The Fourth Boy: Stories and a Novella

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ABSTRACT

*The Fourth Boy* is a collection of seven stories and one novella
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Nonna’s Story

It’s seven years since my cousin Luca overdosed. To this day Nonna tells the story every time I see her. And she tells it as if she’s never told it before, as if she’s trying to convince me it really happened.

As the legend goes, Nonna had a stomachache because she ate too much apple pie, and after spending an hour on the toilet, she walked into her dark living room and found blue and red lights intermittently coloring the lace curtains. She looked out the window and saw two cops emerging from a squad car with flashlights in hand. They didn’t go to one of the neighbors’ houses, as Nonna expected. Instead they walked toward the alleyway that led to Nonna’s small, fenced-in backyard.

Nonna put on her housecoat and went to the back deck. She looked down from the second floor. The two cops and two other shadowy figures were huddled over a supine fat man wearing nothing but swim trunks. Nonna tried to tell herself the fat man wasn’t Luca, but then one of the cops shined his flashlight right on Luca’s face. Nonna claims he was smiling. She ran to the downstairs apartment and woke up my Uncle Pete and Aunt Connie (Uncle Pete on the couch, Aunt Connie in bed). She told them what was happening and they ran outside to check on their son. Nonna went down to the basement, where TJ, Luca’s kid brother, was asleep. She woke up TJ and told him that Luca was out cold in the backyard, surrounded by cops. TJ, fifteen at the time, looked scared.

—Where’s he keep his drugs? Nonna said.

TJ shrugged. I don’t know what all TJ knew then, but Nonna doesn’t think the boy had a clue his big brother was a junky.
Nonna went to Luca’s bedroom and rifled through his drawers. She wanted to flush his stuff down the toilet in case the cops looked through the house. She didn’t find anything.

*

I’m at Nonna’s for dinner. Just the two of us. She’s drinking coffee and watching me eat the manicotti she made but won’t eat, since she doesn’t like pasta.

—Your father he says you won an award, Nonna says.

I explain that I did and it’s no big deal.

—Your father he says you won’t tell him what your fancy shmancy award-winning story was about.

—Yeah, I say. —I feel kind of funny about it.

—Why?

—Ah I don’t know, Nonna. ——It’s full of grown-up stuff.

—Grown-up? Your father’s sixty years old.

—I know I know. I just feel weird. I don’t know why. —You know me and dad. ——We don’t really talk about certain subjects.

—What’s the story about?

I think for a second. I figure I’ll keep it vague and thematic.

—Sex and death, I say.

—Good boy, Nonna says.

She pats me on the forearm and smiles proudly. Her wrinkled little hand is warm, which surprises me. For some reason I expect old peoples’ skin to feel like a corn flake—room temperature, crusty—but every old cheek I kiss and every old hand I shake is warm and damp, as if protesting my assumption that the skin doesn’t contain a living thing.
—Sex and death, Nonna says.

—Yeah, I say.

—I’ve been thinking about sex for eighty-five years. Nobody wants to hear that from a little old lady.

I chuckle. I have no idea what to say.

—See, she says. I can see you don’t wanna hear it.

I want to correct my meek reaction. I want to show her I don’t mind.

—Sex, I say. It never goes away, huh?

—It gets worse, Nonna says. And then you feel stupid for thinking about it because you’re old as dirt.

—Ah, I say. No use feeling stupid.

—There’s some use, Nonna says. Feeling stupid keeps you from acting stupid.

*  

Aunt Connie rode in the ambulance with Luca. I can’t imagine what that ride was like for my aunt, my godmother. I can’t pretend to conceptualize what she felt while looking at her shirtless son on a gurney, his body totally at the whim of gloved hands.

Uncle Pete, TJ, and Nonna followed the ambulance. None of them spoke for the entire ride. And not just because Luca was dying. Nonna and Uncle Pete were on bad terms ever since Uncle Pete filed for divorce. It wasn’t just that he was breaking up the family, leaving Aunt Connie behind. It was the way he was doing it. A year prior, Nonna had sold the house in which they all lived—a tall, slender structure with an upstairs and downstairs apartment—to Uncle Pete and Aunt Connie. She gave it to them for cheap. Really cheap. Practically free, when you considered what the house was worth. Not long after he got his hands on this big asset, Uncle
Pete got weird. He distanced himself. He stayed out late. Eventually—predictably—he started seeing another woman. Nonna said she saw no sign of trouble until she’d sold the house.

Anyway, I don’t really know if Uncle Pete decided to leave because he saw dollar signs or if the marriage had been deteriorating for a long time. But I do know Luca didn’t deal with it well. He was eighteen, then, and he’d often come upstairs to Nonna’s apartment and talk sadly about how happy his family used to be. He’d detail his parents’ arguments, which became more and more frequent. He’d recount trips to the Jersey Shore and get teary eyed. He’d say he wished he was a little kid again. He’d tell Nonna about how he wanted to kick his father’s ass. Nonna would feed him and listen.

* 

—You gonna make a story out of us? Nonna says.
—Oh I don’t know if I know enough about you to write a story, I say.
—You could just fill in the blanks with fake stuff, she says.
—I could, couldn’t I?
—We won’t know. We don’t read.
I laugh.
—Sex and death, Nonna says.
She sips her coffee and thinks.
—Well, she continues. —We don’t have much sex since we’ve all rotted into ugly people. ——But if you’re going to write a story about death our stories are good.
—Are they? ——I couldn’t tell grandpa’s story if I wanted to. ——And everybody else lives in our stories.
—For now, Nonna says.
Luca lived. He was in a coma for three days and everybody thought he was either going to die or come out a vegetable. I never visited him. I couldn’t stomach the thought of him all plugged up with tubes and potentially retarded or dead. I mostly cried and prayed. Back then I could pray and believe it. When Luca finally came to, he was his old horrible self. Apparently he was an asshole at the hospital. He called his mother a bitch and his father a scumbag. He told my Nonna to get out of his fucking face.

Nonna was surprised when we found out it was heroin. She knew he’d OD’d on bad stuff, but heroin—to Nonna, heroin was practically a fictional substance, something reserved for movies she didn’t like to watch. In every iteration of the story, Nonna pauses to say, *I thought worst case he was sniffing the cocaines.*

—Your cousin Luca he’s mad at me, Nonna says.

—How come? I say.

—Last week I called him a bad penny.

I blink. I’m waiting for more, but Nonna doesn’t say anything.

—And he’s mad about *that*?

—Yeah, Nonna says. She stops pouring her coffee so she can think better. —But first he was sad. ——He even cried. ———A lot, I think.

She finishes pouring. I’m holding a fork full of manicotti an inch below my lips.

