultingly premature.

I stand there with my hands on the small of my back, a posture that I know makes me look older than my years and, in the words of the boys I grew up with, "like a nancy." At the moment, there is nobody around to think these thoughts or voice this opinion, though, so I do it anyway as I survey the land, as is my usual morning custom.

My father would stand at the same spot most mornings, after he'd dragged me, still mostly asleep, through feeding the chickens, cows, and pigs. He'd look out on his land with an admiration that I in turn looked upon with envy. Whether in rain or sun, good seasons or bad, those hills and fields were his pride and joy. And yet here I am, left to be the captain of both. Fixing the shit he left behind.

A hundred yards to my left, the screen door off the kitchen swings shut, its weak aluminum frame making a dull thwapping noise that drags me from my thoughts. Benjamin pulls up short as I turn around, like a deer who's caught the hunter's scent. His short, stubby fingers are still straightening his tie as we stare ill-humoredly at one another. His jacket pocket bulges

with the ever-present flask of whiskey, and I wonder if he's already dipped into it at this early hour.

"Morning, there, Davey." His cheerful, oily voice makes the under part of my eye twitch.

I shade my eyes from the rays of low sun. "Mornin'. Care to explain why you're in my mother's kitchen before the dogs are even up?" It's been weeks now that the drunk banker's been paying late-night visits to my mother, weeks that I've been pretending not to hear the creak of the floorboards just before my alarm goes off. To acknowledge the affair is to acknowledge the shame it tracks in like mud on its heels. Eventually, I'll have to do something about the man dragging filth through my mother's kitchen, instead of pretending not to see, stepping over it with a purposeful blind eye.

Benjamin narrows his eyes at me and hooks fat thumbs through his belt-loops. "Well, I was thinking I'd stay for bacon and eggs, but then I figured you might not take too kindly to that." He winks at me, a nudge like a first blow, and my hands tighten into fists at my sides. He spits and grinds it into the dirt with the toe of his boot. "Best you get back to your chores, boy. All them critters will be wanting their breakfast."

I try to match his posture, upright, assured and commanding. "Hard for a fella to get any work done what with you sneaking in and out of the house at all hours." The broken capillaries in his cheeks are enough to set my teeth on edge, the wheeze of his breath a battle-song beating a drumbeat in my veins.

"Now, why on earth would I have to sneak, Davey?" Benjamin asks through a grin. "We both know you wouldn't dare lay a hand on me, boy. God damned pacifist, you are."

It's true. I was never much of a fighter.

Even as a young boy, I understood my father's frustration when I came home with dirt on my knees and empty pockets. He'd run a hand down his beard-scruffy face and order me to get his belt. His whoopings were always a salt-in-the-wound sort of beating. Shameful and full of disappointment.

Because every father wants his son to grow up a prizefighter, not a pansy.

"Davey," he would say, in a tone of voice that curled my toes and made it hard to meet his eyes, "you've got to toughen up. God help me, son, if you don't? Well. If you don't, then this damn world will swallow you whole."

He was never one for explanations, my father. His beliefs ran deep, iron-clad traditions handed down through the generations. Always throw the first punch, no questions asked. Never raise your hand to a woman, no questions asked. Own up to your mistakes, no questions asked. For Pa, there was no gray area, just right and wrong. Maybe that's why we didn't see it coming when he left; there were no clues to explain why, no sideways insults aimed at Ma, no out-of-the-blue explosions at me. He went up to bed one night and never came down to breakfast the next day. No muss, no fuss, just gone.

It's him that I think of whenever I hear news from Vietnam. While the radio pulses forth announcements of war, I can so very clearly picture my old man slamming calloused fists against a bar top in some podunk town in Alabama, spilling some of his beer and shaking his head at the latest news from the front. Wishing he were still young enough to fight, maybe. Or waiting for some drunk hippie to let slip word one against the good old U-S of A.

I was a bored, too-quiet eighteen during the summer of 1965 when the fear of war turned into the reality of it. While the world as I knew it changed around me, I went about my days feeding the animals, bagging groceries, and more or less keeping my mouth shut about anything

and everything. Quietly observing while the girls I'd gone to school with turned into real, honest-to-God women, and subsequently draped themselves over the arms of boys for whom youthful games of playing soldier had abruptly and brutally become real. The girls had romance in their eyes. The boys had fear in theirs.

Not much has changed in the four years since. I listen to the evening broadcasts with the same sense of anticipation and horror that I had on the first night they started pulling birthdays out of the draft lottery. Momma makes a practice of listening with me, her eyes downcast to her knitting, ears perked like a rabbit's. She's quieter now that Pa's gone, or else she's the same volume as before and there's simply less to fill the silences with him not around.

Benjamin adjusts his belt buckle and somehow I can't help but picture him a few minutes ago, pulling his pants on at the edge of my mother's bed. Where I used to sleep when I had nightmares. "It's nice someone's taking care of things now your Pa's run off."

I can't tell if he means himself or me, which sort of "taking care" he's talking about. He grins at the discomfort I can't hide.

"He ain't run off," I spit on the ground, try to get the image out of my mind, the vinegar-pucker of thoughts that shouldn't be thought. A bubble of spit clings to my bottom lip. "He's written a bunch. He's off on business is all." I scrub a dirty hand against my mouth to dry the saliva and streak what smells like pig shit across my chin.

Benjamin's nose twitches and his grin loses its contemptuous arc. The look you give a child when they talk about Santa. "Sure thing, Davey, no doubt. Guess I'd better watch my back around these parts, huh? Wouldn't want your Daddy to go on and catch me digging his potatoes." His eyes alight with mischief, the hope of a fight. With me or with Pa, he don't much care, but he knows it won't be Pa.

Every last soul in this town has concluded that Pa's gone for good, and my stories do nothing but cause them an uncomfortable shake of the head and an overpowering desire to be elsewhere.

The longer it's been since he left, the more I lie about where he is. It don't matter much what the lies are anymore. Ain't nobody that listens by now.

Benjamin and I look at one another, an unspoken truce. It's not worth his time to challenge my lie, just like it's a hopeless cause for me to try and force the issue, make him believe it.

He laughs, shakes his head, and turns his back to me. Waving a stiff hand over his shoulder, he disappears around the side of the house. He'll be back tonight, after my light goes out. Creeping like a burglar into the place that isn't his.

I hear his car crank up and rumble to life somewhere far down the drive. I wonder in a disinterested sort of way where his day will take him, what loans or foreclosures will consume his hours. Whether he'll think of Ma at any point before the sun starts to go down. Whether he even likes her.

By the time I kick off my boots and fix myself a breakfast of toast and eggs, Ma's gone for the day, off to sling cheap food at cousin Addie's inn down by the town square. She'll take lunch orders from families who'll talk behind their hands as soon as she turns away, cut their eyes at her retreating shoulders. She'll come home with grease slicked into her hair at the temples and saucy stains on her dress. She'll sit heavily into her armchair with a sigh and stare across the living room at nothing for a few minutes before hauling herself up to go wash off the eyeshadow and mascara that make her eyes an even more vibrant green, then she'll pull out the

French braid so her hair falls in loose waves down to her elbows. It's a move that seems to take more and more effort every day that goes by.

Age is beginning to take her, little by little, giving little compensation for its taxes. She has no great joyful memories to look back on and understand with a weary nostalgia that they were what she's bartered away her smooth skin and dark, silky hair for. Age has given nothing of value to my mother. It bites away another piece of her each day, a ruthless tax-collector.

I find myself staring out the kitchen window at a sun all the way up now, a day all the way started whether I like it or not. I leave my dishes in the sink and turn for the stairs, quick shower, is my work shirt clean? Did the laundry yesterday, hope it's not too wrinkled, but who really cares anyway.

The doorknob twists, shifts, clunks, and I'm holding a hundred-year-old brass paperweight that no longer has a function as far as the door is concerned. I grind my back teeth; it's been loose for months. I've ignored it just as I've ignored the other broken-ness in this damn house, Benjamin's defilement of my mother foremost on that list. I toss the knob lightly in my hand. I want to throw it, heave it in whichever direction, let it smash through a window or dent a wall, but self-control overpowers the rage. Some days it feels I'm too well-behaved to have emotions.

I settle for dumping it in the trash, letting it clang to the bottom of the can with a noise that I'd feel guilty for making if Ma were home. "You're fucking useless," I tell the door, resolutely closed because why on God's green earth would it break while it was open? "You're a big fucking pain in the fucking ass and so help me God if you don't open the fuck up I'm going out into the barn and I'll chop the shit out of you with an axe."

The door stares back at me with its newly opened eye socket. Dark and unblinking. I kick it with my sock foot, not hard enough to be convinced that I'm angry, but soft enough that it feels dishonest. I can fix it easily, but that's not the point.

I drop to my knees and get on eye-level with the door. It's like the whole damn house has been falling apart since the moment they nailed the last shingle on. Since I can remember, Pa was always grumbling about something that needed mending or shuffling around the hallways with his toolbox, his back hunched as he crouched under sinks and inside closets searching for shorted wires. And the day he left, the house just kept on falling apart, only instead of Pa shuffling and crouching and grumbling, it's me who shuffles and crouches and grumbles, and still I can't manage to get it quite right.

The rest of the door hardware sags in its hole, pins and tumblers and metallic nonsense. Organs no longer supported by their skeleton. I poke them out through the other side and pull the lock-pin backwards through its tunnel. The door swings lightly open.

The rest of the knob goes into the garbage . . . clang, clang, clang . . . and I wonder if I should take the whole door down, re-frame the jamb, turn a barrier into an open space. A few hours and a couple two-by-fours. I could change it, make space where there used to be enclosure, take it further from the house it was when Pa was here, turn it into something new. Maybe, piece by piece, I could replace everything. In enough time, after years or months, the whole house would be new. There could be floors that Pa had never walked on, a bedroom he'd never slept in.

Instead, I leave the door as it is, not quite open and not quite closed, and trudge upstairs. An hour till work, and suddenly solitude is a valuable resource.

Normally, I'd put the radio on just to have background noise. Something to talk to besides myself. But lately, all the radio wants to talk about is Vietnam.

Last week, they sent Ricky Purval back to his family. His casket was wrapped in an American flag; morning shoppers and kids on their way to school stopped and watched the funeral procession as it marched itself, stiff-backed and wailing, through the center of town.

They turned away from the sight of it with misty eyes, pulling out handkerchiefs and mumbling to one another about what a *shame* it was, and what a *hero* Ricky had been, and how *proud* his Ma and Pa ought to be. Should set up a memorial, they clucked and nodded. Something with his name on it where everyone can see. Hometown Hero, our Golden Boy, stolen by war, gone too soon.

My eyes, as I pulled them from the sight of Ricky's casket, were dry. Because Ricky was a fucking asshole. And fucking assholes get blown up just as easily as the nice guys do. No reason to name the whole goddamned town after the guy who found it endlessly amusing to elbow freshmen into lockers as he thundered down the hallways at school. The girls who'd dated him, sobbing beside his grave on the day of the funeral, seemed to forget the black eyes and bruised forearms they'd been forced to hide just a few years before.

So I'd watched the big stink they made over Ricky with something akin to disgust, wondering how the title of soldier was enough to turn an average country dirtbag into a martyr.

Chapter Two

The grocery is nearly empty when I walk in for my afternoon shift. In a town of so few, everybody's usually got better things to do than pick through produce at three o'clock on a weekday. Old Mrs. Bartlet meanders down the baking aisle at a snail's pace. She'll spend a good hour loading her cart with the ingredients for rhubarb pie, which she'll bring in for us tomorrow as another excuse to kill an hour. Being a geriatric widow, it seems, is the ultimate bore.

Nancy the cashier gives me a halfhearted wave as I take my apron from its peg and tie it around my waist. She plays bridge with Ma on Sunday afternoons after church, stayed a week with us after Pa left. I wonder if she knows about Benjamin, but then, how could she not? If Ma didn't tell her herself, somebody else is bound to have. Whether Benjamin bragged about it to his boss, whose wife is in Nancy's sewing circle, or the paperboy caught sight of Benjamin sneaking out one morning and blabbed to his buddies, it's a secret that's not a secret. A private shame

paraded out as entertainment for the neighbors. The blessing and curse of small towns; that everyone knows everyone. The intimacy of a blood family exploded out into bigger proportion. The claustrophobia of feeling like you're being watched at every moment. Ex-friends and estranged family members alike with the smiling police officer and the straight-laced school principal. They all see you. They all know what you did an hour ago, a day ago, a week ago. The jocks thrive off of this. They'll happily take the shoulder slaps and handshakes from a great touchdown or a close game from every single person in Aimsbury; shrug off the praise while their mouths split into grins that nearly split them in turn. Pretty little girls who grow up to be beautiful women blush against admiration from the same teachers and neighbors and store clerks who've been praising them since birth.

But.

But those of us whose names are chapter-headings for painful rumors, who draw misfortune like a parched field soaks up the rainstorm; for us the small town is a prison. The eyes that turn smiling from the jocks and the bouncing curls of beauty queens fall upon us and the light dies from them. They blink hard, so you can practically see their brains churning, dragging up gossip new and old, embarrassments fresh and healed over. Their hello's are stiff and formal. As they slide away, too quickly, so sorry, late for work/school/the babysitter, you feel the slime of their judgment on your skin. Wonder what bit of you they've taken this time, to fan out like a hand of cards to their friends, pore over it and laugh and laugh and laugh . . .

Genevive Greene is in line at my register; something that doesn't escape my notice today, or ever for that matter. A pretty little girl who became a gorgeous woman before my eyes. As my limbs got longer and clumsier, her face lost the softness of childhood. As I grew smelly and pimply, she abandoned her braids for curls. She wore her loveliness like a mink coat.

She unloads apples and a loaf of white bread from her basket, laughing at the customer who stands just behind her. Her smile doesn't turn my way anymore. For a brief moment, a shining season of hope, she'd been mine. Grocery pay squirreled away to pay for dates at the drive-in they'd open just down in Mainard. A blushing kiss suspended over the middle of my truck's bench seat. Flowers painstakingly chosen from Ma's garden and hair-gel that itched.

Nancy dives right in to the small-town small talk. It's maybe the thing she's best at. "Well hello there, Miss Greene, how's things?"

Genevive pulls on one dark, silky-looking banana curl. "I'm well, Miss Andrews, how's little Johnny doing in school this year?"

I keep my eyes down as I start to bag her groceries, not welcome in their conversation. Part of the scenery. Too aware that she'll want to avoid speaking to me just as badly as I'd like to avoid speaking to her.

Nancy positively beams at Genevive. "Oh, you know little boys. Always causing a ruckus somehow. But his teacher says he's reading real good, so I'm a happy momma. That'll be six even, sweetie."

Genevive hands over a few bills with long, graceful fingers. "He's a good boy. Little ruckus here and there ain't nothing to worry about."

Nancy tucks the money carefully away in the register and leans one wrinkled elbow on the counter, playful mischief in her eyes. "Aww, you say that now, Jenny, but in another year or so when you start having little ones of your own and there's just dirt all over everything . . ." Nancy smiles and chuckles a little. "Well, I suppose it's all a part of raising boys, like it or not."

The image of Genevive with a round little pregnant belly and a couple of toddlers hanging from her apron puts a heavy ball of sheer want in my gut. I rearrange her apples at the bottom of the paper bag just to have something to do with my hands.

Genevive laughs back at Nancy and shakes her head so that her curls bounce around her face. “Not me, Miss Andrews. Not for a while, anyway. I’m a long way from being anybody’s momma.” She pats Nancy’s hand and says a brief goodbye while I try to come up with something casual to say.

I curl the top of the bag closed and take far too much care in handing it to her. “Nice to see you, Genevive,” I manage.

I’m rewarded with a lower-wattage version of her smile as she casts her eyes down to her groceries. “You too, Davey.” She averts her eyes like she did in elementary school, like they all did. When me and all the other farm kids perpetually smelled like manure and even the teachers cracked jokes at our expense. Puberty was no kinder. Acne and greasy hair despite mass quantities of shampoo were healthy doses of gasoline on an already raging fire. The physics of middle school; an object in motion stays in motion, momentum begets momentum. A loser who’s disliked remains disliked. Ridicule begets ridicule.

I can hear her wanting to leave, asking me silently to release her from the obligatory pleasantries, but I can’t help dragging out the pathetic excuse for a conversation a little longer. “I heard your brother shipped out last week.” No better than the rest of them; the church-hens and laundry circles that perpetuate the gossip. I heard, I heard, I heard. Someone told me something about someone. I try to smile, make it friendly.

Genevive’s delicate fingers start to pick at the top of the grocery bag, and still she doesn’t raise her eyes to me. “He did. Headed for six weeks of boot camp down it Baton Rouge.” She

smiles a little bit and looks out the window, toward the street busy with afternoon foot-traffic. “All kinds of excited to go play soldier, that boy is.”

I follow her gaze, contemplating the people mulling around the sidewalk. Mothers hauling children around by their wrist, old ladies hobbling with canes. “Excited . . . I can’t imagine feeling excited for something like that.”

She doesn’t say anything back, and it takes me a moment to realize it’s a heated silence she’s fallen into. Genevive’s eyes have started to water, but her mouth is a tight, angry line. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t understand the first thing about bravery, would you?” She tightens her hands around the bag, making it crinkle loudly. “My brother’s goin’ out to defend our country, and he’s like as not to die doing it, but he packed his bag and said goodbye with a straight back and a smile on his face. But you--” her delicate lips curl a little in a sneer so angry I swear I feel my nuts shrink. “You’re nothin’ but a coward.” As she spits the last word at me, she turns, brown curls bouncing, and marches out of the grocery.