—*Cried*? I say.
—I didn’t know he was upset till the other day. He don’t say nothing about it. He plays along like he’s fine. But his mother she says to me Luca’s been all worked up about being a bad penny.

I store the manicotti in my cheek before I respond.

—What’s this bad penny thing even about?

—I’ll tell you, Nonna says. —When he first told me he’d be moving back in downstairs, this’s gotta be two months ago now, I says to him, You’re like a bad penny, I can’t get rid of you.

I put down my fork and shake my head. Luca, twenty-five, had moved out of the house and only lasted a month before he came crawling back.

—I don’t get what all there is to cry about, I say.

Nonna sips her coffee twice and then adds cream.

—He’s sensitive, your cousin, Nonna says. ——He says to his mother I don’t appreciate him. ——He says he thinks I’d be happier if he died that time.

—Christ, I say. ——You were just busting his balls. ——He don’t gotta go and be dramatic about it.

My accent surprises me. I always match the sound of my family when I’m near them.

—that’s Luca, Nonna says. ——He’s always a story.

—Yeah, I say, forking another mouthful. ——A bullshit story.

—Stop, Nonna says.

* *

I was in college when Luca overdosed. In the years since I worked as an auditor in Manhattan and a school teacher in Connecticut; then I wanted to be a writer so I followed some
funding down to Virginia. I only see Nonna during the summer and Christmas holidays, when I can spare a weekend to drive to Jersey. I try to visit as much as I can, but really I don’t know what it’s like in Nonna’s house. Aunt Connie moved out years ago; she lives with her boyfriend nearby. Luca and TJ live below Nonna. They drink a ton and host parties. Nonna, an insomniac since birth, spends her nights watching game shows one floor above thumping music and god knows what else. The cops often show up to clear the place out.

* 

There was one stipulation when Nonna sold the house, and she got it in writing: Uncle Pete and Aunt Connie couldn’t sell the place as long as Nonna lived there. Ever since the divorce, Uncle Pete has lived in Trenton. He’s been supporting Luca, TJ, and Aunt Connie, sending money for groceries, employing Luca and TJ whenever they’re between jobs (i.e. always), paying his alimony and then some. He wants to keep on decent terms, my Nonna claims, so he can get Nonna, his ex-mother-in-law, to agree to move out. That way he can sell the house sooner rather than later. Fat chance. Nonna’s not going anywhere. Plus, where would Luca live? Nonna fears he’d crumble anywhere else.

* 

—I’m surprised the crybaby hasn’t made an appearance yet, I say.

—He don’t come up to eat with me no more, Nonna says. ——You watch he’ll come up at two, three in the morning and eat all the leftovers.

—Least he can do is eat with his grandmother, I say.

—It’s okay. ———He’s tired from work. ————He don’t wanna talk.

—You call what he does work.

—He’s a supervisor.
—*Supervisor.*

I spit the word. Luca works for his father’s HVAC company. Words I know but never use pop into my head: nepotism, sinecure.

—Luca’s a good boy, Nonna says.

I have nothing to say.

—He don’t like to come up and talk because he’s ashamed of himself all day every day.

—Yeah, I say. —I’d be, too, if I were him.

Even though Nonna is shaking her head no, it’s clear she agrees.

—He moving out soon or what? I say. —How long’s he gonna be in your business?

—Oh. Maybe a while.

She says it intentionally tentatively, to indicate that something’s up.

—Don’t tell me Uncle Pete gave him the boot…

—No, Nonna says. —No he’s still got the job.

—Well, what is it?

Nonna levels me with her eyes.

—He’s gotta pay the state, she says. —He got another drunken driving.

—You’ve gotta be kidding me…

Nonna holds up her hand, but I keep on.

—What about his girl? I say. —Why don’t he go stay with her?

—That’s a whole nother story. You don’t wanna hear this.

—What is it?

—Don’t make a fuss.

—What is it?
—Your Aunt Connie isn’t too happy about it.

—What is it?

—The girlfriend, she moved in with him. ——On Saturday. ———She lives here now.

I’ve never met the girl before, but to move in with Luca she has to be bat shit.

—That’s just what you need, I say. —Another drinking buddy downstairs for Luca and TJ.

I wait for Nonna to speak. She just shakes her head at her coffee mug.

—It’s gonna be a disaster, I say. —The three of them partying all night, keeping you awake. ———Those drunks are gonna take over the whole building.

Nonna reaches across the table and slaps my wrist.

—Don’t you call them drunks, she says.

—They’re drunks, I say.

—They’re your family.

—Shame you don’t get to choose your family.

Nonna stands and walks to the cutlery drawer, from which she removes a long wooden ladle. I smile. When Luca and I were children, Nonna would threaten to beat us with the wooden ladle, but she’d never actually go through with it.

Nonna grabs me by the collar and lifts the ladle above her head like she’s going to hammer it down on top of my skull.

—Take it back, she says.

I wait two beats.

—I take it back, I say.
Sometimes I imagine Luca telling Nonna all about that night he nearly got himself killed. I picture them in the kitchen, eating pasta, sipping coffee, talking. It’s a beautiful thing to envision, but it’s not the way Luca is. He’s twitchy, shame-driven, defensive. I’m sure he’s concocted some narrative about how his overdose was everybody’s fault but his. He’s been that way since forever. He was one of those kids who every teacher had a problem with, and somehow it was always the teacher’s fault. Then he grew up, and the people who picked on him were police officers. And we never got to hear about why he got “picked on.”

*

The overdose story changes over time. Nonna acquires details. I don’t know if she’s making them up or what. For a while Nonna didn’t know much about how Luca got into drugs. Then all of a sudden she knew. She claimed he started *sniffing the cocaines* during his freshman year at Bergen Catholic. She said Uncle Pete should’ve never sent him to that terrible, expensive school because all the rich kids had an infinite supply of poison. At some point she added the detail that Luca had been at a barbecue the night of the overdose. There, he met two smackheads—*druggie guys*, as Nonna called them—who took him to Newark to purchase the goods; then they smoked a ton of weed—*marijuana joints*—and drank a load of vodka and snorted up the heroin. Why not needles? I asked once. Your cousin Luca he’s too wimpy for needles, Nonna said. After filling their bodies with junk, the three doped up stooges went into the Jacuzzi Uncle Pete had purchased even though he could barely afford it, and the heat was too much for Luca. He puked, according to Nonna, in the water. He climbed out, stumbled, and hit the ground. How Nonna knows this, I have no idea. The only two people who witnessed Luca’s literal downfall were the two smackheads, and nobody’s seen those guys since that night seven
years ago. All we know about them is that they called 911. Nonna loves them, whoever they are.
They could’ve left him, she always says.

—I imagine Nonna ruminating over the event and fabricating the details. I imagine she
thinks about the details so intensely that she starts to believe them. I like this idea for selfish
reasons. It makes Nonna a fiction writer, like me. It connects us, and I fear I’ve severed most of
our connections with distance and neglect.

— I thought I smelled gravy.

It’s Luca, standing at the top of the stairwell, grinning at me.

—Come on, Nonna, Luca says. —How’s it you fix Mr. Big Shot gravy and pasta every
time he shows his face? — You only make scraps for your bad penny.

He’s gotten even fatter. He wears a black Metallica tee shirt and royal blue basketball
shorts that cheaply sparkle. His facial hair is patchy, thin—pubescent, almost. On his calf: a new
tattoo, an outline of the state of New Jersey. On his head: a funny little black beanie, way too
small for his enormous dome.

— That hat, Nonna says. — You look like a Willy off a pickle boat.

—What? Luca says.

—A longshoreman.

—What?

—Never mind, Nonna says. —Come here let me fix you a dish.

—Don’t get up, Luca says.

He leans over the stove and sniffs.
—I’m gonna take some to go, Luca says. ——Ash is gonna be home soon and I told her I’d watch Jeopardy with her.

Ash? Ash, the bat shit girl. Living in my Nonna’s house.

—So you’ve got her living here, too, now, I say.

—Yeah, Luca says, transporting manicotti to a plate. —Just for a hot minute.

—That’s good, I say. —Real good.

I feel a pulse somewhere near my clavicle. I always want to tell Luca to straighten himself out or find his own life, away from our grandmother, but I never say it.

I sit still feeling like a flushed child.

—Yeah, Luca says. —Way I see it we can take a few months here. Save up some money. Then go someplace nice.

—Smart, I say.

—Not smart like you, Luca says, pointing at me with a fork. —You’ve got your shit figured out, cuz.

—Ah, I say.

* *

These days it’s to the point where Nonna can’t bear to look at the apartment downstairs. There are fist holes in the walls and sticky beer stains all over the kitchen tiles. Food crusting in the carpets. A broken microwave. A broken toilet seat. Broken dishes. Broken chairs. Broken everything. And who broke everything? Who had Luca let into the house? What kind of characters had snorted and fucked and passed out beneath my Nonna? It’s a miracle the whole mess of Luca’s life has remained on the first floor, that strangers haven’t ascended the stairs and trashed Nonna’s warm home.
Maybe they have, though. Maybe Nonna has secrets. Maybe she is protecting her Luca by not telling anybody what is going on in that house.

The truth is, I’ll never know.

I’m the one who left town. The storyteller. Mr. Big Shot. The grandson who will forever be nothing more than a visitor. I will not be the subject of one of Nonna’s stories like Luca. He is so important. He is the great problem of Nonna’s life. When she talks about him, all I hear is love, and I’m jealous. Not because she doesn’t love me. She does, unquestionably, eternally. But her love for Luca is essential to her. It keeps her going.

*—You got any bread, Luca says.
—Garlic bread’s in the oven, Nonna says. —I didn’t want it to get cold.

Luca pulls open the oven. It creaks. He tears off a piece of garlic bread and throws it on top of his manicotti. He closes the oven too hard. The whole thing shakes.

—Why don’t you sit the fuck down and eat, I think.
Say it. Say it. Speak up.

I cough. I’m nothing but my heartbeat.

Luca leans over and kisses Nonna on the head, and my anger morphs into a kind of feverish nostalgia. Luca’s lips sink into Nonna’s short pompadour, which is a wig, and I’m reminded of how, as kids, Luca and I would steal Nonna’s wig while she was napping. We’d wear the wig around the house, laughing hysterically and silently, trying not to wake her. It always astounds me how quickly I can feel like a boy again when I’m around Luca. Even though we’re nothing alike. Even though, at this point, I don’t even know him.

Luca punches me in the shoulder. It stings.
—Be good, Big Shot, Luca says.
—Yeah, I say.
Luca stomps downstairs.
Nonna stares blankly at the staircase.
I want to know what she’s thinking. I want to apologize to her. For what, I’m not even sure. For being a non-entity in her life, perhaps.
It’s quiet for a minute or so.
—You still hungry? Nonna says.
—I’m stuffed, I say.
She leans across the table and peeks at my plate.
—You licked it clean, she says.
—It was good.
—Have another plate.
—I can’t. I might pop.
—You’ll have another, Nonna says, reaching across the table, grabbing my plate.
—Alright fine, I say.
—Good boy.

*

Luca once called me perfect. We were exchanging messages on Facebook; I was drunk, and I’m pretty sure he was under the influence of something, too. Otherwise we wouldn’t have been talking. Not because of some grudge, but because we had no use for each other. Anyway, Luca said he totally fucked up his life. And I said: Nobody’s perfect. His exact response: You
don’t understand man. You’re perfect. You got your college degrees and your jobs and you always have a story to tell. You don’t know how it feels to be a fucked up loser.

I only told him he was being ridiculous. I didn’t mention that I was insulted. Luca didn’t know I was a depressed drunk. I wanted to enlighten him. I wanted to remind him it was difficult to be any person, me included. But he wouldn’t have even heard that. He would’ve said, I know I know, and immediately gotten back to lamenting his life. If I mentioned my problems, my imperfections, Luca would’ve outdone them by enumerating his. Like every junky I’ve ever known, he walks around with blinders on, and in his narrowed field of vision he sees only himself.

And anyway, I wasn’t about to start whining at him. Who was I to tell him he wasn’t the most fucked-up loser who ever existed? I didn’t know how it felt to crave heroin in my body. I couldn’t wrap my head around that need. I could easily imagine ruining my own life, but I couldn’t—and still can’t—imagine needing something badly enough to ruin the lives of those around me. The only time Luca ever described his addiction to me, he said: it’s like every vein is a dehydrated mouth and you know there’s a full body drink of ice water out there.

—Your Uncle Pete just turned fifty-nine, Nonna says.
—He’s getting up there, I say.
—I know.
—You gonna outlive him? I say.
—I hope so. I don’t want him to liquidate my house.
—No way he’s got ten years left in him, I say.

Nonna thinks for a few seconds.
—In the end it’s all a tie, she says.

I smile. She’s right.

—But still, Nonna says. —I’m gonna win.

*

The bit about the full body drink of ice water—I made that up. Luca never said it. I think I heard a junky comedian use the description, or something like it. Perhaps I read it in a book. I don’t know. But Luca never said it to me. We’ve never discussed his drug use in any terms besides innuendo. And even then, we touch the subject and run away from it like it’s a grenade with a pulled pin. If you want to know why I made up that line, here: while I was typing it, I really thought Luca said it to me. I imagined something so clear—Luca and I sitting in Nonna’s kitchen, talking calmly and openly—it felt like a memory.