I should’ve known not to bother. That the tension was bound to boil over. I look up to see the whole of the checkout area staring at me. In all of their eyes, I see the same accusation. Coward.

I want to tell them that they don’t understand. That there’s more to the story. Genevive’s words don’t stem from truth, but from some prejudice held against me that I still don’t quite understand. The same reason she stopped coming to the phone. The mysterious engagements that began keeping her too busy to come out on Saturday nights. I am not a coward, just a spurned would-be-lover.

As the shoppers and cashiers slowly shake themselves from their staring and return to their work or errands, I stare down at the floor and contemplate whether or not I should just kill

myself and be done with it. But along with being too afraid of nearly everything in life, I am also, unfortunately, scared shitless of dying.

#

The screen door bangs with the same sharp smack as it did this morning, and I cringe, remembering Benjamin's words and trying not to imagine what he and Ma spent the night doing. Ma's in the sitting room, knitting. The soft glow of the television illuminates the doorway, and when I walk in, I notice how the dull light makes the lines in her face stand out, the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes visible in the absence of her day's make-up.

The evening broadcast is already on the television, and Ma, with her feet up on the footstool and her pale pink housedress loose around her thin frame, looks up at me with a tense smile. Her eyes don't confess anything, though I know she knows I know. Benjamin had to have told her by now.

"Sit down, sweetheart." She moves her slippered feet, and I park myself on the footstool. It, and all of this, has become a routine.

Someone who'd been living under a rock for the past two years would look at the broadcast and think Bingo was being televised. The announcer stands beside a large drum, pulling out --not numbers that could win some granny a few dollars, but ones that for many will be a death sentence. It's a grim, morbid sort of excitement with which we watch.

As the man in the suit reaches in for the first number, the clack of Ma's knitting needles seems to slow. My temples ache from clenching my jaw. As always, I say a prayer I will never own up to, promising to stop complaining about smelly pigs and beautiful, untouchable women if God will just spare me the fate of a soldier. For a boy who barely had it in him to tussle over the good name of his steady girl, war is a short dead-end road. If I wasn't hazed to death during

training, I'd be the very first sorry sonofabitch to take a bullet to the chest and die bleeding out in a shallow trench somewhere in Vietnam. I can be a soldier no more than I can be a brain surgeon.

The man's hand uncurls around a small capsule, and he holds it up to read the number trapped inside. A number I have etched into my mind. A number that would change the course of my life.

My number. My number. Momma's knitting needles have stopped their clacking. I drop my face into my hands and realize they're shaking. Ma's hands are on my back, her voice in my ear, but I make out no words. My head is too loud and too quiet all at once, Ma's soft drawl is toned out. I get to my feet, stumbling on weak knees, Ma's hands falling away, sitting in her night dress just as shocked as I am as I rush to the kitchen and throw up in the sink, covering her dinner dishes with sick. The smell hits me and I heave again, bent over the counter with tears trickling from my eyes.

"I'll wash them twice," I tell the floor. Instinct takes over. I reach for the soap. The sponge. I scrub the dish with extra soap, wishing I could do the same to myself, little elbow grease and all the gross bits disappear. Make you look brand new again.

I lean back against the sink. A heavy pause. I don't blink. Don't move. A merciful moment of blankness.

Ma appears in the doorway, her hair loose around her shoulders. She holds the wall like a cane, gripping it for support.

"Davey ..." her voice wavers dangerously. Tears already shed, a quick dam built up to stem the flow. She looks about to speak again, her shoulders lift. Her lip quivers. She closes her mouth with a gulping sound.

I shut off the water and brace my hands against the side of the counter. Out the window, the sun is setting over the treeline. The only part of the day when I hate the farm a little less. The few moments of beauty in an otherwise ugly life. Faced with leaving it, shouldn't I suddenly feel a connection to it?

I don't. If given the choice of here or there, I choose neither. Not the farm, not Vietnam. "Don't cry, Ma." It's a harsh, sarcastic bite that fights its way out. "I'll go off and be a goddamned war hero." I swipe my arm across the counter, boxes of cereal and stray dishes flying, crashing to the floor. "They can send little pieces of me home in a fucking shoebox wrapped in a goddamned flag." Another swipe, because the first one felt so good. The toaster goes next. "You can spend the rest of your life being proud of a corpse." There's nothing left within reach.

I turn and my knees give, slumping me against the counter. My vision clouds, the kitchen swims. Soft padding footsteps and Ma kneels next to me, warm and mother-smelling. She drapes her arms around me like a cape, and under their weight, I give in. The tears come violent and sudden, like purging a sickness.

My mother pets my head, whispering things that blend together into one long murmur, a gentle chant of reassurance.

Her small, gentle hands pull me to my feet, and I allow her to turn me, to hold my face in her palms. The way she always does when she wants me to really listen good. "Davey, you know your momma loves you as best as she can, and it'll about break my heart to send you away knowin' I might never see you again. But this is a chance for you to do great things. Here?" she shakes her head sadly, "here there ain't no greatness for you. Just bad memories and a whole lot of people who think they know you." She strokes a hand down the side of my face and tries to

smile. Mostly it just makes the lines in her face deeper. “You could be a hero, baby. You could help people. Save them, even. You’ll be doing a great, great thing for your country.” Her eyes are earnest. She doesn’t have to add the rest, I can fill it in myself. Like the other boys. Like cousin Bobby and poor, heroic Ricky Purval.

There or here. Ma says there. I take her gently by the wrists and pull her hands from my face. “Alright, Ma.” It’s all I can give her, all she wants to hear. The chaos happening in my head, the plans and consequences and alternatives, are only for me. “I’m going to bed. Goodnight, Ma.” I bend down to kiss her cheek and, finding it damp, turn my eyes away. My inner chaos, reflected back at me in those tears, is too much. As a boy, that was always my way. When Pa would yell, or grab for the belt, it was Ma’s face over his shoulder that always turned a quivering lip into a full-on blubber.

I leave Ma in the kitchen and climb the stairs to my bedroom. There or here. From under my bed I pull Pa’s old duffel bag from his army days. Either way, it seems I am going somewhere. Panic gives way to numbness and then back again a few times. I stare at the bag. I know I need it for something. It takes me a minute to remember what.

The canvas is rough but faded, torn at some of the corners and stained with God knows what. I drop it onto my bed. Shirts, pants, warm and cold weather clothes . . . socks and underwear. There’s a buzzing in my brain, too loud to hear over, and I look around, pick out the pieces of junk accumulated over the years, books and knick-knacks and pens and journals and just such utter useless shit that I want to puke again, throw up all over the stuff that I thought was so essential, make it dirty enough to be considered trash, throw it out and move on from it. I pack the duffel to overflowing and wrestle the zipper closed. We stare at each other when I’m finished, and oddly I find that I feel better. Calmer. Having made a decision that was never really

a decision. No choice for Davey. Just the inevitable. In my head, the room burns, flames licking at shirtsleeves and photographs and bedsheets. Nothing worth saving, nothing that I'd spare a moment for in the inferno.

Ma's door closes quietly down the hall, and I wonder whether I should leave her a note. But what could I say that would explain? No, there are no words to put in a note. Any explanation I could give would just sound like cowardice. And without one, maybe she could pretend. Tell Nancy and Benjamin and everyone else that my number was called and I answered the call of duty like so many other boys have done. Maybe for a while they'd even believe her.

I shoulder the duffel and turn out the light in my room. I don't look back, don't waste a moment on nostalgia. The room holds memories that can stay here with it for all I care. Whippings and time-outs and Ma sitting me down to say Pa had left and wasn't like to return anytime soon. The stale, dirty smell after masturbating and the aching loneliness of sleeping alone every damn night of my life. It can all stay here.

The stairs creak quietly as I descend, leaving the lights off and navigating from memory. That god-damned door with the broken knob leans quietly open still, resolutely unlatched from its place, making its brokenness impossible to ignore. I shut it quietly behind me and lean my forehead against it. The tears come now, mere steps from the door, moments from crossing a one-way barrier. My knees go soft. You can't stay here. You can't stay here. Suck it the fuck up. If you can't be brave enough to be a soldier, at least be brave enough to run away.

In the kitchen, I reach for the truck keys and hesitate, hand suspended in midair. Ma will need the truck. How she'll keep up the farm all on her own, I don't know. Sell, maybe. Or maybe Benjamin will try his hand as a farmer. Unlikely.

So I leave with the keys still hung in their spot, out the door and into the crisp night air with barely a noise but for the decisive click of it shutting behind me. I like that click. It sounds like power, like making a decision for myself for once. Like a refusal to continue being who people keep telling me I am. That click sounds like a new start.

With no moon in the sky tonight, the farm is pitch-dark. The barn and field may as well have disappeared, burned to the ground or simply erased by some all-powerful hand. I don't need the light. Memories are all the map I need to make my way down the driveway, years of trudging down the dusty path with shuffling feet, dragging out the inevitability of the chores awaiting me, the animals and crops that would take whatever I had left to give at the end of the day.

At the end of the driveway, I stop. I have no direction, no destination. Left takes me through town, on toward the city. South. Right takes me further into farm country. Eventually up along the coast. North.

I dig into my pocket for a coin. Heads, north. Tails, south. I flip the penny in the air, and it misses my open palm on the way down. I hear it land softly in the dirt by my feet. Heads or tails? I chuckle softly to myself, the first time I've found something genuinely funny in a long time. I readjust the duffel on my shoulder and turn right. I think it might be nice to see the ocean.

Chapter Three

Lewes is a harbor town. From what I can gather, that means that everyone in it either fishes, sells fish, or pours beers for people who do the first two. After walking most of the night and hitchhiking the last few miles, I find myself sitting on a dock watching the sun come up over the water. The sheer size of the ocean is humbling. With the waves nudging the boats, tipping them and bobbing them up and down, I feel smaller than I ever have in my life, but somehow it's a peaceful sort of insignificance.

I hadn't realized what it would smell like, the ocean. The sharp, salty odor that's part fish, part fresh air, and seems like you should wrinkle your nose at it when instead you find yourself breathing as deeply as you can, drinking it like wine and feeling it buzz in your head like the hard stuff.

I know I need a plan. Some quick money, food, shelter. But first, I need to know how it feels to swim in the sea. I pull my shirt over my head, loosen my belt and leave pants and boots

and socks in a heap. I've only ever swum in the pond out back from the farm, but I feel fairly confident that I won't drown. I curl my toes around the edge of the dock, grainy wood under soft feet, the threat of splinters that should bother me but doesn't. Slight bend in the knees and I launch myself into the surf, a clumsy dive with nobody around to notice, and splash beneath the waves. Sharp cold and then acceptance, body temperature and water temperature compromising and I find the surface with a gasp. The taste of the ocean is everywhere, on my lips and stinging the corners of my eyes and smooth on my skin. I float onto my back, the sun on my face, drying already, leaving tight salty firmness in my cheeks. The ocean may be my new Genevive. She feels better than the self-hating tug and jerk thinking of Genevive's perfect laugh, and I wonder what it'd be like to make her laugh like that and then . . .

I pull myself back onto the dock, hungry muscles straining, hair dripping into my eyes. The breeze coming in chills my skin, and goosebumps bubble up but I lay on my back nonetheless, spread-eagle and vulnerable to it, cold but fine. Maybe it's the proximity of the ocean, maybe it's my pilgrimage from Aimsbury, but either way there's a thrill of freedom pulsing through me.

With the sun fully up now, I step back into my clothes, still damp and itchy from the water, like traces of a woman's lipstick kisses all down my arms and legs. Uncomfortable but pleasant all the same. I buckle my belt and, feeling like I've just crossed an invisible threshold, pick up my duffel and aim my feet toward the main street in Lewes. A job, I tell myself. A new job, without cow shit or pig shit or any other type of shit for that matter.

The early-bird Lewesians are just now stirring, leaving home with sleepy eyes and coffee on their breath. Storefronts flip their Closed signs to Open, and I blend in to the thickening crowd. I pass a grocer with a Help Wanted sign in the window and don't glance back once. My

bag-boy days are behind me for good. Raised voices call my eye to the far end of the road, where barrels are being unloaded from a truck. Burly men in rubber boots, all with long, scraggly beards grunt loudly at one another as they roll the barrels down an alley. Fishermen.

Long stints at sea would keep me out of sight. A draft-dodger's dream job. As the men keep yelling at one another, I quicken my pace and come upon them just as they're unloading the last barrel.

"Hey there," I call out before I think better of it. My voice is gruff from lack of use, a scratch zig-zagging through my words. A dozen sun-weary eyes turn on me. I clear my throat and try again. "I'm, uh, looking for a job." The tanned, stony facades start to crack, corners of bearded mouths turn up, they glance at one another. Laughing at me. "On a boat," I clarify, helpless to stop the idiocy leaking from my mouth.

The ridicule starts on cue. The sailors erupt into laughter. The one perched on the back of the truck crouches down, knees popping, to look closer at me. "You ever been on a boat before, kid?"

My gut curls in on itself and tightens. I might shit myself. "No, but --"

Another jumps in, leaning over one of the barrels, gripping its sides with grease-caked nails. "Ever spent a month away from your mommy? A week, even?"

Before I can think of a way to evade that question, another is hurled at me. "What help would you be anyway?" Elbow jabs and conspiratorial grins are exchanged. "About a hundred ten with a brick in his pocket."

I'm tempted to argue with them. Ask them if they know how much a bag of cow feed weighs. How tough it is to lean a stubborn cow away from the trough when it's time to turn back in to the barn. Instead, I turn away, ready to abandon my momentary interaction with the world.

The Genevive Green that lives in my mind shakes her head at me, shiny curls bobbing around her naked shoulders, and calls me a coward. No imaginary blowjobs for me tonight. Even my fantasies are disgusted by me.

The voice that comes from the back of the group is somehow deeper than the others. Older, more grizzled. "Bunch of buzzards," it growls. The men's heads collectively swivel toward the doorway of the building behind them. Through the mass of beards and muscular shoulders, I catch a glimpse of the speaker. He's an amalgamation of the men standing in front of me, taller, wider, dirtier. Older. His flyaway sideburns are a dull gray. Under the knit cap he wears, his tanned face is crossed so frequently and deeply with wrinkles that it borders on deformity.

"The lot of yeh were greener'n that not so long ago. Regular land-lubbers." Under his gaze the rest of them seem to diminish, shoulders hunching, eyes cast downward. "What's yer name, lad?"

I try to stand up straighter, make my voice deeper. "Davey," I answer. The heathens of the sea glare at me, the interloper who got them in trouble with dad. "I'm looking for a job," I add, though he didn't ask. "Thought I'd like to learn something about fishing."

He lumbers over to me, the other sailors melting into the background around him, conveniently finding barrels that need to be moved or tackle boxes that need to be brought inside. The old sailor steps toward me, and I have to fight the instinct to back away. He doesn't say anything for a long moment, just looks at me all close and squinty and about as uncomfortable as one person could possibly look at another one. "You look about twelve years old, boy."

“I’m—“ I stop before I can say something stupid. Telling him my real age marks me as a dodger off the bat. “I’m sixteen,” I blurt. He narrows his eyes at me, and I try to look honest while the backs of my knees pool with sweat.

“Sixteen? Oughtn’t you to still be at your mamma’s house?” He takes me by the elbow, a sharp pinch that I try not to grimace at. “You runnin’ from somethin’, boy?”

Only everything. A girl who look at me like I’m dogshit on her new shoes. A livelihood that’s more a puddle of quicksand, a trap around one ankle, just barely shake-loosable at the last second after all. The booming echo of tanks and mortars calling me from overseas. “My stepdad’s a drunk.” The backs of my pants may well be leaking with liar’s sweat. “He’s a violent bastard when he gets at the whiskey. Thought it best I set off on my own.” It sounds believable enough, or so I hope.

The captain—for I can think of him no other way--regards me silently for a moment, scratchy fingers still planted deep in my elbow flesh. It’s hard to tell whether or not he believes me until he gives me a good yank and turns away, into the shadowy doorway of the building where the sailors have taken all the barrels of fish. I follow him.

The salty, dirty smell thickens with each step, and when we duck into the fish market the hum and bustle of dozens of sailors and thousands of fish bounces and rebounds around the brick walls and high ceilings. The captain leads me to a back corner, ducking and weaving with expert familiarity through the crowd of men while I trip and stumble and try to look like I’m not tripping and stumbling. He holds a knife out to me so abruptly that I nearly walk into its blade and impale myself. Recovering, I take it gingerly by its handle.

“You’re no sailor, lad. But if you can filet a fish, you’re at least half useful.” He points to three barrels in a row to my right. “Whole bass, good meat, scales and bones. You get through

the barrel, I'll give you enough for dinner down the pub. And I'll let you come back tomorrow." He reaches into the barrel and grabs a slimy bass by the tail, slapping it onto the table with a wet thwap. "Two steaks, one each side." The captain presses the heel of his hand against the fish's head and with the other hand pulls a knife from his belt, whizzing it through the bass's body in one swift motion.

"Simple enough," he says, turning away and clapping me on the shoulder. "Get to work, lad." And he's gone, before I can ask him to show me again. My switchblade has only ever been used for non-living things. Ropes and stray threads. This is very much new territory.

I pluck the top fish from the barrel; it's heavier than the captain made it look, and awkward. I have to use two hands to heft it from its spot on the pile, swinging it onto the table with too much momentum, so that it nearly slides off and onto the floor. I curse under my breath and pin the bass down the way the Captain did, mentally recoiling from the slimy texture. The scales are somehow rough and slick all at once.

They're watching me, I know they are. Even with my back to them I feel it, the stare of those who fit, fixated on the thing that doesn't belong. The fish slides and the knife twists in my fingers, cutting a jagged path through the scales and pink meat, slicing into my ring finger just below the knuckle, a clean, bright sting and suddenly the pink bass meat is stained red.

"God dammit," I breathe, dropping the knife onto the fish and instinctively closing my uninjured hand around the oozing mess. The salt from the fish stings like a motherfucker, and my eyes water, so much so that a few fat tears leak from the corners of my eyes. Crying. I'm the asshole crying in the middle of a fish market packed with sailors over a cut on my finger.

"Oy, yer bleedin on the damned profits, boy!" I catch an elbow to the ribs and a scrawny kid in overalls is pushing me away from my table. "Fuckin' genius over here can't be trusted

with a butter knife,” he says, tossing a roll of duct tape at me before turning back to his work. “Cover that shit up, kid.”

The fish looks up at me, watching me contemplate the roll of tape and the mess of blood still pooling in my palm. “Fuck you,” I tell him. It feels good to say it to someone, even if it is just a dead, two-foot-long bass. Wiping most of the blood on my pants, I wrestle off a length of tape and wind it around my finger. It bunches and catches and ends up a lump of a mess but the worst of it seems to have stopped.

There’s no alternative now though. No room to run home to and hide in. No home at all. Barely any cash in my pocket. It’s oddly calming and clear to know that if I screw up I won’t eat tomorrow. $A + B = C$. I grind my palm into the fish’s face, thinking of the announcer’s face on the television as he rattled off my number in a monotone. Careless. I press harder, the oily eyes staring up at me, and I imagine them bulging out, popping free and rolling away. The knife feels more natural in my hand this time, slices more smoothly through the pinkness.

My imaginary Genevive watches, perched on the corner of the table behind me where the kid in overalls is dicing fish with the speed and efficiency of an old pro. A line forms between her eyebrows as I filet one side and then the other of the fish. What’s left on the table, guts and fragile bones and that one staring eyeball, it’s familiar to me. Weak, helpless, half-blind.

I lift the bass by its tail, lighter now, and dump it in the third barrel. Genevive seems to approve.

I fall into a rhythm after a while, the clumsiness of my inexperienced fingers giving way to a gradual muscle memory. I become good at something new. The scrawny kid behind me regards me out of the corner of his eye every so often. I catch the flicker of white when I turn to dig in the barrel for another fish. He doesn’t say much.

Like the first time I changed the tractor oil without spilling the pan on my feet, it feels good to master something, even if it's something so mind-numbingly simple. I add it to a mental checklist, a running inventory of things I've done, things I've learned. I can milk a cow. I can plow a field. I can shoe a horse and fix a door. I can name every element on the periodic table. And now I can filet a fish.

It may be a short list, but as I swing the next bass onto the table and slice the knife cleanly through it – whizz – I smile and acknowledge that it's a list that's only getting longer.

Chapter Four

By quitting time, the lower part of my spine aches. My skin is salty and sticky from the dozens of bass. I have no less than four fingers duct-tape-bandaged, and smears of blood on my shirt and pants. I smell. But when the bell rings and a general shout of approval goes up around me from the men, echoing against the brick walls of the fish market, I feel myself smile despite all of this. The nearly-full barrel, brimming with shiny pink bass meat is a testament to my day's work. Blood and sweat that was actually worth something. Valuable.

As the men toss their knives and aprons onto their tables, the Captain makes his way toward me, moving against the tide destined for the bars. He regards me with the same empty expression as before, dull eyes moving across the barrels, fixing on my hands for a moment, and meeting my gaze. "All ten still attached then?"

I glance down at my hands before I can stop myself, as though I could've managed to chop off a thumb and not realize it. "Last I checked they were, sir."

"Good," he nods. "Leave the knife, then. We'll go have ourselves something to eat."

The sun is setting as we leave the fish market. Low-wattage light floods the streets, making shadows of shadows. We trudge across the street, the Captain moving without looking back, me lurching over the cobblestone street in his wake. Without breaking stride, he shoves open the door and we're greeted by a near-tangible wall of voices threading over and through one another, the conversations overlapping and dying out like waves.

The crowd splits, bodies shifting and sliding to make way for the captain. He taps the bar with two fingers and a moment later two overflowing mugs of beer appear in front of him. His form of payment is nothing more than a nod as far as I can tell, but he turns and presses one of the beers into my hand, tapping the rim with his own before taking a drawn-out sip.

I can probably count on two hands the number of beers I've had in my life, but if there's going to be a next one, I like that it's here, after a day of being up to my elbows in fish guts, with a perfect stranger. It has the feel of something that'll make a good story someday.

I sip big, a mouthful of foam and hops. It's not good. It's a chore to swallow without grimacing, but I do it. And take another. It's an equation as simple as work equals money equals food equals survival. Men drink beer. So I drink some more. I like the way I feel with a beer in my hand. All around me mugs are lifted and set back down, clinking against one another, being emptied and refilled. Nobody looks too long at me, I don't warrant a second glance here. I fade into the background of fishy-smelling men, like low-grade invisibility. My lines blur, my colors fade into the men on either side of me. I'm a part of the great chuckling, sipping, back-slapping mass.

I sip again, the mug lighter in my hand. It tastes as bad as before but somehow I care less. The Captain hands me a fish sandwich, grimy fingers digging into the bun without a care for cleanliness, and I take it because when a man like the Captain hands you a sandwich, you take it no matter how dirty his nails may be. He's in the middle of a story, doesn't break stride as I bite in, tartar sauce oozing out the side of my mouth and dripping down my chin. Far better than the beer. Ten foot seas, or so they say. One of the other sailors tries butting in, adding some detail to the story. The Captain talks over him. Torn sails and lost nets. Wind at thirty nauts easy.

My mug of beer has somehow become empty, and as I look down at the residual foam circling the glass bottom, a new frosty glass is pressed into my free hand, and my first beer is pulled away, plopped onto the bar and cleared away by a woman whose long red hair flops over her shoulder in a thick, knotted braid, the tail of which nestles comfortably in her cleavage.

I stare without meaning to, and when she meets my eyes I hurry to take a sip from my beer, spilling foam onto my shirt in clumsy haste. Her top lip pulls up in a smirk and she turns away, called to fill more mugs, hailed by the stinking belligerent masses.

"Her name's Brandy," the Captain tells me, so close to my ear and unexpected that I start, which doesn't go unnoticed by the men around me who chuckle and return to their sea-themed war stories.

"Brandy?" Skeptical. Like an Eileen with a cane or a weightlifter named Jim. It's too fitting. As she pours two shots of dark liquor and knocks one back with an ease and expertise far superior to the kid across the bar from her, I find myself asking a bold question. "Does she have a boyfriend?" I've never seen a girl like her, so bold and unapologetic. Back home in Aimsbury they breed them demure and quiet. Polite.

The idea of her appeals to me; and the idea of who I could be with her: a sailor with a whiskey-shooting woman waiting for him to return. Bulky, bulging muscle from rolling in barrels of fish, a scruff of beard that she'd complain itched her face when I kissed her but I'd keep it anyway because all the sailors would have beards and none of their women would like them but too bad honey if we're bringin' home the bacon y'all can deal with a little facial hair.

The Captain chuckles in an ominous way. "There's yet to be a man from sea or land that could tame that one, boy." We watch her down another shot and, as a man with intentions in his eyes leans in to whisper in her ear, shove him away by the face, porcelain white palm against nose and beard and beery mouth, no thank you sir.

This girl is confidence personified. She laughs with her whole mouth, all teeth and tongue and full, inviting lips. She smiles like she knows a secret about you. She's the most beautiful single person in the room right now and she knows it. And we know it. And she knows we know it.

If I finish my beer, I can get closer to her. I can drop it on the bar and order another. I can have ten full seconds of her eyes on mine and right now there's nothing I want more in the world. I wonder what her voice sounds like, close up. Husky, probably.

I've got just a few sips left, and I watch her over the rim of the mug. A hiccup takes me by surprise and my teeth click against the glass. The Captain's hand closes around my shoulder and my beer is gone. "Alright boy, know your limits." He turns me with one hand and starts pushing me out the door. "Six a.m. comes 'round a lot quicker than you'd think. Go catch some shut-eye and we'll see you bright and early back at the dock, yeah?"

The door shuts abruptly, the noise cut off all at once. In a second, I'm in another world, conspicuously separate from the liveliness of inside, thrust rudely into outside.

The night air is oddly sobering. The sharp saltiness and near-silence once the door of the bar closes behind me seems to make things shift into clearer focus. With the clarity comes exhaustion. And I've got nowhere to sleep tonight.

The distant ringing of ships' bells as they rock in the waves seems to call me, and I turn, toes dragging along the cobblestones, toward the ocean. What must it be like to make the ocean your home? To live for weeks on end being rolled and tossed by a power so much greater than yourself that at any moment should it decide to swallow you whole, the tides would turn, pull you down to the depths, and there'd be no evidence you'd ever been there at all.

The anonymity, I think, would be infinitely preferable to the stifling closeness. To trade the simple-minded neighbors for a million strangers yet to be met would be a worthy barter. A trade upwards.

To travel to places where even my words would be foreign, to be a stranger among strangers, would be quite an adventure. No past, no future. Nobody to know my dirty little secrets. The ocean wouldn't care a thing for me, or them. Too many other things on her mind. Pollution and weather systems and the diminishing whale population.

The docks are empty this time of the night. The distant echo of the bars is gone, drowned out by the in and out of the tide. So quiet and so deafening all at once.

My eyes droop, threatening to close before I find a bed for the evening. Mind and body refusing to cooperate with one another. I have some cash in my wallet, just whatever was in there last night, crumpled ones and a few fives. An accumulation of spare change from the past weeks. Stamped with fingerprints of people I'll never see again. Not enough for a hotel room, but it makes me smile anyway.

There's a small stretch of sandy beach to my right, and I force my near-limp legs to carry me over to it. I drop too heavily, the impact jarring my spine and spilling me backwards. Sand in my face, compounding the itchiness of two-day stubble, I give in and release my loose grip on consciousness.

I wake with seaweed in my fingers and a mouthful of ocean water. The tide has come in and my trousers, I realize quickly, are soaked. I sit up, sandy and damp and shield my eyes from the sunrise, glittering off the peak of each individual wave. The top half of the sun, all that's visible over the horizon, is a startling pink. It bleeds into the sky around it, turning the whole morning sky rose-colored. The beauty of it makes my skin itch less and I get to my feet brushing the grains off with less irritation.

I have somewhere to be. Work to do. The thought makes me smile in spite of the headache blooming around my temples. I'll need to think of a funny hangover quip on my way to the fish market.

The morning is already familiar from yesterday. The same sleepy townies slip out front doors, the same aroma of coffee steams from hands and windows. There's an internal tug – time to feed the pigs, check the chicken coop. I give myself a mental shake and like an etch-a-sketch the feeling fades away.

A truck idles at the loading dock of the fish market, a new group of beards and overalls unload barrels of different fish from a different boat, a different trip. Minor tweaks to the same image. Today I walk up with confidence, raise a hand and nod in acknowledgement of them as I walk inside. They assume I belong, don't ask questions. Confidence as camouflage.

I start to think that maybe I could make this my life. Earn enough for a crap apartment that's homey in a twisted sort of way. Make friends with the other guys. Finally work up the

nerve to talk to the gorgeous bartender. I try to look approachable as I shoulder my way through the yawning masses to the back of the fish market.

The Captain finds me at my worktable as I'm hauling the first tuna from the barrel. He runs a hand over his beard, a look of mild amusement in his eyes. "Wasn't sure we'd be seeing you again, Twiggy."

I manage a smile. The overpowering odor of fish is turning my stomach, whether from last night's alcohol or my nonexistent breakfast, I can't tell. "I've got nowhere else to go, sir." I shrug. "So here's as good as anyplace else."

He nods pensively, and I turn my attention back to the tuna. I feel rather than see him walk away, the absence of his presence seemingly just as tangible. My father would have liked the Captain. Would have respected him for his rugged façade if nothing else. But then, my father would like any man who got his hands dirty for a living, no matter if he could add two and two together or not. To my father, a man who couldn't spell his own name but spent forty hours a week hauling lumber was more worthy of the name than I was.

A tap on the shoulder and I turn to find the Captain holding out a muffin to me. "My old lady put it in my lunch pail," he explains. "Growing kid like you could use it more than I can."

I take it – blueberry – and nod firmly at him, fighting not to betray on my face the emotion building in my throat. "Thanks, Cap."

He grunts and turns away. The language of men; grunts and nods. A million things we're not allowed to say. Not allowed to acknowledge. Pity. Gratitude. A hungry boy and a benevolent stranger. Nods and grunts.

My stomach growls and I put away the muffin in three bites, the salty tang of fish an unpleasant addition but not nearly detrimental enough to give me pause.

“Oy! Twiggy! Hand me that there filet knife, would ya?”

I pull a blade off the wall and hand it over my shoulder to the kid from yesterday.

“Twiggy?” I ask him.

He runs his thumb along the knife’s edge and chuckles. “Boy, you don’t like it I’d suggest you get to a buffet or a weight room right quick.” He jabs an elbow at me and turns away.

Twiggy. It could be worse. Twiggy could fall under affectionate teasing. Twiggy could be your buddy. Twiggy could be out having beers with the fellas from work. I dig my palm into the tuna’s face and bring the knife down, cutting off its head just below the gills.

I’ll take it.

Chapter Five

It's one of those moments when you say fuck it, fuck everything, throw caution to the wind, give in to the animal in you, dick in hand and so many beers you've lost count by now watering down your blood, making you brave, making you stupid, making it god damned near impossible not to look at Brandy's pouty painted lips with a little smudge of red in the corner from where her tongue pokes out as she considers you, whether to laugh or not whether to ignore you or not whether to grace you with a smile or turn away.

The bathroom smells like shit. Like literal shit, like someone left a turd for days and weeks on end to spawn anew and repopulate the whole world with shit. Human carelessness on its smallest, stinkiest scale. My equilibrium evades me for a second and I nearly fall over, brace a hand against the wall to keep myself standing, half worried about getting caught half willing to

fall face first into the dirty toilet and chip all my front teeth out of my face if that's what's needed for me to just. Be able. To get. Off.

The door swings open, the voices from the bar growing and falling in volume within the space of seconds and I clamp my lips together but make no other acknowledgement of having company. Brandy's burgundy red sort of orange not quite orange orange sort of closer to how the sun looked this morning braid, its tail tucked just barely in between slightly over-exposed cleavage like an arrow pointing you to look but you shouldn't look and she knows you're looking and smiling that sort of corner lip smile because she knows and she knows and her eyes flick down to your zipper, playful wink and here's your beer, honey and then she's gone and you just. Can't. Take it. Anymore.

Splat.

I exhale the breath I never meant to hold, wrist slackening against the wall, whole body drooping. The familiar sense of shame doesn't come, though. The beer buzz, the dirty bathroom, the noises of drinking and arguments and glasses clinking together make it seem more normal. Allowable. The twist brings it all into clearer focus somehow. But when you look through a kaleidoscope and find an image that actually makes sense, what does that say about your reality?

I hitch my jeans back up around my waist. They're oily to the touch and a few inches too wide. I'll need to find a way to buy a new pair.

I shoulder open the stall door and shove my hands into the nearest sink. Hiding the evidence. Because how dare any one person accidentally acknowledge what we all know we all do anyway. Like the starving kids in Africa or the guys getting their limbs blown off in Vietnam. We're okay knowing it's there, just don't show it to us. We don't want to see.

The Captain is cozied up to the bar and he holds a finger up to me, a question, and I nod, *yes I'll have another beer*, pleased that I'm already learning. Brandy smirks at me like she knows, but I don't blush. I stare back at her, mirroring her half-smile. She can know all she likes. A cold mug is pressed into my hand and the Captain taps the rim with his own beer, already half empty. "A fine job today, Twiggy. We'll make a sailor of you yet." From the inside pocket of his jacket he produces a few folded bills. Crumples them into my open palm. "Get yourself something useful with that, you hear? Not booze or grass . . . new pants or something. Roof over your head for a few weeks if you're planning to hang around."

He nods once and turns away, his limit for emotion apparently reached. And I stare gratefully at the ten dollars in my hand and think as loudly as I can, Thank You. Not wanting to be tempted into or drunkenly careless of spending it on what I've just been told not to spend it on, I shove through the crowd and out the door into the air that doesn't smell like sweat and fish and stale beer. That first breath that always hits like something new, every single time. I wonder if I'll be used to it in five years. Ten. How long will this place take to get old? Irritating?

New pants I can do without, but what I'd give for a shower. The only bed and breakfast on the main street is a few doors down, and I try to force my steps into a straight line, will myself to be less drunk than I am, as I stagger towards the front door, where a dim light emanates onto the street.

The bell tings above me as I pull the door open and I jump, not expecting it, and trip over the threshold. The young woman at the counter looks up over the rim of reading glasses and appraises me with her lips set in a firm line. "May I help you?"

I hold the money up to her, part proof that I'm not a bum, which I suppose I just might be, and part greeting. "I was hoping to roont a rem. Renta room."