*

I’m uncomfortably full, but it’s time for dessert. Nonna slices into the apple pie that’s been cooling on the counter.

—Worst night of my life, she says, looking at the pie, digging into it.

And here comes the story. The hinge of my Nonna’s twilight years. The event that seemed to symbolically put a nail in the family’s coffin. An apple pie. A bellyache. Police lights. Luca in the yard. Those shadowy boys who called for help. A silent car ride to the emergency room with Uncle Pete and TJ. Luca in a coma. Three endless days waiting for him to wake up.

I wonder what wrinkle she’ll add to the story this time. Whatever it is, I know it’ll be something gritty and believable, something too specific to deny. And I know why she’ll do it: to make the story realer, or at least more comprehensible. When I think of my Nonna thinking about her Luca, I see an old woman staring at a kitchen table full of puzzle pieces. And the
puzzle pieces are her family. Only each puzzle piece has no image on it, but Nonna sees images on them. She grabs a pencil, takes one blank puzzle piece at a time, and draws intricate little components of her family. And she draws them real. She doesn’t falsify. Even if the details are imagined, she makes them true to the people she knows. Luca’s the toughest to draw, so she works overtime on articulating him. She knows she’ll probably never get him right, but she’s going to try. She imagines that if she does Luca justice, she can piece the picture together, frame it, mount it on her wall, and say to herself: this is what my family looks like, and I am not ashamed.

END
Sam and I had this conversation about skeletons that kind of fucked me up.

We were on the couches and I said, Isn’t it weird that there are two skeletons in this room right now, on the couches.

He said, Imagine a tall apartment building full of people, and imagine if you could see through the walls of the building, and the people had no skin or muscle or organs. All you could see were their skeletons, hundreds of ‘em, tinkering around.

I said, Whoa.

Then I started imagining skeletons doing other normal things besides tinkering. I imagined skeletons grocery shopping, driving cars, and playing eleven on eleven tackle football. I found the football thing particularly distressing because skeletons, without the other stuff on top of them, seemed very fragile. I felt like they would get tangled up and snap so easily when they crashed into each other. Then I thought it was amazing that real life football players didn’t constantly break their bones.

On the whole I found this skeleton business pretty upsetting.

Anyway, obviously, when I was thinking about skeletons I was really thinking about death and God. I was really trying to riddle out if we were just skeletons covered in meat or if we had souls. And I was thinking how we probably didn’t have souls and we were these ridiculous bony things that could move around for a certain stretch of time until eventually we couldn’t move around anymore. And then I thought how if that were the case I really wanted to be able to move around for as long as possible—and as long as possible definitely was not long enough.
After a while of thinking about that shit I looked at Sam on the couch. He was flat on his back, looking at the ceiling. His arms were spread wide. One of his legs hung off the couch. He looked like a sloppily crucified guy or somebody who just passed out on his back with his eyes still open or like a skeleton that got tipped over. I told him he looked like a skeleton and he got a good chuckle out of that. I thought he was laughing at the joke I’d intended, which was a corny goof about him being a skinny guy. But then he put on a fake Italian accent (I have no clue why Italian) and said, People always says I look like my motha. He guffawed at the ceiling, then, and I got really quiet because Sam’s mom was dead.

Nothing happened for a while.

Then I looked at Sam’s mouth because he had a red cough drop in there and the sound of it clicking around in his teeth caught my attention. I thought it was amazing that his tongue and teeth could keep him from choking on the thing while he looked at the ceiling. Then I imagined him as a skeleton with a cough drop in its bone mouth. The red lozenge was wedged between the top row of teeth and the bottom row of teeth. The skeleton of course had no tongue or spit, so the cough drop remained dry and whole.

That got me really upset. I guess I didn’t like the idea that someday we were going to be these things that couldn’t taste.

Sam must have seen it on my face because he said, Dude, what’s wrong? I lied and said, Nothing, bro. But what I was thinking about was getting a whole huge bag of Luden’s and feeding them to skeleton Sam. I imagined putting them in the skeleton’s mouth one by one, and the mouth couldn’t hold them so they fell onto the floor until I ran out of cough drops. Then I got another bag of cough drops, and another, and another, and so on, until the only parts of the skeleton not covered in cough drops were the top of its head and its spread arms and legs.
Somehow it ended up looking like the cough drops came out of the skeleton’s mouth and covered its body.

No matter what, I realized, a skeleton can’t swallow, which, now that I think about it, is so obvious it shouldn’t even be allowed to be realized.

I closed my eyes and thought about the skeleton covered in cough drops one more time, but for some reason all the cough drops were rubies.

Then I thought, Thank fucking God for spit.

Then I said, Thank fucking God for spit.

And Sam said, Yeah, dude, seriously, because Sam was the kind of friend who wouldn’t always ask me to make sense.

And I figured that if we didn’t have souls it was cool to have spit and other parts that allowed us to taste the rubies. I meant cough drops, not rubies, but the accidental thought made me imagine cherry flavored rubies—and for some reason the cherry flavored rubies never lost their flavor. They were eternal. And I was suddenly happy. I felt good because I had a mind that thought weird things.

Then came the crashing realization that I had just thought up a variant of everlasting gobstoppers, which were from Willy Wonka and not my brain, and I felt like an unspecial machine that regurgitated what the world fed into it.

Anyway I looked at Sam’s skeleton equipped with flesh and other stuff, and I tried to be positive. I felt glad he had spit and a mind. I felt glad I had those things, too. And I thought, At least we’re not just skeletons, and that made me feel better about existing, but only for a little while.

END
Sometimes I pretend I’ve got an animal tranquil gun that turns people into crumbles. It shoots invisible bullets and makes no sound so you have no idea you’re going to be crumbles until you’re already crumbles.

Last week I put a pencil in my pants and made a boner tent. Ms. Dipple got pissed and gave me detention. Next day Ms. Dipple told me to stop swinging upside down on the monkey bars. I pretended I had an animal tranquil gun and I fake shot it at her. She gave me detention for fake shooting. I said, Fuck. And you know what, I got a detention for that too.

Ms. Dipple I do not like you.

I think that all the time. I will not say it, though, because if I did Ms. Dipple would point her long finger at me and give me another detention and honestly I don’t like the way that feels. Her long finger is like a real life animal tranquil gun that makes me feel like I’m getting turned into crumbles.

The stupid dumb thing I don’t understand is that when I’m actually in detention I kind of like it.

When my mother gives me Nyquil at night I have dreams. I have dreams every night. Sometimes… Okay a lot of times… I have dreams about Ms. Dipple and all her rules and for some reason the dreams are not nightmares. The dreams are actually happy dreams.