She daintily removes the readers from her nose and sets them down. "Eight dollars a night or fifty per week. And we don't rent to riffraff. Loud noise, fighting, the like. So if that's what you're about, I'd suggest you try further down the road."

With that, she replaces the glasses and returns to her book, no doubt assuming to hear the bell tingle again as I turn tail and try elsewhere. And I can't help but chuckle to myself at the idea that this woman would look at me and think riffraff when every other woman I've ever known has looked at me and thought harmless.

"Something amuse you, darlin'?"

I run a hand over my hair, a useless attempt to smooth it. "Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I assure you, I ain't riffraff. Just a kid looking for a place to hang his hat while he's working in town is all."

The voice isn't mine. Part of it may be the booze, but another part entirely is the persona I'm shifting into, the not-me I'm trying so hard to be. She regards me over her glasses again and finally crooks a finger at me with a sigh, inviting me closer to the counter.

"No doubt I'll live to regret this," she murmurs to herself. Her light eyebrows lift, though she doesn't look at me, disappearing behind wispy bangs. "Name?" Her pen poises over a ledger, waiting for my answer.

"Davey" slips out, a note of uncertainty clasped onto the latter syllable. "Davey Greene," I supply quickly, hoping to cover my tracks with the first not-mine last name that comes to mind. Imaginary Genevive comes up behind me and rests her chin on my shoulder, laughing in my ear. Victorious at invading my consciousness where she's not wanted.

The pen pauses, and clear eyes devoid of makeup finally look up at me. She knows I'm lying. She's just deciding what to do about it.

After a long moment she lowers her pen, entry unfinished. Takes off her glasses and lays them on the ledger. She regards me much the way my mother did years ago, breaking the news that Pa's gone and ain't likely to return.

"You smell like fish," she tells me.

My face burns and I drop my eyes to the floor. Imaginary Genevive throws her head back and laughs, deep and echoing. Mrs. Martin pulling me aside in the third grade to ask how things were at home. The smell of pigs trailing me through the hallways at school. The things a father's supposed to teach a boy.

"Yes ma'am," I mutter, not sure if I'm answering the girl at the counter or my old teacher. The booze blurring the line between reality and memory. Words coming unbidden.

"Been working down at the docks?" Her expression hasn't changed. Stony and impassive.

"Yes ma'am."

"Two kinds of folks make their living down there, darlin'. One kind is kids running from their Ma and Pa. Other kind's grown men running from something else. Usually the law." She intertwines long pale fingers and rests her chin on them. "And as much as you look like a kid, something tells me you're the latter."

Her deadpan accusation wrapped in an innocent tone of voice chills me worse than the night air. I should deny it. "I'm not . . ." but I stop. I'm already caught in my lie. I puff out a breath that smells like stale beer and run a hand through my hair. My fingers come away greasy. "They called my number." I shrug. "Do I look like I'd survive a tour in 'Nam?" I look at her now, challenging her to disagree with me. "It was either go there and die or take off. I took off. And here I am. Go on and call the police on me then, and let's be done with it."

The booze is talking, and it's much ballsier than I.

The elegant fingers stay wound together. She doesn't reach for the phone. Just keeps looking at me like she's studying an Algebra problem that just doesn't quite add up correctly. A touch of frustration mixed with curiosity.

She holds a hand out to me. "It's eight for the night."

I'm surprised enough that I don't reach for my pocket, just stare at her a little too long.

She sighs through her nose and drops her hand onto the counter. "I can't imagine what it'd be like to be ordered to go die in a war that you didn't start. That you don't understand or believe in. If it were me, I'd probably be doing the same as you right now. So it's eight for the night, if you want the room."

My limbs catch up to the conversation and I dig in my pocket for the money. It's crumpled and probably smells just as fishy as I do, so I drop it on the counter instead of pressing it into her non-fishy hands. She slides a room key over to me. "There's towels in the linen closet in the hall. Second door on your left upstairs."

I take the key and turn away, afraid she'll change her mind if I linger too long. I stumble on the first step, partially from my hurry and partially from the way the beer makes near things seem far and far things seem kind of more near. She sighs heavily behind me and I hurry up the stairs as carefully as I can.

Three jabs and one turn to the left with the key get me into the small dark room. The keys hit the bedside table with a jangle, I don't break stride as I cross to the bathroom, pink frills and flower wallpaper but it's got a shower with running water and tiny one-time-use soap and shampoo bottles. The air turns steamy after just a few seconds, and I duck under the spray without testing the temperature first. It scalds, but I let it.

Clean skin feels like the removal of a disguise. Naked and exposed now that the grime has been wiped away, like somehow the filth was my camouflage, a cloud of testosterone to be lost in, a stink that marked me as part of the tribe. Without it, I am Davey again.

I wipe away the fog from the mirror, not because I particularly want to see myself, but because it's what you do. Like if you don't check every so often to make sure you're still there, eyes and nose and mouth and ears, you'll somehow disappear entirely.

If I stare hard enough, my face becomes nothing more than the face of an animal, as like to any other primate as faces of dogs or monkeys are to our perception. Like saying a single word over and over again until its meaning melts away, reducing it to nothing but vowels and consonants, tongue movements and the vibrations of vocal cords.

But when you look too hard, too long, something strange starts to happen. The whole fabric of the universe starts to melt away around you. Everything becomes a question, not a given. Truth starts to leak through, hard, fearful truths that rock you to your core. The understanding of how insignificant you really are. How even your very worst problems on your very worst day are barely a blip to the greater universe. We think we're the Alpha and the Omega, the very first and the very last, but when you catch just the edge of that Greater Understanding, you're forced, if just for an instant, to concede that to the universe, you're just about on par with a pile of dogshit.

Or maybe that's just me.

Chapter Six

As far as I can tell, I sleep without dreaming, waking up with a start in the same position I remember falling asleep in. It takes me a few fumbling attempts to shut the alarm off, the grating *beepbeepbeep* dragging me from sleep and beating me about the head with the morning.

The dull morning light streams in through the curtains I forgot to close last night, illuminating the sparsely decorated room. My clothes, reeking of fish, are in a pile on the floor, and I pull them on. I should be disgusted at the crunch of my jeans, but I'm not. The filth is my camouflage. In it, I am someone new. A fishmonger, a Lewesian.

I dig the heels of my hand into my eyes, rubbing the crust of sleep away. Bathroom. After my drunken shower last night, I left the damp towel on the floor. Slob.

There's a solitary toothbrush on the vanity, wrapped in cellophane and partnered with a miniature tube of toothpaste. I'm suddenly very aware of the stale alcohol taste in my mouth, and

this, unlike the state of my clothes, truly disgusts me. I brush my teeth twice, use every ounce of the toothpaste. The clock tells me to get my ass in gear, and I leave my boots unlaced as I pocket my room key and get on my way.

The girl from last night is still at the front desk, bent more sharply over her book. She looks up as I clomp down the last few stairs and regards me in the same librarian way. “Coffee?” She gestures to a small table by the window where an urn of coffee and a scattering of mugs wait.

“Thank you,” I mumble, pouring myself a cup. I’ve never been much of a coffee drinker, could never stomach it, but with the way my head’s pounding, I’m willing to try any of the conventional hangover cures. It burns my tongue and the roof of my mouth, but I clench my teeth so the girl behind the counter won’t know.

“There’s a Salvation Army down a few blocks,” she jerks her chin in the opposite direction of the docks. “They usually have an okay collection of work clothes, if you need some shirts and pants. Reasonable prices, too.”

I wonder if she could smell me coming down the stairs. I step back and try to make it look natural. “Thanks.” Say something else, asshole.

I take another sip of the coffee, forgetting and then remembering how hot it is and nearly choking on it. She watches impassively.

“So, do you live around here?” Stupid. Of course she does.

She smiles in a way that lets me know she’s laughing at me, but she nods. “Just next door. My folks own this place.”

I should get moving. The fish market will be opening soon, but she's talking to me, her sleepy eyes wandering over my face in a pleasant, searching way. "So you inherit the family business. Believe me, I get it. Do you at least like it?"

She looks hard at me, and for a second I think she won't answer. I tap my dirty nails on the coffee mug, thinking of the farm. The family business that was a weight, a magnetic yank on my boots, making my steps more difficult the further away I pulled from it until I finally crossed the invisible barrier and passed through the sphere of the magnet's power. There's freedom in my exile.

"I don't mind it so much," she concedes. "I don't have much of a plan for myself otherwise."

I lean against the counter, probably too close to her but the thrill of finding a connection with her, a common ground, makes me not care. "I didn't either," I smile around the rim of the mug. "My family had a farm—has a farm. But I just . . . I couldn't stand it. Every day, doing the same exact thing . . ." The exaltation of departure is impossible to put into words.

Her face is blank, and I'm afraid I've lost her. But then she blinks just a little too long, and takes the glasses off, rubbing the bridge of her nose where there are tiny red footprints from them sitting too long. "Adventure might hurt, but monotony will kill you," she quotes at me. A tired smile, and suddenly my tongue doesn't hurt so bad. Her eyes though. The look she gives me jumps down my throat, choking me, wriggling down my esophagus to curl into pure feeling in my gut.

I set the empty coffee cup back on the counter. "I'll be late if I don't get a move on. Thanks for the coffee."

The front door bell jangles and she drops her eyes, looking over my shoulder, already done with our conversation. She hitches a new smile on, a different smile, for someone else.

I shoulder my way past without looking too long at him. He's a blur of suit jacket and aftershave. It lingers stinging in my nose halfway down the block, as I trot past storefronts that are already becoming familiar in that peripheral way of recognizing somewhere you've been before. That ethereal line between lost and unlost.

As I duck into the fish market for the third time, more hands clap me on the shoulder as I run the gamut to the back table. More guys bob their chins in greeting. The Captain booms out, "Morning, Twiggy," and tosses another muffin at me.

I find myself amazed at how quickly the fear has faded. The thrilling uncertainty of what my life was about to become. If this is adventure, it may be a bit overrated.

When the lunch bell rings, I take my salty pay from yesterday and find the Salvation Army Store. Ten bucks gets me a new pair of workpants and a few t-shirts. After a short internal debate I get a button-down and a clean pair of jeans as well, resolving to take the girl behind the counter for ice-cream.

And learn her name.

#

I don't go for beers with the boys after work. They crowd toward the bar and beckon to me with friendly gestures and smiles that are becoming familiar, but I wave them off. "I'm gonna go see about a girl," I tell them, and they respond with knowing winks, disappearing into the darkness in pursuit of that ever-necessary buzz.

The bag of new clothes taps against my leg as I walk, working out what I'll say; how I'll go about asking her. Trying to mingle words into something resembling charm. My appeals to a

higher power are answered, and there's an older woman manning the counter when I walk in to the Inn who barely glances up from her book as I walk in and cross to the stairs. Something tells me I have a better chance for a yes if my proposal of ice cream is accompanied by new clothes and clean hair. When I'd first asked Genevive to the homecoming dance, I'd changed shirts three times before school and insisted on carrying her books to English class.

I rush even though logically I know the girl's shift must not start until much later, shampooing so hastily that it gets in my eye and stings. The anticipation is familiar without being any less unpleasant.

She'd said yes, Genevive, when I'd asked her. She'd smiled and looked up at me through her lashes like she'd been hoping I'd ask. And when I'd picked her up, sweating and uncomfortable in a tie that wasn't knotted quite right, she'd kissed me on the cheek and laced her arm through mine.

I force myself to wait until eight o'clock to see if the girl is downstairs. With nothing much to entertain myself with, I end up sitting at the foot of my bed, rigid and pulling at the cuffs of my new shirt. And when the clock strikes eight, I pop up and clatter out into the hall with clumsy eagerness.

She's there, sitting with her glasses sliding down her nose, bent over a book. As she daintily turns the page, the feeling in the pit of my stomach makes me wonder whether I actually would've preferred coming downstairs to find any other person on the planet in her seat.

"Oh, hello," she says pleasantly as I step into the lobby. She slides the wire-framed spectacles back into place with one finger and nods in approval as she takes in my improved, cleanly appearance. "What can I get for you –" She waits for me to supply the rest.

“Davey.” I could pass by, walk out the door, head down the street to the bar and pretend that was my intention the whole time. But when I think of Brandy, tending bar with that tantalizing braid tucked into the seam of her cleavage, I conclude that even a five-minute conversation with this girl is ten times more appealing. “I actually . . .” I lean my elbow on the counter and then that suddenly feels like I’m too close to her, so I shove both hands in my pockets instead. “I realize I don’t know your name.”

She looks down at a white nametag, mostly obscured by the collar of her shirt and covers her mouth with one delicate hand in mock embarrassment. “Oh, gosh.” She adjusts the pleats to uncover the remaining letters: Emily.

I dare to extend my hand for hers. “Well, it’s nice to officially meet you, Emily.”

She hesitates for a fraction of a second before fitting her fingers into my palm. A woman’s handshake that I hold for a little too long, meeting her eyes with a boldness I didn’t know I had in me. “There is something you could do for me, Emily.”

“Is that so?” She pulls her hand back with a gentle smile but doesn’t look away.

I drum my fingers on the wood of the counter. “Yes ma’am. You see, I’ve got a hankerin’ for ice cream lately, but being new in town, I’ve got no idea where’s the best place to go looking for it.” There’s a heat rising up the side of my neck and I can only hope she doesn’t see it. “I was hoping you’d do the new guy in town a small favor and escort me to the best spot in town.”

I know she’s going to say yes before she does. The rounding of her cheeks as she smiles, not the tepid customer-service pleasantries, but something more genuine. I push my luck while I can. “Of course, I’d repay your services with the largest sundae they make.”

At that, she laughs. Breathily and nasal, and her voice comes out huskier with the taint of it still lingering. “I suppose it’s my duty as your hostess.” She looks over my shoulder at the clock

on the wall. “I could sneak away now for about an hour. Doubt we’ll be taking in any new folks past this time of night.” Her eyes glint with laughter. “Unless of course another half-drunk drifter shows up on the doorstep.”

The blush deepens until I feel it behind my ears. “Well, you’d have to tell him you’re at your quota anyway. Better to save him the trouble of being let down.”

She pushes her chair back, smoothing out her skirt as she stands and bookmarking her page. “You’re not wrong.”

I open the waist-high door for her, and she steps graciously through. “Shall we?” I venture, gesturing to the darkened street glimmering just outside the spotless windows. She takes my arm, the top of her head barely clearing my shoulder, and I take this as an affirmative answer.

She directs us down the cobblestone streets, navigating them expertly despite the thin heel of her pumps. Her skin is soft beneath the pad of my thumb, the only point of contact that I dare make just yet.

I ask her about her life as we walk, what it was like growing up in a place where you can see your neighbors eating dinner when you look out your living room window. She mostly watches her feet as she talks, but every so often her eyes flick up to meet mine. “Claustrophobic,” she tells me. “My whole life I’ve felt like I’m running out of elbow-room. Like there’s not enough space to stretch out and get comfortable. Like sharing a couch with both your parents. You’ve got to sit up too straight and keep your knees together and eventually it just makes you so exhausted you give up and go to bed.”

The ice cream parlor is lit like an all-night diner; I spot it from two blocks away. As we approach, I stroke her wrist with my thumb. “Sorry to tell you, Emily, but that feeling ain’t

exclusive to Lewes. Where I grew up, you had nothing but space. Acres and acres to stretch out in all you liked, but I still felt like that.”

She nods like she gets it. An acknowledgement of a mutual feeling, an entrapment that seems inescapable, mounting as the years do, closing in and choking until the only thing to do is give in or break free. “So that’s why you’re here?” she asks, as I hold the door open for her and we step into the fluorescent lighting of the ice cream shop.

“Oh, there’s a hundred reasons why I’m here.” The father in front of us juggles his three daughters, melting vanilla dripping down the side of his hand as he tries to hand them each a cone. Emily tucks her hair behind her ear and unhooks her arm from mine. In the silence that extends between us, I feel the need to clarify. “I hit a breaking point. The time came that I had to make a choice, and the choice I made wasn’t Vietnam. After I made that call, it was like anything was a possibility. I packed a bag, flipped a coin, and headed towards the ocean. Thumbed my way until I felt I was far enough from home, and here I am.”

The clerk looks at us expectantly, and I defer to Emily for our order. She considers for a moment and then points up to the menu. “The peanut butter fudge sundae, please.” After a moment of thought she adds, “To split.”

I count out enough cash to cover the dessert, and I can’t help but feel a surge of pride, the satisfaction of providing. It’s this that makes me entitled to that spot which I like most on women; the curve of the lower back, just to the left or right of the spine, a minor hollow that’s oddly pleasant to fit the palm of your hand against. She lets me, and I guide her gently along the counter while the clerk scoops chocolate and squeezes peanut butter sauce into a creation that makes my mouth water.

It takes some shuffling, but I pull a chair out for her while balancing the sundae and two spoons, reluctant to take my hand away from the warmth of her.

“I’m a little jealous of you, you know that?” she says around a spoonful of whipped cream. I’m so distracted by watching the pink curve of her lips that I barely taste the first few bites, although on some level I recognize that it’s the best thing I’ve tasted in what seems like ages.

I try to laugh in a way that’s charming. “Of course, I mean, what is there not to be jealous of? Rad job and a wardrobe that consists of over three items? I’m living the regular high life.”