Sometimes during detention Ms. Dipple says, Mr. Babcock I’m so proud of you for how you’re behaving right now. (I really like when she calls me Mr. Babcock instead of Matthew.) Then she says, How come you can’t behave this way when you’re around your classmates? And do you know what I say? I say this, I don’t know. Ms. Dipple doesn’t like that answer.
Yesterday a girl named Bethany called me a fag because I’m obsessed with boner tents, but then I kissed her open mouthed and I said call me a fag again, and you know what? She didn’t.

She told on me, though. And Ms. Dipple called my house and left a message for my mother. She said, Mrs. Babcock I would like to have a meeting with you about your son. His behavior is erratic and I’m seriously concerned. He often (she paused a long time at this part because she was thinking up this next word) imposes himself on his peers, he doesn’t want to sit still in class, and he seems to be angry all the time.

What Ms. Dipple will soon find out is that my mom won’t ever come in for a meeting. So Ms. Dipple can’t really stop me. I’ll impose all I want. And someday I’ll get a real animal tranquil gun and that’ll be a good day because I’ll be king of the school and the playground, and Ms. Dipple won’t be able to make me apologize to anyone or get any slips signed by my mom or sit in the time-out folding chair during recess. And I’ll be able to go to detention if I want to and if I don’t want to Ms. Dipple can put a sock in it or else she’s crumbles.

That’ll be a good day. That’ll be my favorite day. When I’m king. King of the school and the playground. I’ll stay there, too. School will be my kingdom, and then I won’t ever have to leave.

END
1996

You’re ten. It’s Saturday afternoon and you’re in the open field behind Wallkill Elementary School with Travis Joseph and Matthew Babcock. You just finished playing kill the carrier, a.k.a. smear the queer. Everybody is out of breath. Of the three of you, Travis is the only one standing. He’s pacing back and forth, holding a football in the crook of his arm, and talking about boobs. He claims a girl will let you touch her boobs if you carve your name and her name into a tree. Between the two names, Travis explains, it’s crucial that you draw a plus sign. And if that doesn’t work, you just have to carve a heart around the names, and then she’ll definitely let you touch her boobs.

To you, everything Travis says seems absolutely true. He’s twelve and tall. And he has a mustache, sort of.

“Wait,” Matthew Babcock says, “why do they like it when you carve their names into a tree?”

“Because it lasts forever,” Travis says.

You hadn’t thought of that. Now you’re wondering if lasting forever is really that special. Everything you’ve ever known has lasted forever.

“No,” Babcock says. “Eventually the tree grows and the carvings go away.”

“Trees grow at the top, not the bottom,” Travis says, whipping the football at Babcock—who dodges it. “If you carve the heart at the bottom of the tree, it’ll stay there for as long as the tree exists, which will be, like, longer than our natural born lives.”

“That’s not how it works,” says Babcock.
“It is, cock head,” says Travis.

“Is not, queer bait,” says Babcock, standing up. “We can test it, you know.”

Babcock glances at you. Travis glances at you. You try to keep your face neutral. You have no clue how trees grow.

“Fine,” Travis says. “Fine. Let’s test it.” He picks up a sharp rock and you follow him to a birch tree at the edge of the field. He falls to his knees and gets to carving.

You think of a plan: every year, on today’s date, the three of you will visit this tree to see if the carving still exists. It’ll be a tradition. You’ll do it until you’re old men. You’ll show up even if the carving disappears, just so you can remain friends.

You don’t voice your plan because you’re afraid Travis and Babcock will call it stupid. They’re the ones who have ideas. You’re the one who follows them.

When Travis is done working, he drops the rock and stands. In the base of the tree, he has carved an erect penis with very large balls. The penis is aiming at the words YOUR MOM.

“You drew a dick,” you say.

“No shit, Sherlock,” says Travis.

“Are you some kind of a queer?” you say, wishing you could suck the words back into your mouth, because you don’t want Travis to hit you.

“Fuck no,” Travis says. “That’s my dick fucking your mom, bro.”

You’re treading rocky ground: you don’t know if drawing a dick is cool or gay.

“He’s right,” Matthew Babcock says. “It’s not gay if the dick’s fucking your mom.”

“Obviously,” Travis says.

You hope they aren’t messing with you just so you’ll stupidly think a gay thing isn’t gay.

“You should’ve used a knife, Travis,” Babcock says.
You’re glad for the change of subject. And Babcock is right: the rock wasn’t sharp enough. The penis and words are faint. It’s like they’re already fading away. You don’t know the science behind it, but somehow you’re certain this carving won’t last.

2000

Erica Stockdale is wearing high top Jordans, red tube socks, and boyishly long basketball shorts. She also sports a royal blue practice jersey through which, thrillingly, her bra is visible. She’s posting you up, yet again. The score: 6-6. 7 wins. Each dribble echoes loudly in the empty gym. Her ponytail wobbles, touches your mouth. She stinks of BO, like a boy, and you like it.

And you hate that you like it. Her body bothers you, because it shouldn’t be something you compete against. You want to kiss her, not keep her from getting to the hoop. You want to hold her hand, not steal her dribble. But also, somehow, more than all that, you want to dominate her, because what kind of girl will hold your hand if she can work you at basketball?

Your only hope: become a wall; keep her away from the hoop; frustrate her into taking a fade-away jumper. You widen your stance. You lean all of your weight into her back.

“You’re off-balance,” she says. And because you are off-balance, she’s able to pull a 180 and blow by you for an easy finger roll.

“Game,” she says as the ball passes through the net. “I need water.”

You follow her to the fountain. While she sips an arc of water, you marvel at the calf muscles beneath her red socks.

“They’re taking forever today,” you say.

“I knooooow,” she gurgles. “We’ll be here all night.”
You consider that: all night, you and Erica and the empty school, while her mother and your father sit on the auditorium stage, talking about budgets and teachers and whatever else school board members talk about. It could be fun. All night. You imagine sneaking into the skylab and looking at fake stars, Erica’s head on your shoulder. You imagine playing one-on-one, but with no basketball. You imagine racing Erica down the crazy-long hallway by the art rooms. You imagine finger-blasting her in the cafeteria (and this time you’ll do a better job than when you fingered Tracy, who said it felt like you were stabbing her). You imagine a kiss that’ll never actually happen because Erica is basically a dude and your friends would give you hell if you kissed her.

You drink from the fountain. Erica softly kicks you in the butt and says, “Do you like Charmaine?” You stop drinking. No, it’s never crossed your mind to like Charmaine, but you know why Erica asked: because yesterday you told everybody at your lunch table you’d trade your left nut to suck Charmaine’s tits, and somebody must’ve told somebody who must’ve told everybody, including Charmaine. “Yeah,” you say. “Charmaine’s hot.”

“Well she,” Erica says, tossing you the basketball, “likes you.”

“What-ev-er,” you say.

You dribble once. Erica steals the ball and spins it on her middle finger. The effect: she’s awesomely flipping you the bird. A shit-eating grin spreads across her face, and you’re trapped inside the urge to simultaneously fight and kiss her.

2001

You and Travis Joseph cut class and smoke a bowl on the football bleachers.
Travis says, “Remember how in elementary Matt Babcock always wanted to fight everybody?”

You do. The kid was a townie who, like Travis, got held back a grade. You remember once Babcock tried to fistfight a recess aid, and the thought of him throwing a right hook at a grown-ass woman has you cracking up. Travis is cracking up, too.

You say, “Matt fucking Babcock.”

Travis says, “Matt fucking Babcock.”

Yesterday you spotted Babcock walking home from school. He was obsessively rubbing his chin against his shoulder.

You take a long hard hit from the bowl and try not to think about Babcock’s weird head.

Travis says, “Bro, remember I carved that dick in the tree? Remember how Babcock tried to say it wouldn’t last?”

“Yeah,” you say.

The weirdest part of the memory: Travis was taller than you. He hasn’t grown an inch since middle school. You tower over him now.

You pass the bowl to Travis, who smokes the remaining ash and coughs into his sleeve.

“We should go find the dick in the tree,” Travis says. “I guarantee it’s there.”

“Let’s do it,” you say.

You walk to Wallkill Elementary and spend ten minutes combing the edges of the field behind the school. You don’t find any dicks.

“Maybe it’s gone,” you say.

“It can’t be,” Travis says.
You sit cross-legged and stare at your old elementary school. Weirdly, you smell glue. You tug a fistful of grass out of the earth and drop it on your lap. You imagine burying yourself in grass.

Travis sits next to you.

“I’m so high,” you say.

Travis grins. His lips strike you as obscene: they’re red and fleshy and seem to be attached to his face, rather than part of it. And his nose—it’s got a bump at the top that makes his glasses sit lopsidedly.

“Imagine Matt Babcock was still regular,” Travis says.

“Imagine,” you say. Last year Babcock’s mom smashed her car into a tree off the New York State Thruway. Babcock, who’d been in the passenger seat, emerged from the wreck with a huge dent in his head, and he went from being a normal kid to a full-blown retard.

“Dude, man, bro,” Travis says. “Maybe he still is regular. But, like, he can’t show us he’s regular, and he’s all herky jerky and stuttering because that’s the regular old Babcock trying to get out of his fucked up body.”

Until now, you assumed Matt Babcock was a goner, but the idea of him existing still, inside that dented shell, excites you. You say, “Maybe we can get the regular Babcock out.”

“No dice, broski,” Travis says. “Matt Babcock is gone.”

You make like you’re about to stand because suddenly you really want to find the dick carving, but you realize the weed has rendered you dense and immovable, so you remain seated.


“Oh yeah.”
You’re staring at the grass in your lap when Travis’ long, bony hand comes into view. The hand appears gigantic and disembodied. It’s tan, and veined. The hand wipes the grass off your thighs and crotch. The hand is stoned, so it moves slowly, methodically. It seems to be wiping away one blade at a time.

The hand lifts, hovering inches above your lap. You imagine the hand has eyes staring at your erection. You don’t want the hand to touch you, but then it does. You want to say, Stop, you faggot hand, but you forget how to talk. It feels good to be touched by somebody who is not you. You listen to the sound of the hand rubbing denim, which is amplified a thousand times beyond its usual volume so that in your skull it’s like humongous, all-encompassing, rhythmic white noise. You think about Matt Babcock’s dented head and how one day the regular Babcock, the one who’s trapped inside that retard, will get out, because you’ll find a way to help him get out. But then you remember Travis’ words, Matt Babcock is gone, and you realize how much you hate the idea of gone. You tell yourself to forget Babcock entirely because if you forget him entirely you don’t have to think about how he’s gone. Plus you shouldn’t be thinking about Matt Babcock while you’re watching the hand. Forget Babcock. He’s gone. Forget him. Forget him.

You close your eyes. You listen to the white noise. You listen hard. You try to hold onto the sound so you can keep it, because it’ll only be a few seconds before you tell Travis to quit being a fucking queer.

2005

“I’m going to touch your boobs!” you say.

Erica spits out a mouthful of vodka.

“Follow me!” you say.
You sprint across Travis’ backyard, your suspenders flopping loosely at your sides. You squat at the base of a maple tree. Erica is in the middle of the yard, turning in circles, looking at the grass. She holds a bottle of Stoli in her left hand, a high heel in her right. “I can’t find my other sneaker,” she says.

“Come here!” you say.

She drops her heel and ambles your way. Her basketball body looks too muscular for her prom dress.

“I’m going to woo your boobs into my hands,” you say.

“Just touch them,” she says.

“Shush. You’re gonna ruin the magic.”

Erica sits next to you, her dress blooming around her. She places the Stoli in the grass and it tips over, slowly. There’s so little in the bottle that it rests on its side without spilling.

You grab a rock and carve a heart that’s too small: when you try to carve your names, all that fits inside the heart are the first two letters. Erica starts cracking up.


“Ah fuckin’ shit,” you say. “You’ve gotta do the names first.”

Glass shatters in the distance. Then: muffled shouts. Travis’ voice is the clearest. He’s going, “You fucking pussy ass bitch! Fuck you!” The poor kid. He’s small and ugly and nobody will fuck him. When he drinks too much he baits people into kicking his ass. You consider running to the other side of the house to help break up the scuffle, but you’re too drunk. You lie on your back and look at the dark tree limbs.

“Remember our one-on-ones?” Erica says, resting her head on your shoulder.

“You beat me every time,” you say.

“Until you grew.”

“I always wanted to beat you so bad,” you say. You try to slap Erica’s ass, but you can’t reach, so you hit her lower back. “I also wanted to hook up with you so bad.”

Erica cups your crotch: “You can do both now.”

You push her hand away and kiss her forehead so she doesn’t feel insulted. It’s not that you don’t want to fuck her (in fact, you do, and you will); you just don’t want to spoil the basketball memory with sex. You recall crushing on Erica even though she wasn’t hot in the correct ways. You were so confused back then. It seemed wrong to like such a boyish girl.

The weird thing is sometimes you miss the confusion. Or, rather, you miss the realization that came from the confusion—that is, that Erica was beautiful, despite what your friends said. It made you feel smart and powerful to see something that other dudes couldn’t see. Something you now take for granted.

“I liked it better when you beat me,” you say.

“Why?” Erica says.