She responds with a chuckle, but I can tell my sarcasm falls a little flat. She spins the plastic spoon around in her fingers, contemplating it. Her lips are ice cream sticky and I try not to stare too hard. “But you did something about it.” She speaks to the slowly melting ice cream. “You know, I’ve been moaning and groaning for years about how bored I am here. How I’d like to go somewhere else, do something else.” She takes another pensive bite, and I mirror her. “But here I sit, day in and day out. The closest I’ve come to adventure is reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*.”

Her forehead creases against a thought that won’t budge as well as she’d like it to. I’m struck by the realization that I know this girl. I know her feeling of futility, the struggle between duty and independence, responsibility and volition. I reach across the table and take her hand. The tips of her fingers are cold.

“Well,” I say, my voice huskier than I intend it, leaning toward her because I can’t *not* lean toward her, “I do hear it’s a fascinating read.”

Her head tilts up, fingers closing on mine, spoon suspended over the forgotten sundae. She doesn’t look away, and we regard one another in anticipation for a moment, serious and

questioning. Then the corners of her mouth turn up just slightly, so close I can see the smallest smudge of chocolate sauce on her bottom lip, and I know it's alright.

I kiss her under the fluorescent lights, in my Salvation Army shirt, and she tastes like ice cream.

#

I wake up with a smile on my face the next morning. Clean and satisfied and for the first time in who knows how long not angry at the morning for arriving before I was done sleeping. For a moment, I think I can still taste the ice cream.

I brush my teeth hastily, so overwhelmed in the desire to see her again that I nearly trip over myself twice tying my boots. My head is ahead of me, already kissing her on the cheek and asking to see her again later, or this weekend; calculating how much I'll make in the next few days at the fish market, deducting the rent for my room and cross-referencing with possible dates. In my haste, I clomp down the stairs on loud, heavy feet.

I pull up short as I skid into the lobby. Behind the counter is, not Emily, thumbing through a book and sliding her glasses up over sleepy eyes, but a man shuffling papers at the desk who looks up sharply over glinting spectacles. "Can I help you?"

His tone asks something altogether different.

"Pardon me, sir." I fish in my pocket for the room key, evidence that I belong here. "Just heading off to work for the day."

He abandons the papers, leaving them in a pile on the counter. He hasn't dropped his eyes from me, and I wait for the permission I so implicitly need to cross to the front door.

“You’re renting a room upstairs, that right?” As though the key dangling from my fingers wasn’t proof enough.

“Yes sir,” I answer, as politely as I can make two syllables sound. “And I’d hate to be rude, but I’ve got to shake a leg, else I’ll be late getting to work.”

I move to go, but he holds up a decisive hand. “No need for that. You can go ahead and hand me back that key there and get on your way.” He reaches across the counter, fingers outstretched and fully expecting to be obeyed.

“I paid for the room.” His objection to me is obvious, but I can’t reconcile the reason behind it. The slight fishy smell from my boots, maybe? Or my late-night ice cream date with Emily? What about me marks me as dangerous, exactly?

“I don’t give a damn if you laid down a down payment to stay five years, I won’t have seafaring hooligans under my roof, and I most certainly mean it.”

I’m halfway through my objection at being labelled a hooligan when he swings open the little waist-high door and strides out into the lobby and plucks the keys from my hand. “Trash,” he mumbles as he turns away again to stomp up the stairs. “Godless trash.”

In the throbbing angry silence of his wake, I find my reflection in the window. Hazy and faint, streaked through from the sunlight, I’m slightly rumped and stained. My new work-pants have holes worn through the pockets. Three-day stubble peppers my jaw. My hair has started to get long, falling around my ears and over my forehead. I look like a roughneck and so, to this man, like the boys in the bar and by the harbor, this must mean I am a roughneck. Even to myself, I realize what I appear to be starts to become who I am. These strangers are my mirror, and they’re no better or worse than the old, familiar one that was Aimsbury. I have let them create me. Change me.

Footsteps. Descending this time, and I wait with the anger of injustice simmering in my blood. This man. How dare this man call me trash? Godless?

He drops my duffel on the floor, not quite at my feet. “On your way now,” he nods like it’s a closed case. “Nothing left for you here.”

I lean in close to him as I grab for the strap. “Why you so afraid of a working man, huh?” I look him dead in the eye, the way Pa always did when he wanted to be intimidating. The way you look at a cow or a horse so they know you’re in charge. “You worried one of us might catch the eye of that sweet-looking girl you got working the night shift? Scared she’ll take a liking to a man with dirt under his nails?” I grin as his face reddens. I hope he hits me.

He reaches just as I swing the duffel over my shoulder, and grabs only air. “Get your sorry ass off my property before I call the police,” he grinds out through white teeth.

The mention of cops pulls me back from my anger. His keen eyes brighten ... he sees it happen, sees that click, that blink the word ‘police’ causes.

His jaw relaxes into a smile and we both realize he’s won. He reaches over the counter for the phone and I backpedal, reaching behind me for the door. We watch one another as he dials, and as he raises the receiver to his ear I turn, letting the door slam closed. The shrill ding of my departure ringing in my ears.

Chapter Seven

The noise of the harbor drifts down the street to me, bouncing against the brick buildings as if seeking me out. I could drag myself and my duffel back to the fish market. I could stay clear of the Bed and Breakfast and hope the cops never chase down the owner's complaint about me. I could behead barrel after barrel of slimy bass until the salt worked its way into my very blood. I could stay here, and be Godless, seafaring trash. I could put on my new jeans and new shirt and sweet-talk the girl behind the counter until she agreed to go out for ice cream with me. Piss off her father with my presence until he called the cops again. One way or another, I'd be discovered as a draft-dodger. They'd take me in cuffs, enunciate the charges against me so everyone could hear. The guys at the market would look at me in disgust. I'd be a coward in their eyes.

I turn away from the noise. Put the ship bells and deep, gruff voices of the sailors at my back, let them push me like a storm wind away from yet another place, another future Davey.

So I walk, thumb jutting out as cars whiz by, stopping only to duck behind a tree to change into the new clothes I bought with pay I now wish I'd saved. The non-fish-stained digs get me two short-distance lifts from quiet truckers who spit tobacco into Styrofoam coffee cups between their knees. As the 18-wheelers put more and more miles between me and Lewes, I stop wondering if anyone has noticed I didn't show back up to work after lunch. I mourn the Captain and the guys at the bar and my nickname. Silently, watching more towns zip by out the open window. I bury them, one shovelful of dirt at a time.

But as the harbor, the job, the girl fall further behind me, all I really feel is incomplete, in a not uncomfortable way. Not done, in progress, but with momentum. A math problem half finished, when you know you've done something right and the answer is coming.

The last of the truckers drops me off in a small town center, honking a quick salute goodbye. With my boots on the pavement, I want to keep moving. Keep walking, if need be. This town, whatever it's called, whatever claim to fame it may have, has no draw for me simply because it's here. Right now, I need more distance. If I can't be in Lewes, I need to be as far from it as possible.

A train whistle blows in the distance and I turn myself in its direction. Again I need an escape, but I feel less like I'm running from something now, more like I'm moving toward something, searching out a place or a person that is somehow still foggy and unformed in my mind.

The call of the train takes me away from the town center. Slowly the buildings grow elbow room, shimmying away from one another before retreating back into the trees. The sidewalk ends, dumping me out onto the dirt, but I don't break stride. In fact, the spongy give of the dap sand is less painful on my ankles and knees.

The noise that train cars make when they jerk to life, the inharmonious clanking and squealing, has never inspired much reassurance in me as to their safety. I imagine the whole crawling length of it twisting hard left over a stone or a tree branch, tumbling a domino-effect spiral over an embankment, spilling coal or stone or people, whatever its charge is today, out onto the ground in a high speed, high impact mess.

It breaks out of the trees as I come over a small hill, black and metallic, but moving at a speed that assures me I can be Somewhere Else in short order.

My muscles protest, but I speed up until I'm sprinting, parallel to the tracks, and reach out for a protruding door handle about to pass me. Fingers close around metal and I muscle myself up and into the freight car, using my momentum to swing the duffel in ahead of me.

As I stand up, intending to dust myself off, find a comfortable spot to watch the country roll by, I'm caught behind the ear by a punch that dots the field outside with black patches and nearly sends me stumbling out the open door.

You never really get good at taking punches. There are few people who can shake one off with dignity and get down to the business of brawling after their vision's been doubled or their nose broken. Every fight I've been in has felt like a spectacle. A public test. A chance to prove myself worthy or a wimp. And I've always felt too much like an actor in those situations to really feel like a warrior.

This time is different, though. Nobody is watching, this time. Not Ma, not Pa, not Genevive. In a strange land, everyone's a stranger. I have no reason not to hit back with everything I've got, so I whip an elbow around, connect with bone or muscle or train parts and turn, eyes blurry and too slow to keep up, shrugging away the hands grabbing for my shoulders.

It surprises me, the anger. Not necessarily its presence, but its strength. The rush of something that feels like power, the snarling, gritty need to take something between my hands and crush it. You feel no pain in that red haze. You barely feel the impact of knuckles on cheekbones, the tear of fingernails on skin. The world tips sideways and you're stumbling, barely staying upright through the rage. All momentum, no plan.

It fades as fast as it came on. Exhaustion. My fists fly out, not through crisp air, but nightmare-thick mud. Body and mind slow. Something catches me by the left eyebrow and blurriness turns to darkness, spots that grow and then recede, the corner of something metal digging into my spine, something to lean against as my knees go watery and I sink down to the floor. The hard buck and shake of the train and I move with it, listing like the drunk sailors. Beards and knit caps come into focus, the rusty smell of blood and maybe actual rust and foul, old sweat. Three-day-old sweat, layered over and under itself and rotting from the inside out. Sharp twist and pain in my ankles, one-two, and my boots are gone. My eyes, one dazed and still trying to catch up, light on a face. Eyes, at least. Other ones. Green behind massive eyebrows. Kind eyes. Perched above a nose lumpy and dripping blood.

I apologize before I think better of it. Sorry comes out slurred like whiskey shots on your tongue and he laughs, sharp and spitty, at me. My boots dangle by their laces from his fist. The kind eyes darken, shadowed beneath the ridge of eyebrow. This smelly man with green eyes has stolen my boots and blackened my eyes. But I don't feel as though I have been beaten, I feel like I fought as he fought. The loss is more or less inconsequential.

I pant against the doorframe, lapping up the breeze as it buffets me in the face, tiny slaps against tender skin but it's the only thing that feels good.

“This ain't your car.”

I force my eyes into focus and watch the man still dangling my boots by their laces. He stands over my duffel bag, one hairy foot planted on either side. My car? I don't *have* a car. We had a truck, me and Ma, for the farm. An old, rusted thing that bucked with each gear shift no matter how delicately you toed the clutch. Smelled like chickens. Hole in the driver's seat from where Pa spilled his cigar ashes once. And me in the passenger seat, toes tangling a foot above the floorboards, waiting for the day when it'd be mine.

"It was a Chevy," I mumble, but through swollen lips only the vowels are audible.

The man drops my boots, comes into slightly clearer focus as my pupils stop vibrating from the impact of his fists. His overalls are so torn they're nearly useless. He's layered flannels and long johns and dress socks with them to cover the holes. The kind eyes narrow at me, a sort of mirrored confusion. There's a trickle of blood by his eyebrow and I try to raise my hand to point to it. Try to form the words hey-man-you've-got-a-little-something-there, a gentlemen's truce after a brawl.

He kneels next to me, and I try to wet my lips with a slow, chomped-on tongue and try again. Dirt-crusting hands, hands as filthy as I've ever seen, grab my shoulders firmly. What car? The truck was a Chevy.

With one almighty shove, the man with the kind eyes pushes me, and I tumble out the open door of the train car.

Oh. *That* car.

Chapter Eight

The ground tumbles up toward me, end over end, spinning and surreal until wham, we collide, the impact a reverberation that lasts too much longer, a painful echo in my chest and head and shoulders and knees.

I think for a moment I might be dying, but death would surely be less painful. Maimed, maybe. Or paralyzed. Something irrevocable and tragic. For a while I just lay in the dirt, throbbing at too many places to count, the moist, sticky presence of blood at my mouth and nose and elbows. My socks, damp with sweat, chill my feet with the breeze.

I fell from the barn loft once, when I was five. Adventurous and still so like the rest, a boy with dirt under his fingernails and a knack for being places I shouldn't be. The loft was off-limits, hence its appeal. I was an Aztec explorer, climbing vine-choked Amazonian trees to survey the land to be plundered. The hay sticking to my thin, sweaty calves was a trail of ants,

one of many occupational hazards for a man of the world such as myself. The barn roof was a dense treetop cover of dew-soaked leaves the size of my head. Panthers and anacondas lurked in every dusty corner. I shimmied out onto one of the wide rafters, a gnarled branch from which I could look out over the rivers and mountains.

It was trying to stand that did me in. I was fine, my tiny frame hugging the beam, oblivious to the tiny splinters digging at my shins. But a man would stand, straight-backed and fearless to look out on the land soon to be his. So I arched my back and tucked my knees onto the wavy surface and wiggled my toes into position. I stood up, had one fleeting moment of triumph, and promptly lost my balance, toppling ass over tea kettle into a fortuitously placed pile of straw.

All thoughts of aspiring manhood abandoned me at that point. I wailed like a child for my mother, but the first one to hear and come running was Pa. He pulled up short in the doorway of the barn, framed into a dark silhouette by the sun behind him. My leg was blinding-hot fire, but his slow advance struck more fear. He lifted me by the elbow from my landing place and tried to set me back on my feet. I winced and leaned, keeping weight off my right foot any way I could.

“Stand up, boy.”

Pa’s command demanded that I do as I was told. Gingerly, I dropped my toes down to the dusty floor, shifting so far to my left that I nearly fell over. I sniffed, snot running down my face and looked up at him.

“You climbing the rafters?” Barely a question. An accusation.

A swallow and a nod from me, and Pa cocked his eyebrow. He wanted a verbal confession. “Yessir.”

“Well, get on in the house. Let your Ma take a look at you.”

He turned, a less frightening silhouette leaving than coming, and went back to his work. And I, five years old and nearly a quarter mile away from the house, limped and cried and snotted my way inside to my mother, who ascertained that my leg was indeed broken, and drove me into town to the doctor, who set it in a white cast that would itch all summer long.

I may as well be that five-year-old boy all over again, dusty and tearful and needing my mother to pat me on the head and save me from the pains of the real world. But, luckily or unluckily for me, she's a few hundred miles away.

Just as I did that day so many years ago, with Pa gone and Ma too far away to reach, I force myself up out of the dirt despite the way my leg protests. I ache and I throb and I may be making my injuries worse but there is no other option but to stand so I stand.

My ankle is surely broken. It nearly gives out under my weight with each step. The forest floor crackles underfoot. Pinecones and dead leaves. I bite my lip against the pain and keep on, following the train tracks, because eventually they'll lead to Somewhere.

I imagine for a moment that I'll come across a bar in the next city I pass through. I'll stop in for a drink and elbow up to the bar, order a beer with ease and confidence. I'll look to my left and he'll be there, knee-deep in whiskey but still with those sober eyes. I'll let him recognize me before I look at him twice. Let him stare too long and struggle to find the words. I'll wait until he says my name—Davey?—sort of sure but not sure could this really be my son, this man at the bar with a beer in his hand and so far from home and I'll look at him nice and even and no sort of a smile just real quiet—Hey, Pa—and let him be the one to search for words and finally grind out a stiff — How are you, boy? How's your Ma? — and I'll turn full to face him and sip my beer and just look at him like how dare you ask about either of us, you sonofabitch if you wanted so badly to know how we were you would've stayed and you'd know how we are. And I'll just look at

him dead in the eye until he realizes how foolish he sounds and when he drops his eyes I'll drop money on the bar and finish my beer and stand up and look down at him and say Me and Ma are just fine. We're just fine.

The trees and underbrush gradually open up, becoming less a forest and more a backyard. A staggered skyline rises up on the horizon. Someplace new, a spot to get lost in once again. My head spins in a might throw up kind of way but I keep on. If I throw up, there's plenty of options vis-à-vis location.

The tracks intersect a road up ahead. The asphalt cuts through the forest looking strange and out of place, like an intruder. I thump-drag slowly closer to it. Left is westward, toward the heartlands. Right is East, back toward the ocean. The girl behind the counter and the salty stink of fish. Beyond them, Ma and the farm.

I limp off to the left without breaking stride.

Chapter Nine

He doesn't make a noise, but I know he's there. The road is more or less empty and then it's not, two bleary brown eyes in a trash pile, and I pause, leaning on my good ankle. He shudders, nose peeking in and out of sight, and I bend down, more from habit than anything else, years of goat-herding and cow-milking still at the ready should they be needed, and he pokes a dirt-spotted muzzle out of the garbage. A shred of lettuce pokes out the side of his mouth. The last bit of someone's discarded sandwich, maybe. My stomach growls, the deep churning hunger that's nearly nausea. Leaves you light-headed and you need to sit down, so I do, leaning against the mailbox post, someone's dirt driveway beside me and their torn-open trash bag at my feet.

He comes out slowly, ribs showing, fur clumpy and stained. White fur spotted with black and brown and then mud and the crust of neglect on top of those. I reach in to the bag, tearing the hole wider, and his nose twitches. The shred of lettuce falls off.

“There’s more in here,” I tell him. Low and even, the cadence animals like. A rotted apple turns to mush under my fingers as I dig, skin and mealy insides shoved up under my fingernails and I dry-heave as the smell wafts up. The dog plants his rump in the dirt and watches me.