“Oh, you know… I mean…” The question strikes you as unanswerable. Now you’re well over six feet tall, and even though Erica’s an all-county power forward, she can’t deal with your size on the court. Maybe you miss losing because that’s when the games were fun, because Erica beat you with her size and strength. With her body. It was as if, while beating you, she was slowly giving you access to her body. And also something more than her body. What something, though? Her mind? No. Her heart? Her what? Her soul? Soul? No not that. What even is that?
“I thought you wanted to beat me,” Erica says. “I don’t get why you’d want to go back to losing.”

You’re unable to find traction in your thoughts. You’re baffled by this something more than her body business, so all you say is: “You’re the better player. You deserve to win.”

2008

5:45 AM. Your phone rings. It can only be Travis. He always calls after he finishes his nightshift at the warehouse—the fucker is tactless. You grab your phone and get out of bed. Your roommate and his girlfriend both look at you sleepily. “Sorry,” you say. You put on slippers and go into the common area.

Travis says, “What’s up, shit stain?”

“I’m just trying to sleep.”

“Nice. Listen, bro, I’ve got big news.”

You scrutinize a hangnail on your thumb.

“Well,” Travis says. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

“Sure.”

“Dude, you have to sound more excited. This is big. This is, like, big.”

You don’t say anything. You’ve been unable to sleep because some guy had his arm around Erica last weekend. You have evidence, thanks to Facebook. The guy’s name was fucking Parker. Parker. To you, the name reeks of superiority, of money, of yachts. In the picture, he wore awful lime green shorts. His adam’s apple was huge and red, his forehead sunburned. Erica said, He’s just a friend. But you know Erica too well: you know she presses
two fingers to her temple when she lies. And even though she was reassuring you over the phone, you were certain you could hear her touching her temple.

“Are you there?” Travis says.

“Yeah. What’s the big news?”

“You’re going to be an uncle.”

Your kid sisters are fifteen and sixteen. Your heartbeat quickens. But then you realize you’re not going to be a real uncle.

“Who’s the mother?” you say.

“Amanda Cotto,” Travis says.

“I don’t know who that is.”

“She’s a senior.”

You grab your forehead, confused. Then you say, “In high school?”

“Don’t say it like that. She’s eighteen.” You hear Travis’ blinker clicking. You picture him at the intersection of Plains Road and Route 300 in Wallkill, on his way home, where his mother is no doubt making him bacon and eggs.

“So you’re gonna go through with it?” you say. “She’s, like, actually gonna have the kid?”

“Yeah, bro,” Travis says. “We’re in love.”

You can tell he means it, and you have to smile. Travis seems so innocent. He can say he’s in love with no trace of doubt in his voice. He can call you in the wee hours of the morning without even thinking to apologize.

You try to imagine Travis shaking hands with Erica’s Parker, but you can’t. If there exists a spectrum of men—Travis on one end, Parker on the other—you don’t know where you
fall on it. You feel closer to Travis, though. The Parkers of the world—your college friends, kids who drive cars that cost more than all your student loans combined—take for granted everything you value (free time, good food, earned money). Travis is a low-class idiot. There’s no doubt about that. But right now you wish you’d stayed in Wallkill, gotten Erica pregnant, picked up some warehouse gig, settled into something a Connecticut adam’s apple couldn’t steal from you.

2009

It’s the second time you’ve ever been to a strip club. There are two strippers and two patrons—including you. The other patron has to be at least seventy. He’s wearing a red Semper Fi hat and drinking an O’Doul’s. It’s 3:00 PM.

The stripper on stage is in the middle of eating an eggroll, which she holds between two fingers the way you’d hold a cigar. She doesn’t seem interested in your money because she won’t come near your edge of the stage. She walks lazy circles around the pole and makes eyes at the marine, who shamelessly gropes himself and sucks his O’Doul’s. What bothers you about the old man is that you might become him: desperate to touch, smell, and ogle, but unable to find anybody who truly wants to touch, smell, and ogle you back.

The other stripper approaches you. She’s tall, skinny, black, and naked. She leans against the stage and folds her arms across her chest

“I’ve never seen you,” she says.

You smile and try to hold eye contact.

She reaches back and pops herself onto the stage. She sits, legs dangling. You stare in her general direction, not focusing on any one part of her. She does a split and uses her fingers to open up her vagina: the first black pussy you’ve ever seen. You think: They’re all pink on the
inside. The phrase calls to mind locker rooms and boys laughing hard. HA HA HA. You once found the idea of internal pinkness repulsive and confusing, but now you find it comforting. They—we—are all pink on the inside. All made of the same stuff. All growing the same way.

“Now you give me money,” she says, still holding herself open. You extend a dollar. She pats herself on the right calf and says, “Right here.” You put the dollar in the rubber band around her calf. It strikes you that that leg used to belong to a baby.

She puts her bare foot on your crotch. You realize you’re on the verge of tears. You shake your face and smile.

“Here’s what I’m going to do,” she says. “I’m going to dance on you for a few songs. Keep your hands to yourself. Every time I put my foot where it is right now, you put money on my leg. If you want more, we’ll go in the back. It’s forty for a lap dance. A hundred for a blow job. And two hundred if you want to fuck. Got it?”

You nod. You admire her forthrightness. She sits on your lap and starts dry-humping you.

Your penis nervously shrinks. She asks what you do. You tell her you’re about to graduate from college and you’ve got a job lined up at KPMG. You expect her to ask what KPMG is, but she only says, “That’s nice.”

“I’m Star, by the way,” she says. “What brings you here today?”

“I don’t know.”

But really you know. You’re here because a few weeks ago you asked Erica whether or not she’d been seeing anybody since she broke up with you, and she caved and told you she’d already slept with two men, and then you wanted to fuck Erica just so you could make the jealous nausea in your brain disappear, but she wouldn’t let you—Listen, I can’t do that, she’d said—and so you went to night clubs and bars and tried to find a woman to fuck, but you
couldn’t figure out how to broach the topic of casual sex, and plus you couldn’t shake the feeling that you were betraying Erica, and then you started to fantasize about putting a hole in your head—not seriously, but as a kind of hypothetical consolation—because you couldn’t stop obsessing over the image of Erica getting fucked, and all you wanted was to do what she was doing—that is, move on, have fun, connect, somehow, to somebody—but you had no idea how to feel OK with new people, because new people, like old people, would eventually disappear, and you didn’t want anybody disappearing anymore, and so you couldn’t bear to learn too much about any woman because then you ran the risk of caring about her. So here you are: a place where you can pay for a naked body, where there’s nothing to lose.

The problem is you’re stupidly caring about the woman in your lap. You think: *Star, I want to take care of you.*

You look over Star’s shoulder. The other stripper is gyrating in the old man’s lap, eggroll hanging from the corner of her mouth. You want to leave, but you don’t. You’ll go in the back with Star. You’ll hold her close and for a moment force yourself to forget her touch isn’t free.