“Do you have a name, boy?” There’s something wrapped in plastic and he cocks his head at me, ears flopping at the movement and I pull out the remains of a loaf of bread, the butts and a few last middle pieces, still in the wrapper and twist-tied closed. The dog’s eyes follow my fingers as I unearth marble rye, hold the rotted apple spread.

There are mold spots in the corners, but I pull them off and toss them back in the bag. The dog’s paws twitch as he thinks about going after them, but I hold out a clean piece to him and he pauses, indecisive.

“It’s better for you than the lettuce.” I drop the piece halfway between us and he regards it for a moment before pouncing, gobble-snap-retreat and he’s back in his spot, pink tongue licking imaginary crumbs from his snout.

“Good, huh?” I fold a full slice into my mouth, my bruised jaw a misery to work up and down but soreness aside I chew and swallow and the dog and I smile at one another. “More?”

I put the next piece closer to me, a bigger one this time, and he doesn’t hesitate. The stump of his tail wags as another marble rye disappears down the hatch and he plops down, within arm’s reach now.

There’s a butt piece left and I tear it in two, chewing as much as my swollen jaw will allow and with a thick swallow there’s only the half slice left. The dog watches it and I hold it out to him. “You want it?”

We both sit immobile for a moment, watching one another. He leans in slowly, his eyes on mine the whole time, the question of trust hanging in the balance.

Then the bread is gone, my hand is empty, and his tail thumps in the dirt again. Holding the mailbox for balance, I drag myself up to stand. The ache in my ankle deepens and my vision goes blurry for a moment. The few bites of food in my stomach churn uncomfortably. Breathe deep, swallow, repeat. I can't stand another rummage through the garbage to look for more.

After a while the nausea shifts, dissipating throughout my limbs into a low tremor. The dog sits silently, still watching me.

“Not exactly filet mignon, huh, bud?”

His tongue unfolds in a pant and he smiles at me. Seriously, he seems to say. What I'd give for a cheeseburger right about now.

When you're eating from the garbage and talking to stray mutts, is that what people mean when they refer to hitting rock bottom? Have I reached that mythological place?

I test out the ankle. It holds okay. I brush some of the dirt off my pants and laugh when I realize the futility of it. My forceful exit from the train has smeared dirt deep into the crevices of skin and clothing alike. A shake of the head, resignation to be filthy yet again. Slow, tentative steps and I'm back on the move.

I've gone barely ten steps when the dog whimpers. A high whine once, sharp. Not a response to pain, a call for attention. I look over my shoulder at him, still sitting by the mailbox and the mangled trash bag.

“Come on then.” I tap my thigh and he scampers to my side, tail wagging and that jaunty trotting gait that all baby critters seem to have. “Shall we see about that cheeseburger?”

I laugh at myself, shake my head. This doesn't feel like rock bottom, but it damn well should.

The country starts to fade into city, the woods thinning and houses creeping closer and closer to the road, which widens and turns to pavement. Bud pads along next to me. Each time I call him that, he looks intently up at me and cocks his head as if to listen. I take that to mean he prefers this as a name.

The pain in my ankle has dulled to a numb, swollen sort of throb. I limp along on it with resolve, eyes watering every so often at particularly sharp rocks in the soles of my stocking feet.

There's yelling in the distance. Rhythmic chanting like a song except not quite so melodious. The road opens to a town center and ahead of us, spread across the intersection and holding up exactly three cars from continuing on their way is a group of tie-dye clad kids. Signs bob up and down in their hands, their tangled, beaded hair whips into their faces as they pump fists in the air.

Bud steps behind me; he's not so sure about the hippies, all round glasses and "stop the war" and sandaled feet.

Peace, they preach, angering the drivers who beep back at them and make empty threats from behind their windshields.

Peace, I wonder. *Is* there such a thing? The man with the kind eyes pushing me out the train car door. Maybe peace for him was a pair of boots to keep his feet dry. Pa. Maybe his peace was freedom from his wife and child and a life he no longer wanted. Peace for Vietnam would mean the U.S troops gone from their shores.

Peace for the lion is a belly full of gazelle, but peace for the gazelle is a life free of lions. A violent catch-22. A food chain nobody is free from.

And what's my peace? An open road? A new town? A woman? Or a man who finally nods in acknowledgement of my membership into that elusive yet all-consuming club?

These kids are fools. Their campaign for peace is a shout into the void. God is dead and peace is a myth, and the acceptance of those things, I'm finding, makes the rest of it much easier to stomach.

There's a gypsy-looking girl in the crowd, long skirt swirling as she weaves through the others, bright and limber and full of conviction. One of her companions watches her, a boy with crossed arms and a pair of army-issued camouflage pants. His eyes follow her as she flits through the signs, her voice harmonizing with the others.

And I wonder about this boy. Tonight, if the pot hits the gypsy girl too hard and she falls asleep in a darkened corner, will he rape her? If the protest gets broken up by the cops, will he protect her? As their bus crosses some lonely highway, if there is one sandwich left, will he offer it to her or keep it for himself?

What kind of man is he?

The gypsy girl loops through the crowd again, her fingertips brushing the boy's arm in passing, a smile thrown over her shoulder that he answers too slowly and too eagerly. Does your arm tingle where she touched you? Do the chills radiate all the way to your toes? Are you tripping over words in your head, wondering what to say and how to say it so that she'll smile like that at you again?

Have you seen the war, boy? Have you been shot at? Watched your friends die? Huddled cold and wet and scared to death in a muddy hole wondering if the last thing you'll see will be the raindrops dripping from the rim of your helmet and the pale, hopeless faces of your comrades?

Have you lived my greatest fear? Or are you running from it just like I am?

The boy turns and sees me watching him. For a moment we simply stare; size one another up. Then he cocks an elbow and shoots me a half-hearted peace sign. Obligatory. A gesture he doesn't mean and doesn't believe in. Going through the motions of what the rest of them expect him to do.

Maybe this boy is not so different from me after all.

I turn and whistle for Bud, who hops to attention, cantering along in figure eights between my feet. This place is not for us.

Chapter Ten

Pikeville, Kentucky, is a town that has seen better days. The houses we pass by have drooping shutters and chipped paint, a sort of atmosphere of neglect that permeates the people – they pass by us in cars and on bikes with little more than a glance and a wrinkle of the nose. Bud and I walk with no real destination, poking halfheartedly at open trash cans we pass. Potato chip crumbs and some already-gnawed chicken wings end up being dinner. When my ankle feels ready to give out under me, we stop and sit awhile, Bud at my hip. I scratch him between the ears until the throbbing subsides some, and we get up and keep walking.

Pikeville and I seem to have an understanding, that neither of us are at our best, so we avert our eyes from the ugliest parts of one another and pass on by.

It's just before twilight when we happen across a car pulled off to the side of the road, hood up and a healthy rump of a backside poking out behind the front bumper.

“Hey there,” I call before I think better. My voice is scratchy from lack of use and I cough a rasp or two laced with phlegm. My breath is bad. I’ve not seen a toothbrush in over four days. And eating from the garbage doesn’t do much to help such a problem.

The rump disappears and a man’s face replaces it, looking out through the steam issuing from the engine. He squints at us behind tiny oval-shaped glasses, beads of sweat rolling down his cheeks which turn quite seamlessly into his neck. “Howdy,” he answers, dragging the back of his hand across his forehead. “You wouldn’t happen to be a mechanic, now, would ya? Because for the life of me--”he swipes a hand through the steam and wipes it on his chinos--“I can’t figure out what in the hell is wrong or for that matter how to fix it.”

Bud runs ahead of me and noses up to the man’s knee, sniffing him out. A few hearty tail wags are all I need as confirmation that this guy’s a-okay in his book, so I limp over in the dog’s wake. “Far from a mechanic, but I can take a look anyway. Worked on enough tractors in my day that I may know a thing or two.”

I catch the man’s reaction as I get close enough for him to smell me, to trace the limp in my step with his eyes and count the dirt-stains in my clothes. His eyes linger on my socked feet and bounce back to my face. A wrinkle in his forehead appears. Hobo, it says. Smelly, appalling bum. Any second now, he’ll tell me to carry on my way. Rather be late for dinner, get home to cold mashed potatoes and a pissed-off wife than get too close to the likes of me.

“Be my guest, pal.” He gestures to the engine and steps back. Bud plants his rear end so close to the guy’s foot that he’s nearly sitting on his white, spotless sneaker. To the man’s credit, he reaches down and pats Bud on the head a few times.

I lean my hip on the bumper and duck beneath the hood, taking the weight off my ankle for the time being. The engine hisses even in its inactivity and I start checking the basics. Battery connections, radiator fluid, oil level. I can feel him watching me.

“Name’s Allen.” His voice arcs over my shoulder, the watchful gaze of a parent.

“Davey,” I answer. “When’s the last time you filled her with oil?”

He sputters for a moment before realizing what I’m asking. “Ahh--” the hesitation that speaks volumes. “To be honest I aint rightly sure.”

I straighten up and wipe the sheen of moisture off my face with my sleeve. Wince as I kneel down and sit, gravel digging into my ass, and swing around to look under the chassis.

“Where you headed to, Davey?”

Easier to ask with my head buried under his Dodge. A dig that’s not really. Hey kid, you look like shit, wanna tell me why? A fat drop of oil lands on my cheek and I slide out from underneath the car to wipe it away. “Not really sure, Allen. But you’ve got one mother of an oil leak, which is why the engine overheated. I’d load her up with about five quarts and take her right the hell to a mechanic to figure out where she’s leaking from. Lucky the whole damn thing didn’t blow up.”

I dust my pants off, habit, and laugh to myself at the futility of it. The oil mark on my face adds an interesting layer to the odor I’m cultivating. Eau de hobo, now with notes of 5w-30. You’ll be beating the broads off with a stick.

Allen watches me, sliding the specs up his nose with his middle finger. “What size are you?”

I stare at him, a challenge and a question all while half-formed memories flash by, teenaged hard-ons and a ruler, locker room curiosity and that stomach-turning fear of being

caught looking where no man should ever look, even if it is just to compare notes, so to speak. The fading sun loops beneath a tree branch and I raise a hand to shade my eyes. “You trying to compare Johnsons with me, Al?”

He sputters again, an oddly satisfying noise, and pushes his glasses up again even though they haven’t gone anywhere. “No, no . . .” an uncomfortable chuckle, part nerves, part act. “Your feet – shoes,” he clarifies hurriedly. “The roads around here . . . the loose rocks must be a killer.”

Kindness. The last time I thought I spotted it, it pushed me out a moving train car. I regard Allen for a moment. There’s no moving vehicle for him to push me out of. What the hell. “Nine and a half.”

He nods all in a hurry. “Thought so. I’ve got a few spare sets of sneakers back at my house. I could bring you some?” He gestures to the still-hissing Dodge. “As thanks, you know, for checking out the car. Mechanics around here, they’d have sold me a whole new damn engine.”

The ache in my feet make it impossible to say no. My pride would walk a hundred more miles on bleeding soles, putting more holes in the ripe-smelling socks just for the satisfaction of telling this stranger that I don’t need his charity. But the pain is too much. Pride gets beaten down and I nod, hanging my head and not meeting his eyes. Unable to let him see how his kindness opens a new wound in me. “I’d appreciate that very much, actually.”

Allen grins and it makes his fat face look jolly. “Good man. I tell you what –“ he glances down the street – “I’m real late getting home, my wife’s probably got her undies all in a bunch by now, but there’s a church about two blocks back and three that way –“ he gestures off to the left – “and they’d be happy to take a fella like you in for the night. I’ve got a project I’m working

on across the street and I'll be there in the morning. I'll bring you the shoes and a roast beef sandwich. Whaddaya say?"

The grumbling in my stomach says hell yes, and Bud's ribs poking through his matted coat seem to agree. Again, I nod. Survival beats pride over the head with a stick. Pride flops onto his back, raising a dust cloud.

"Good enough, then." Allen sticks out a pale, freckled arm and I wipe dirty palms on my dirty jeans and take the hand he offers. "Until tomorrow, sir." And with a lazy salute, he turns and continues on down the road, to his pissed-off wife and an armchair in front of the television. Four walls and running water. Bud watches him go and looks up at me. The church? He seems to ask. Two blocks back and three to the left. A destination, at the very least. A someplace.

As Allen's footsteps crunch off down the street, the growing darkness swallowing all of him but the sound of his shoes on the potholed asphalt, I reach for the handle of the Dodge's back door and pop it open as quietly as possible. The soft leather bench seat is as inviting as anything I've ever seen, and I fold myself into the back, stretching out on my side. A tap on the floor calls Bud and he bounds in after me, curling up on the floor mat as I pull the door shut behind us.

Chapter Eleven

The sun wakes me, glaring in through the windows just as it peeks over the horizon, and when I sit up, Bud stirs beside me on the floor, bleary eyes blinking up at me. “Morning, Bud.” His answer is a chorus of panting, tongue lolling out. It’s nice to have someone to say good morning to. And my ankle throbs with significantly less force than yesterday.

I slide out of the backseat, calling Bud after me. He looks at me with his sleepy eyes and yawns, pink tongue unrolling and re-rolling. Take it easy, he seems to say. Five more minutes.

But the promise of shoes and a sandwich piled high with roast beef have me intent on vacating Allen’s car before he comes back for it, and I pat my knee insistently. “Let’s go, Bud. Move it or lose it.”

There’s a dewy cover on the ground, a cold dampness that seeps through the thin socks into my feet and subsequently my bones. I shiver.

The soles of my feet have a tender sensitivity not unlike the kind fading just now from my face. A fat raindrop falls in my eye and wiggles down my cheek like a tear.

Bud and I hobble three blocks back as the rain picks up. Cars and people whizz past us and the whole world has the rushed, cranky feel of a Monday morning. By the time we find the church, its faded white steeple nearly indiscernible amid the fog and rooftops that swarm around it, Bud and I are soaked.

There's a low rock wall framing the front lawn, half disassembled, chunks of concrete laid about and small boulders like puzzle pieces waiting for busy hands. The windows are darkened smudges. The paint flakes off the shutters in chunks.

A low rumble of thunder and Bud's ears flatten, tail tucked, eyes wide.

"I'm not sure how Jesus feels about dogs in his house."

A bright flash and the rain pounds harder, pattering on sidewalks, shoulders, and mutts alike. Cleansing like when you've got into the big mud puddle by the barn and Ma takes the hose to you.

Bud's fur clumps together, his bony ribs that much more evident. I never did believe in Jesus that much anyway.

"If you insist."

I need most of my body weight to open the door, and my ankle groans in protest, a harmony with the oak. Bud squeezes inside ahead of me.

The vestibule is cool and dark, empty this early in the morning. I slide into one of the back pews, leaving wet streaks on the polished wood. Bud hops up beside me, nails clacking.

It occurs to me that I should make the sign of the cross, a habit forcibly formed by Ma on the many occasions she dragged me by the ear to Sunday school. But the idea of blessing myself

–the whole concept of it – is laughable. Bless me, God, with better garbage to eat today. Make the rain stop before we get hypothermia. And maybe some damn shoes. Amen. Bud curls up beside me, his rough fur brushing my knuckles.

Jesus on the cross regards me with a pained face, but whether for the nails digging into his palms and feet or for my very unchristian lack of gratitude, I can't be sure.

“Fine.”

I fold my hands neatly in my lap. “Thank God for dogs. Because people are fucked. Amen.”

The doors creak behind me and I start, the domino effect of Bud twitching to attention beside me making his nails clatter again, and I turn, half expecting the Lord in bright light tapping his open palm with a leather belt, ready to make me regret having a smart mouth in his house, not under my roof, dammit.

But it's Allen.

His gut stretches the front of a light-blue button-up, hair is still wet from the morning's shower, and in each hand he holds a paper bag.

“Hey pal! Good morning. Wasn't sure I'd see you here, but I'm glad to.” He holds out the bags like a sacrificial offering. “Brought you a few things.”

His eyes cut over to Bud, staring over the back of the pew at him, and I can tell he wants to say something about having a dog in a church, but he bites it back. When I stand up there's a moist imprint of my butt on the polished seat.

“Sneakers?”

He shakes one of the bags at me in answer and I reach out and take it. He starts chattering as I dig around inside.

“I called up a mechanic last night, they’re sending out a tow truck this morning for the car –“

I pull a pair of sandals from the bag, letting it fall to the floor as I examine them. Separating soles, worn straps. Imprints of toes worn nearly through them.

“—told them, don’t be givin’ me the runaround about a new motor either, because I know for a fact –“

The sandals dangle from my finger, a promise of blisters and broken toenails but at the very least a reprieve from the constant digging pain of rocks and pebbles in my arches. “Thank you.” But my thank you sounds a lot like You Fucker, You Said You’d Bring Me Sneakers.

He stops midsentence. “Yeah sure, I figured I was gonna throw ‘em out anyways.” He rubs a hand along the back of his neck. “Made you a sandwich, too. No roast beef left, but I always liked PB and J as a kid so . . .” He trails off, holding out the second paper bag.

I curl my fingers around the top of the bag. Force a smile. “I appreciate it. Really.”

Why do I say it? It’s habit. Be polite. Say thank you. Even when you don’t mean it. Especially when you don’t mean it. Why?

He shrugs exaggeratedly. Big smile. A man who’s Done a Good Thing. “Don’t worry about it.” He even gives me the aw-shucks hand-flop.

“Love thy neighbor, right?”

Allen looks at me much like Jesus does. Pained. Like I’m not playing along. I’m supposed to fall to my knees in gratitude for his crappy shoes and crappy sandwich like he’s saved me from starvation singlehandedly. Like he’s been heroically selfless in his quest to feed and clothe the hungry hobo. I’m supposed to say God Bless You Good Sir. Jesus love and keep you. Amen.

I'm glad I slept in his car. I hope it smells like hobo for weeks. I hope the stench of me and Bud is ground so far into the upholstery that even though he scrubs and shampoos and hangs air fresheners from his rearview, he keeps smelling us. I hope the memory of us lingers even with the windows down and the breeze buffeting his comb over into disarray.

"The pastor should be here soon." Allen's voice is monotone now. The game is over. "I'm sure he can set you up at a shelter. Soup kitchen maybe."

"I don't need his charity. Or yours for that matter." I drop the sandals at his feet. The sandwich is harder to let go of, but I uncurl my fingers from the bag and let it fall to the floor as well. Pride struggles up from the dirt, one knee at a time.

Allen's eyes track the gifts he's brought, rejected on the floor. He's uncomfortable, and I'm glad of it. I smirk as he struggles for words, the actor who's forced to improvise when someone else goes off-script.

"I wish you'd stay."

"You don't." My ankle twinges as I forget and put my full weight on it. "You want to feel like you helped us, but you want us gone. It's fine," I add as he tries to cut in with some excuse or explanation. "We don't need you to want us. But you don't get to feel like a saint just because you brought us a damn sandwich."

Allen regards me for a moment. "That's mighty ungrateful of you, boy."

I push past him, lurching in my ungainly limp. Bud patters after me. "Maybe so. But I'm grateful for a lot of things, Allen. You and your sandwich just don't happen to be one of them."

The rain is still steady outside. For a moment I stand at the doorstep of the church. Which way now? Left or right? Find shelter or find food?

Within seconds, my hair is soaked and dripping into my eyes. Across the lawn, the stones lay, dark and slick with water. The monotony of survival has begun to bore me. The constant perusal of our surroundings, scanning for something useful. The half-built wall is something new. A different, more complex type of puzzle.

Like a math problem once the numbers click, I see how they all fit into place. The large one with the one sharp edge as the base, alongside the half-begun wall. The round one next, with the smaller ones to frame it. I kneel in the mud and start to fit them together, muscles straining against the weight of the heavier ones.

Why?

I don't know, except that it feels good to put something together. Bud gives me up as a lost cause and takes refuge beneath a tree to stay dry, shaking out his fur as best he can.

One stone at a time, the wall grows. And each time I find just the right one, the right flat side for the sides or the top, the key-like lock of two things you'd never expect to fit together, the satisfaction grows.

The nausea of stomach acid gnawing on nothing but my own body subsides the more focused I become on my game. The rain loses its chill and begins to feel good. Refreshing on skin breaking a light sweat. The sweat of labor. Of intent. Of purpose.

At some point, Allen leaves. The pastor arrives. People file past me, heads ducked under umbrellas and hats, on their way to repent for their impure thoughts, their lies, their infidelities. To pray for wealth and health and for their kids to stop being so god damned disobedient.

And still I pile.

My hands shake from shivering but there's no pain. Will I die here? Lay down in the mud and waste away from hunger or just pure pointlessness? I no longer care. If the urge to lie down

strikes me, I'll lie down. If sleep overtakes me, I'll gladly close my eyes. If I don't wake up, I'll happily dream until the dreams fade to darkness. The wall, at least, will remain. A gravestone marker, nameless as I am, my task my death. So be it.

A pair of boots invade my line of sight, sinking slightly into the soft mud, shoelaces dangling.

Squish.

"No work today, son. Didn't you get the message?"

I look up, jeans to belt to tucked-in t-shirt to clean-shaven face to ball-cap pulled low over the eyes.

I watch him realize he doesn't know me.

"You're not on my payroll." An itch of barely there chin stubble. "Wanna tell me why you're out here in this weather, slingin' rock for free?"

The small boulder beneath my hands is a perfect top piece. One smooth side and a lump just shallow enough to fit in the groove of the one below it. Muddy fingers, cracked and jagged fingernails explore its surface. I heft it into place. It fits so satisfyingly.

"It wasn't finished" is the best I can come up with. "I had some time. The rain doesn't bother me much."

A hand held out to pull me to my feet. "Well work like that deserves a burger at the very least."

I don't take his hand but I lurch to my feet, ankles and knees and hips clicking and catching. Bud lifts his head and the man's mouth arcs up in a smile. "Cute dog. He got a name?"

I push a dripping shock of hair back from my forehead. "I just call him Bud."

Upon hearing his name, he trots over. The man pats him on the head and his tongue lolls out in a doggie smile.

“I’ll bet Bud would like a burger too. What do you say, son?”

The thought of real food makes my mouth water, and my stomach answers for me with an audible growl.

The man laughs. “I’ll take that as a yes, then. How about you hop on in the truck? Great burger joint just down the road a piece.”

Take a handout or find another trash can to eat out of. Believe in the kindness of a stranger again, or push away the mere possibility of it?

Alright then. Better than Allen and his shitty sandwich. His goddamned sandals.

“Alright then.”

Chapter Twelve

His truck is an old Bronco. Rust eating away at the fenders. Mismatched paint in patches on the door he opens to reveal torn seats. Bud and I climb in. It smells like cigars. There's a crushed beer can on the floor.

I like this truck. It's honest. It makes me like the man who owns it.

I think I smell less potently for my afternoon in the rain. Though the wet dog aroma from Bud coupled with the lingering smoke could just be off-setting my B.O.

The driver's door slams.

Three cranks and the engine turns over. "My crew could take a lesson from you, you know. Bunch of pansies, they are. Couple drops of rain and they're all too worried about mud I their panties to work." He shakes his head and pulls away from the curb. "Makes you wonder

what happened to that good ol' American work ethic. My father had it. Made damn sure I had it, too."

Pa would like this guy.

"Guess the definition's changed a bit over the years. My old man worked from dawn to dusk. Got my ass up with the roosters from the time I was seven."

A chuckle of affirmation. "Way it's supposed to be, right there. Good man, to raise his son to know the value of a hard day's work."

"He's dead."

I don't know why I say it, except that it sounds right. Like an insult to him that has actual weight, even in his absence. He's gone, he's dead. Same thing.

"Damned shame. My condolences. The good ones always go too young, huh?"

We pull into the parking lot of a diner and I realize I have no shoes on. I smell. I'm dripping with what I mostly rainwater but partly sweat.

"I'll just wait in here, then."

A quizzical look. "Bud'll be fine for a few minutes. We'll crack a window. Bring him a doggy bag." He strokes Bud's ears. Gives him a scratch. "You'd like that, right Bud?"

Bud gives a smiling pant of approval.

"I've got no shoes."

His eyes flash to my feet. "Got a pair in the backseat somewhere." He reaches back and rummages for a moment, coming up with a pair of mud-stained boots. "Might not fit perfect, but better than nothing, right?"

As he holds them out to me across the worn bench seat, gratitude strikes me hard and deep. My eyes nearly start to water, and I have to look away.

“Thank you.” A thick grunt. Clumsy as I pull them onto my feet. The snug comfort of having a layer of anything between the tender soles of my feet and the rest of the world.

“Forget about it.” He waves away this gesture, this act of kindness that’s moved me to tears. He ducks out of the truck, creak-slam, and I follow.

“Stay, Bud.”

A glob of drool slips from Bud’s tongue. Another mark on the upholstery that I doubt minds a little dog spit.

The parking lot is scattered with older cars. Mostly trucks that look a lot like his. Beds filled with tools or bags of mulch. This is a working man’s place. No ties required.

But still I worry I smell.

The door dings as we enter and they all look up. cursory glances that slide over us and transition smoothly back to their burgers and beers. Some of them bob their chins in nods of acknowledgement. The stoic man’s Hello.

“Counter okay?” He grins and adjusts his hat. Behind him, a brunette leans across the crumb-covered surface, fat cheeks dimpling in a smile. Her eyeliner is smudged at the edges but her red lipstick has a freshly applied sheen to it.

“Don’t you dare think about sitting anywhere else now, you hear?” She winks at me as she swipes at the crumbs with a rag. “This one here’s the highlight of my day.”

He chuckles and shrugs at me. “Counter it is.” I perch on one of the stools. Sticky vinyl but I still try not to touch anything.

He plops down next to me, leans on his elbows, and waves to the cook through the order window. Plucks a menu from its holder and hands it to me. “I’ll have the usual, Trixie,” he grunts. “And whatever the kid wants.”

She pushes frizzy curls back from her face. “You got it, handsome.”

I drop my eyes to the lunch list, feeling like I’m intruding on something private.

“Where’d you come from, anyway darlin’?”

She’s asking me, brown eyes wide and interested and totally unaware just how much weight her question holds. The instinct to lie rises hot and wet in my throat like bile.

“Most recently?” I force a smile. “A churchyard knee-deep in mud.” She laughs so I go on. “Before that I spent some time on the coast.”

She pours me a steaming cup of coffee as she talks, movements repeated so many times that they’re mere muscle memory. “Could’ve pegged you for a fisherman.”

Waitress banter. A polite way of saying you look smelly enough to pass for a sailor. She throws me, though. This blind belief that I am what I say I am, that I come from where I say I come from. An innocence that borders on gullibility.

“I’ll have a burger,” I mumble when the silence stretches on too long. Close the menu without looking at it and hand it back to him, his outstretched hand already waiting to tuck it back into its place.

Trixie nods and turns away, wide hips swaying, apron strings tied so tight they make a bulge above and below, a softness that extends into her personality.

“Got a proposition for you, son.” He watches the waitress as he talks, and I wonder if he’s fixating on her love handles like I am or if he’s admiring the tight curls of her hair. I watch him watch her until she disappears around the end of the counter.

“A proposition?”

He nods like he’s still somewhere else. “My crew’s a few fellas short. Now I’ve already seen you can do the work and no offense meant boy, but you look like you could find use for a

solid paycheck. It's rough work and it ain't much money, but you'd be helping me out and I got a feeling it'd be helping you out too."

Two burgers appear in the order window and a hairy hand reaches over to ding the bell. "Order up!"

He unfolds the paper napkin and lays it across his jeans as Trixie waddles back over to deliver our lunch. Scratches the stubble on his chin with his knuckles. "Offers on the table. Lunch is on me either way."

The very smell of the meat almost turns my stomach in a pleasant but sickening way. The first bite trickles ketchup and meat juice down my chin and I'm through two more before I remember my manners and wipe it away. The softness of the bread and the crunch of lettuce taste better than any meal I can remember. Steaks, ice cream, thanksgiving turkeys all pale in comparison to a greasy burger on an empty stomach. I remember that he's waiting for an answer still, so I force myself to put down the uneaten half and wipe my face with the napkin.

"I'd be mighty grateful for any kind of work . . . and any kind of pay." I glance out the window and there's Bud, nose poking out the two-inch opening in the truck window. I wipe my face again, worried there's still more evidence of my lapse in manners. "Trixie," she looks up with a smile ready, and I try to decide if it's genuine or just a well-practiced part of the job. "Could I get a bag please? Got a hungry pup outside."

Before she can answer, he interjects. "Darlin', why don't you have Jeff back there throw a whole new burger on for the pup. We'll take that in a bag for him whenever it's ready. No need for hungry fellas to share their lunch."

She offers me a shrug-wink combination. "You got it, Bill."

He nudges the salt and pepper toward me with the back of his hand. “Eat. I intend to work you plenty hard. You’ll need the energy.”

I gratefully take another massive bite. The French fries smell like heaven, hot and salty and I can almost taste them just through the steam wafting from them. I know I’m eating like an animal but can’t seem to stop myself.

“You gotta tell me though, kid, what’s your plan?” He thoughtfully crunches on a fry. “Now I don’t mean to pry and I sure as hell don’t wanna be insensitive, but it’s pretty clear you’ve hit some hard times. I’m happy to hire you on and pay a fair wage, but I wanna know that you’ll use it to get back on your feet, not smoke it up or drink it away.”

I swallow too hard in my hurry to answer him and end up nearly choking. I cough around the chunks of beef and he pushes my soda closer. When the fit passes, I take a few sips. “I’m no druggie,” I nearly laugh. “Not much of a drinker either, to be honest. Just your run-of-the-mill case of looking for something better than what’s back home.”

Trixie deposits a grease-dotted paper bag in front of us and suddenly I’m in a rush to leave, to sate Bud’s hunger the way mine’s been done. To make him feel the contentment of a full belly.

He regards me over his plate as I pick at the French fries, three at a time and still barely chewing. “Well that’s an honest answer if I’ve ever heard one.”

The soda slurps as I reach the bottom of the ice without realizing it. Manners are the luxury of the well-fed man, it seems.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about trading in that old Bronco for some time now. She’s got a lot of hard miles on her, but she still runs alright. Well enough to get about halfway across the country or so, I’d wager. Now you can go on and take my first offer, or I’ll take two weeks of work in

exchange for that there truck and three square meals every day. I'll throw in two hundred in cash at the end of the two weeks to get you back to wherever it is you're runnin' from."

I drop the last half-eaten fry onto my plate. My appetite has vanished. In fact, my stomach rolls over itself uncomfortably, and for a moment I think I might shit myself. Whether from the offer or from eating too fast, I'm not sure.

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful," but I do – "but runnin' suits me just fine." I push the plate away, empty save for a smear of ketchup and the one bite of French fry.

He looks up from his plate, pauses in fishing for his wallet. "Sure don't look like it."

My face burns in the old familiar way. "I'm getting by."

He shakes his head, so much the way Pa used to, and drops some cash next to our sodas. Raises a hand in habitual goodbye to Trixie who, amid juggling an armful of plates, flashes him a white smile that still manages a flirtatious edge.

I follow him out the door, wondering if I should say more, defend myself against his judgment, but what's there to say? He found me starving and alone so I can make no argument against the fact that I am indeed, starving and alone. I'm not getting by. But I sure as shit don't feel like I'm running away anymore, but no more can I find the words to explain what I do feel like I'm doing.

"You're lost, boy."

Well, shit, those words will do just fine.

"Maybe you headed out lookin' for something or maybe you were runnin' scared but either way, what you are right now is lost, if you ask me." He hands me the bag with Bud's burger in it, the scent of which has already reached him, judging by the massive tail-wags that thump-thump against the bench seat. Bud nearly topples out of the truck as I open the door.

“Easy, boy.” I break off small pieces, worried he’ll choke in his haste and his hunger. Still he scarfs them down instantaneously, and soon the bag is empty and my hand is gloved in drool. Bud smiles up at me with his tongue lolling out.

“Better than yesterday’s lunch, huh?”

He hops back into the truck in answer, and I look in at him, already with one arm draped across the steering wheel. Not sure if I’m supposed to get in or walk away, how far his hospitality and my humbleness extend.

“I think you may be right.”

He pats Bud on the head and nods an I Thought So nod. My sore ankle and still-reeling stomach and the very smell of myself and a fleeting memory of Ma’s face strike me so suddenly that I need to lean against the doorframe for a moment.

He cranks the engine and his mouth loosens into a smile. “Well hop on in then. We’ve got work to do. Places to be.” He chuckles at his joke and I climb in next to Bud and I grin a little because I can’t really help it with him laughing like that and I wait for the panic to hit at the contemplation of Bill’s proposal, the idea of seeing Ma, going back to face my fate those people that town and that goddamned draft number but the panic doesn’t come and the engine purrs and the rain has let up and with the windows down and the warm weight of the dog next to me it’s nice and it’s alright and it’s going to be okay.

Chapter Thirteen

The Bronco's brakes are bad. After the first stop sign I nearly roll through, I make adjustments. Slow down far before I need to, plan my moves carefully. At first.

After a while I just drive and hope for the best.

Bud rides shotgun, his whole face out the window, ears flapping in the breeze. I swear he's gotten bigger since I first found him, not just fuller thanks to a diet not dependent on trash cans but actually longer too. His tail thumps idly against the seat.

The map Bill gave me is tucked above the visor. It flutters every now and again with an especially strong breeze. I don't know yet whether I'll need it.

I can't tell if I'm sad to have left this last place. Unlike the coast, it was just time to move on. I had a choice to stay, but needed to go. It had begun to feel like it could be permanent. If I stayed for another week, I'd have stayed forever. And forever is still a concept that terrifies me.

I'd started to love the little things; the tiny room above the post office that Bill's brother let me rent for dirt cheap. The bad coffee every morning.

This next leg of my quest leaves behind men I came to know more than just to bum a beer at the end of the workday. Carl with four fingers on his left hand had a new baby girl he talked about constantly, in a voice of awe as he wondered how anything could be as small as her toes or nose or ears or hands. David with his old and faded Navy tattoos, anchors and naked women that over time blurred into nothing more discernible than lines and shapes. Joe, with the bluest eyes I've ever seen, who came to lunch every day with a new joke to tell.

Good men. Men with dirt under their nails and scars on their hands and wives and children to support. Men who'd help you lift things that were too heavy, who helped you fix what a mistake had made wrong. They'd toss you a water on a hot day, when the sweat was beading down your neck, soaking the back of your shirt.

Part of me is sorry to leave them.

The growl of the engine is comforting, though. The road is empty save for a few cars here and there. The sun is high and the radio works. Gratitude. Allen called me ungrateful, but I'm grateful for these little things. For a dog and a Bronco and fresh air on my face.

I wonder what Ma's doing right this moment. If she thinks about me, if she's still wondering where I went. If she took up feeding the farm animals or if she let them starve, the pigs oinking impotently as they shrunk to nothing but hide and bones, dry and cracked for want of water. The chickens baking in the henhouse, and then the stillness when not a one was left to flutter and cluck, getting underfoot just to be a nuisance.

Benjamin could have moved in. Made the whole affair a little less scandalous for the town gossips. Or maybe Ma would have finally seen his true colors, quirks and habits less than

flattering. Cut him loose and found a better man to pass her days with. Someone who'd court her like a lady instead of sneaking in and out under the cover of darkness like a nightmare.

If she hasn't already, I hope she does.

And Genevive. It's strange, I can barely picture her face now. Beyond a silhouette of soft hips and dark curls, all she is is a blur. A feminine blur. She doesn't speak to me anymore. She's gone, nothing but a memory that can't exactly be called sweet.

Good riddance.

As the odometer climbs higher, I put more and more space between me and them. Foothills start to spot the horizon. Then mountains. Whatever Ma and Genevive are doing now will remain a mystery for me. They'll forever remain the way I left them.

It's a funny thing about the past. The old scars stay with us. We can see them, examine them, remember the pain they caused us when they were fresh and pink and raw. Maybe they still hurt sometimes, on rainy days or when the pressure drops just before a big storm. But with time, they fade. We forget about them until someone points them out, until they catch our eye in a mirror, unexpected, and pass through our thoughts in between the new things that are so important to us. New people, new places. They overlap the old. Bury them deeper and deeper, graves beneath graves.

I wonder that anyone would voluntarily exhume them. Examine the bones and feel it all again instead of building right over them. Piling the earth high and tamping it down. Planting grass and trees. Disguising the cemetery as a park. Bulldozing the park, layering another life on top of the last, bringing in stone and concrete and steel beams to weigh down the dead.

Buildings and bridges and whole empires on the corpses of the past.

The Use of Stream of Consciousness and an Examination of Masculinity

Throughout my graduate program, I have found myself again and again studying ideas of masculinity. Whether in an examination of father figures in Jewish literature or discussing rhetoric around emerging sexual politics in modern Ireland, this subject continues to fascinate me. *Little Left of Normal* is yet another chance for me to explore this topic, and furthermore to engage in the creation of what I believe to be an example of the struggles faced by males of any time period and the ongoing defining and re-defining of what it means to be a man. In addition, this fictional creation allowed me to mimic the stylings of realist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. The extreme focus on the interior, which I found to be endlessly intriguing in my reading of *Ulysses*, is a stylistic tool which I have chosen to implement in my own writing, hopefully to successful ends. The use of stream of consciousness and the extreme focus on the interior through an incredibly close first person perspective made Joyce a standalone in his field with the writing of Leopold Bloom's famous 'journey,' and in mirroring this stylistic choice in *Little Left of Normal*, I believe the journey of Davey is communicated in the best possible way to the reader. This amalgamation of my literary interests is therefore a clear showcase of my specific areas of study in the past several years.

Much of my creative writing focuses on the stage of life surrounding what many would call the 'coming-of-age' stage. This novella is a crossroads of the difficulties associated with coming-of-age and those associated with creating a definition of masculinity. Davey's struggle with his identity is meant to be exemplary of the uncertainty felt but mostly unacknowledged by boys of every generation. His unwillingness to follow in his father's footsteps and similar

hesitation to enter into the life of a soldier remove the two paths of least resistance as far as creation of identity and solidification of a clear path for his future. This forces him to create or find alternative options, which necessitates the quest that he undertakes upon departing his ancestral home. With the choice before him of where to go once he's made this decision, his need to be 'anywhere but here' so to speak is highlighted by his final action before departing, "Heads, north. Tails, south. I flip the penny in the air, and it misses my open palm on the way down. I hear it land softly in the dirt by my feet. Heads or tails? I chuckle softly to myself, the first time I've found something genuinely funny in a long time. I readjust the duffel on my shoulder and turn right. I think it might be nice to see the ocean" (Archambault, 20) This type of situation exists in parallel for generations both before and after Davey and therefore lends a feeling of timelessness to one of the main themes of the story. His unwillingness to conform to the status quo forces him to embark upon a life which inherently marks him as an outsider in each consecutive community which he enters into. His ultimate decision not to return home and instead to continue his journey, embracing this 'outsider-ness' as his accepted identity, is essentially his arrival at a place of manhood, as he achieves an emotional balance where he sees himself as brave and masculine, albeit in a way which is dissimilar to the concepts of masculinity he has so far encountered both in his original community and in the ones he has traveled through so far.

As Davey attempts to create his own definition and identity of masculinity, he in turn struggles with the unannounced departure of his father. Here, the novella is a more personal exploration. The difficulties of having an absent father is a struggle I have grappled with for most of my life. I have found myself reading research on the topic, examining my own feelings

and experiences on the matter, and incorporating these findings into nearly every piece of writing that I have produced. Davey's attempts to rectify the emotional damage caused by the absence of his father is very much a parallel to my own. He acts as my personal agent of catharsis, making this novella and specifically this character deeply personal. His musings as he wanders from place to place, wondering what might happen if one day he were to happen across his father again, come from a deeply personal place:

"I imagine for a moment that I'll come across a bar in the next city I pass through. I'll stop in for a drink and elbow up to the bar, order a beer with ease and confidence. I'll look to my left and he'll be there, knee-deep in whiskey but still with those sober eyes. I'll let him recognize me before I look at him twice. Let him stare too long and struggle to find the words. I'll wait until he says my name –Davey? – sort of sure but not sure could this really be my son, this man at the bar with a beer in his hand and so far from home and I'll look at him nice and even and no sort of a smile just real quiet –Hey Pa – and let him be the one to search for words and finally grind out a stiff – How are you, boy? How's your Ma? – and I'll turn full to face him and sip my beer and just look at him like how dare you ask about either of us you sonofabitch if you wanted so badly to know how we were you would've stayed and you'd know how we are. And I'll just look at him dead in the eye until he realizes how foolish he sounds and when he drops his eyes I'll drop money on the bar and finish my beer and stand up and look down at him and say Me and Ma are just fine. We're just fine" (63).

Davey's eventual point of closure on this issue is not necessarily an answer to a problem but instead an acceptance of the decision his father made and the movement into a place of

independence where he no longer feels emotionally dependent on his father. In abandoning his hometown and the community of people whose judgment he constantly feels, Davey moves past the damage that his father's abandonment of him caused.

In addition to the exploration of manhood and the societal pressures to conform to specific gender roles, *Little Left of Normal* undertakes to discuss a person's physical journey through a calculated focus on the interior effects of the external movements and experiences. Davey's geological movements are very much secondary to his emotional ones. His departure from the family farm is less significant than his decision to forego two different "accepted" pathways for his future in exchange for the uncertainty of what lies ahead of him. His being thrown from the train car is of minimal importance compared to his consequential musings about his feelings toward the fight which instigated it and the man who perpetrated the abuse. By filtering thoughts and emotions through the physical world instead of the other way around, the novella takes an inward approach to the story and Davey as a character is able to make observations and grow psychologically in the foreground of the audience's frame of vision, instead of in the background.

Aside from Joyce, Virginia Woolf is another of the most celebrated authors who has written with an aim towards interiority with the purpose of communicating larger ideas through the personal journeys of her characters. Margot Livesey wrote in her article *Nothing Is Simply One Thing* that Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* specifically is a work, "to which many writers, know it or not, like it or not, are indebted" (Livesey, 116). Indeed, Woolf's stylistic leanings toward the aesthetic and the tendency to incorporate autobiographical moments and struggles into her

writing are points upon which *Little Left of Normal* is built. She goes on to discuss how Woolf's contributions to the realist tradition come from a very personal place. She writes, "We have much to gain from figuring out, as Woolf did in her letters, essays, and reviews, what our beliefs are and how we can more fully embody them in our work" (117). As Woolf attempted to exorcise her personal demons in her works, so too have I. Woolf's emotional complications around her mother appear again and again in her characters, which has led multiple critics to examine her writing through the lens of her personal experiences and discuss this tendency towards autobiographical inclusions in conjunction with the conversation around her specific writing style. Her description of Mrs. Ramsey in *To The Lighthouse* coincides in many ways with what is known about her mother: "she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. With stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets – what nonsense was he thinking? She was fifty at least; she had eight children. Stepping through fields of flowers and taking breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair" (Woolf, 20) Though never explicit in nature, Woolf's characters are doubtlessly representative of relationships which had a lasting effect on her.

Livesey spends some time discussing Woolf's personal struggles in her article, citing her mother's death, multiple nervous breakdowns, and several suicide attempts as elements of the "madness" that Woolf fought against for her entire life. My point – and my reason for including Woolf in the discussion about *Little Left of Normal* – is that Woolf is an author whose personal demons very clearly exist in re-creation within her written works, and her particular writing style is an attempt to not just re-create people or situations, but to delve deeper into the heart of them. Livesey quotes Woolf directly here: "When you think of a great novel,' she claims, 'you think

of a character and then you think of all the things you think of through that character's eyes – of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul.' The job of the novelist, she contends, is to show us character and the world through character" (124). This, most specifically, is the aim of Davey within *Little Left of Normal*. My exploration of identity, masculinity, and the departure from a status quo future is not achieved through Davey's experiences in Lewes, or in Pikeville, or even directly through his interactions with the Captain, Emily's father, Allen, or Bill. This exploration is instead achieved through Davey's perception of all of these places, people, and experiences. His interpretation of these things, his emotional responses to them, are what truly builds this novel into an answer, or at least a proposed answer, to all the questions it poses in its opening chapters.

Interestingly, the link between Joyce and Woolf is not only one of craft styles, but also a more personal one. As Kevin Birmingham points out in his book *The Most Dangerous Book*, Woolf's initial introduction to Joyce was through Harriet Weaver, Joyce's anonymous financial backer, who asked Woolf to print *Ulysses* through Hogarth Press, which she ran with her husband. Woolf rejected this proposition, citing the book's great length as her reason, while secretly, Birmingham bluntly points out, "Virginia Woolf did not like *Ulysses*" (Birmingham 129). He quotes her directly in her review of the book, where she calls Joyce, "admirably willing to disregard 'coherence or any other of the handrails' that readers crave, and her backhanded praise led to a direct strike: *Ulysses* 'fails, one might say simply, because of the comparative poverty of the writer's mind'" (130). However, at a later date Woolf "confessed in her diary,

‘what I’m doing is probably being better done by Mr. Joyce’” (130). I cannot help of course but to mirror Woolf’s feelings, and extend them to read: what I’m doing was probably being better done by Ms. Woolf, and before her, by Mr. Joyce. This tendency to lean away from such close, interior writing to the extent of denying it to be a part of one’s own individual style is perhaps due to the parts of human existence which is must acknowledge, even to the discomfort of the readers and to some extent, the author as well. Birmingham points this out as well, noting those in the literary world who were put off by Joyce’s unflinching willingness to include even the most unseemly aspects of what it is to be a person, specifically John Quinn, who wrote to Ezra Pound: “The fact of s---t—g being a common practice every day and hence must be ‘a natural fact known to everyone’ is no reason why it should be put upon a printed page of a magazine” (125). Woolf seemed to realize that although her prose did not necessarily acknowledge as directly as Joyce did the extremes of “non-publishable” human behaviors, she nonetheless had a similar focus on the interior, and placed literary value on the inner workings of the human mind in response to its environment. As the beauty of Leopold Bloom’s epic journey lies in his uncensored reactions to any and all external stimuli, so too does Mrs. Dalloway’s, and if I may be so bold – Davey’s. Though his rummagings in the garbage and his self-gratification in the bar bathroom may not be pleasant images to have flitting through one’s mind, they nonetheless are an attempt to mirror what it is to be human.

Another man on the periphery of this modernist struggle was Ezra Pound. Birmingham makes a point to compliment Pound’s ultimate conclusion that he comes to after attempting several times to write the same poem, “In a Station of the Metro,” saying, “No long-winded elocution, no tricks or persuasion, no tinsel or frills – there was not even a verb. He peeled away

layers of rhetoric until all that was left was the epiphany” (37). This, I think, is the intention of the kind of modernism that Joyce was such a massive part of. The conventions of traditional prose get thrown out the window in favor of words that cut more deeply to the heart of the matter, the raw human emotion that is really the point all along anyway. With iconic lines such as, “Every life is in many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves,” (Joyce, 318) Joyce reaches his reader on the deepest emotional level, despite the confusion that so much of the rest of *Ulysses* creates. It seems that I, along with many others, are beholden to this era of literary giants for knocking down the walls in the house that is fiction writing, and allowing generations of writers after them to make their own attempts at getting to the heart of the matter in a way that subverts all prior expectations placed on what some might classify as “professional” writing.

Part of my interest in the development and defining of masculinity perhaps comes from my objective viewpoint of this issue as a female. Femininity has been allowed to morph and change in past generations, from the empowerment of women during the suffragist movement to the acceptance of women into different professions that they were previously barred from. In my own generation, with the move towards equal rights for the LGBTQ community, the definition of femininity has expanded even further. Gay women are still considered feminine by society. Transgender women are considered feminine by society. To be a woman in 2016 can mean any number of things. For the societal collective mind of the 21st century in the United States, a woman can ride a motorcycle, show off her muscular gains, acknowledge her failures as a cook or housewife, refuse to have children, profess sexual desire for another woman, drink, smoke,

collect guns, choose a career over a family, and have that chosen career be something traditionally “men’s only” such as police work, military work, or political work ... and still be accepted by this collective mind as ‘feminine.’

And yet.

And yet the Boys’ club of the 21st century has budged considerably less. The bubble of masculinity still encapsulates what it did a century ago, and hasn’t expanded to include much more. Jokes still abound about men who drive a Prius, or male nurses. It is a point of embarrassment for men to be incompetent in the areas of automotive knowledge or athletic capability. So why is it that the idea of femininity has expanded to allow so many more females to be defined as such while the idea of masculinity has remained stoically consistent with its ancestors from generations ago? Because this intrigues me so much, it intrigues Davey. His journey to find an answer, to create a definition of masculinity in which he is included, is my intellectual exercise in finding an answer for this societal inconsistency.

Davey’s interactions with masculinity begin in a place and context which to an outsider would jive with the contemporary definition of manhood. His capability as a farmer should solidify his place in the Boys’ Club quite nicely, but his unwillingness to continue on this given path takes him away from this identity and therefore forces him to question: What else is it that makes a man? Davey’s ability to encounter things as an objective outsider allows him to recognize them as near-parodies of manhood. The beer-swilling men from the fish market may be friendly and the acceptance into their ranks may feel like a win, but Davey is able to recognize the emptiness of the repetition their lives entail and branches out to find something of

substance to add to this potential future for himself in Lewes. Similarly, Allen's meager attempt at fatherly assistance is a chance for Davey to challenge the false quality of male-to-male interactions in such a context. The tendency to recoil from genuine conversation or genuine showing of emotions between men is challenged when Davey breaks from the accepted 'script' and again when Bill's attentions take him so much by surprise.

Davey's ultimate answer is independence. His recognition that he is able to provide for himself, that he can create a life for himself in any environment, with nothing more than the physical and mental capabilities he already possesses, is an epiphany which affords him a level of freedom and self-acceptance that brings him tangible peace at the novella's close. This in turn gives him the bravery to continue on his journey instead of returning home to the identity and future that would be imposed upon him. Masculinity, then, becomes less about beer-guzzling comradery and work that gets his hands dirty and more about self-acceptance and self-sufficiency. With this comes Davey's emotional clarity and ability to let go of the wounds caused from his father's abandonment of himself and his mother. As Davey crosses the barrier into adulthood – not age-wise, but in his maturity and emotional growth – he no longer feels the need for a father figure.

In an attempt to align Davey's journey with another changing element of contemporary society, the life he leaves is not a partially anonymous, faceless community of distant neighbors and half-acquaintances. His transition is from a close-knit town of people who know him far too intimately to relative invisibility as the anonymous stranger in towns he has never heard of until he gets to them. Again, this theme arises partially from personal interest and partially from

personal experience. Growing up in a small, intimate town, it always fascinated me the way the community could be at once comforting and stifling, and as a result I felt the need to explore the alternative which the stifling element inevitably pushed me toward. Over the span of several years, I moved from being stifled by my small town to leaving my small town for college, moving back to my small town when college was too expensive to stay at, and then leaving the country entirely when that stifling small town became too small and too stifling all over again. Yet again, Davey's journey is symbolic of my own, a further exploration of ideas and situations which fascinate me emotionally and academically. His insatiable need to escape the confines of a community which knows him far too intimately morphs into a complete escape from this community, a departure with the intent to find a space in society which suits him.

This novella represents the amalgamated interests that I have accumulated through my graduate work. From stylistic choices to character archetypes to reflections of my personal struggles, this work of fiction is a display of all that which I have found fascinating – all that which I have found it worthwhile to spend additional time exploring in various contexts, classes, and writing assignments. Davey's journey is in essence a journey of the mind for me; his explorations are mine, and his experiences are in turn mine. Though most of my graduate work has morphed into something personal in some way or another, this project has been especially based in experiences and obstacles from my past. Aside from my intentional mimicry of Joyce and Woolf and their stylistic choices, it seems I have also mimicked their tendencies to incorporate real life experiences into their written work.

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