**2010**

Midnight. You’re still at the office. A text message from Travis: *Dickie says he saw you driving by Rob’s Pizza last weekend.*

You consider ignoring the message, but you scroll up and realize you’ve ignored nine consecutive texts from Travis. You respond: *Yeah, I was visiting my folks.*

Travis writes back within thirty seconds: *You can’t pop my way for a beer?*
A bubble appears at the bottom of the screen to indicate that Travis is already typing another message. You respond quickly: *I was only in town for the day. You know it’s hard for me to get upstate. I wanted to spend time with my family.*

The typing bubble disappears for a second. Then he’s typing again.

*Go fuck yourself,* Travis says.

There’s no use responding. He’s probably drunk or stoned or both.

You get back to work

2011

Your knuckles throb. So does your jaw.

It’s 4:00 AM and you’re in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Deegan. You’re thinking about stupid fucking happy shit: Erica asking you to homecoming junior year; you and Travis convincing Erica and her friends to swim naked in Lake George; Erica shotgunning you a mouthful of smoke, pulling away, smiling. These memories are ancient. They’ve hardened with time, turned holy. You haven’t seen Erica in two years. You don’t know the woman she is. The memories are all you’ve got, and they’re polluted: by Erica partying in college and Erica growing bored with you and Erica needing to feel something you couldn’t make her feel.

The car you’re driving belongs to the woman in the passenger seat. Andrea. You met her three hours ago. You’re going to her apartment in White Plains to have sex, or at least that was the big game she was talking at McFadden’s. Now, she’s nodding off, and you figure you’ll be lucky if you cop a morning BJ.

Your cell phone buzzes in the cup holder. Andrea grabs it. You stifle an urge to tell her not to touch your shit. “Private number,” she mutters. It has to be Erica’s boyfriend. “Hit
ignore,” you say. Andrea does. She puts the phone down and rests her bare feet on the dashboard. You stare at this loose stranger. Her legs excite you. They’re fat, but in a strong way.

Your phone buzzes again, but it’s not a private number. It’s Erica. You accept the call with a quivering hand. Before you can even say hello, he starts lacing into you: “Listen you motherfucking psychopath you need to get a fucking life and quit…” You hang up.

This guy. This stranger. You’ll probably never see him face to face, but he’s acutely aware of what a disaster you are.


There must’ve been an accident. Nobody is moving. You examine the wet tunnel you’re trapped in. One of the world’s most beautiful skylines on the horizon and you manage to get stuck under a dripping arch of Bronx concrete, every inch of which is covered in graffiti: red and yellow bubble letters, looping signatures, a humongous face. It’s too dark. All of the tags are illegible, the artwork half-shrouded in shadow.

People are honking their horns.

You’re thinking it’s been so long since Erica told you goodbye, and still you’re obsessed. No amount of new women can adequately distract you. After enough vodka you always end up in some corner, calling Erica, repeatedly punching yourself in the jaw.

More horns honk. So much pointless sound. You begin laughing hysterically. Everybody’s frustration seems just. You roll down your window, stick your head into the night. You smell garbage and exhaust and old rain. The horns whirl together and ricochet off the walls of the overpass. You imagine the graffiti screaming.

Andrea tugs on your belt loop. You bring your head back into the car.
“What are you doing, man?” she says.

“I don’t fucking know,” you say, surprised by the aggression in your voice.

“Is everything okay?” she says.

“Yeah,” you say.

She squints at you.

“Everything is fucking fine,” you say.

It bothers you that she seems frightened.

2015

A caged woman dances. She’s in a black bikini, a toucan’s beak attached to her face. Plastic wings wobble on her back.

You’re unbuttoning your shirt.

You’re watching two women make out on a red pleather couch.

You want to be touched.

You roam. Overhead, out of a black void, blue and red streams of light shoot in every direction. The lights make a flower, or a spider web. The flower or spider web closes, the lights braiding into one stream that hits you right in the eyes.

You blink rapidly.

Hips. Legs.

Your shirt is totally unbuttoned. You stand before an amplifier that is the size of you, and it blasts windy sound onto your bare chest and stomach.

Travis is dead.
Erica told you so. Two weeks ago. She thought you should know. She feared you’d get the news late—perhaps after the funeral—since you have no internet presence and nobody from town has heard from you in forever.

The last time you saw him he slapped you upside the head.

You order three shots of vodka, all for you.

You’d like to fade further. You’d like for one of these women to trap you in a corner.

You’d like to have hands on you.

You’d asked Erica about her husband. About her child.

They’re doing well, she reported.

Funny how you opted out of Travis’ funeral, how you evaded him for years, how he became a character from some story about another you.

Funny how you’d like to push him out of your mind so you can enjoy yourself.

Funny how you have to drink yourself numb in order to touch another person.

A hand on your chest. Another at your crotch.

You notice: both hands belong to one man.

Travis: a father. The thought makes you laugh.

Erica: a mother.

You recall Erica’s asshole. She never let you in.

He is sleek and beautiful.

You wanted in. You wanted all of her.

A puckered, private space.

So many years since Erica.

And still.
So many years since Travis.
And still.
You recall Travis in somebody’s basement, opening a can of maroon paint, drunk, spilling the color all over a pool table, laughing.
His mother found his body in his childhood bed.
The only bed he’d ever call his own.
His tongue is in your mouth. Your tongue in his.
The comforter was pulled to his chin.
Travis: a father.
Apparently his feet were speckled with needle holes.
You smile into the man’s mouth. You laugh.
Travis is a father. Was.
Was. Was.
You wonder if her husband has fucked her ass.
You want to fuck.
You want fucking to be enough.
You can’t remember your last sober fuck.
You feel the man’s stubble on your upper lip.
You touch his chest.
You hate him for being flat-chested.
You’re pushing him away.
Is Travis anything but bones?
Travis was a father. Travis was.
You wonder if there was a specific moment in time when you lost Travis, when he became just another kid from Wallkill.

You don’t know.

Where was he, those years?

Where were you?

Where are you?

You are.

He was.

Fuck.

You reach out for the man, but he’s gone.

Everything is color and sound and fuzz and still, somehow, you’re not numb enough.

Somehow it’s all too clear.

**2013**

You’re at the Magnanini Winery in Wallkill, and you’re about to do a shot of grappa with your grandma. The rest of your family is out on the dance floor. An old man plays the accordion with the verve of a twelve year old. Everybody’s clapping.

Before you can say “salute” and clink shot glasses, somebody punches your shoulder. Standing over your table, looking down: a skeletal person with your old friend’s face emerging vaguely in the cheekbones. You can’t really call him a man; he’s more of a ruined, bearded child. He wears a gray tee shirt that says EVERYTHING SUCKS over a smiley face. His thick glasses warp the shape of his eyes.

“Look who it is,” Travis says.
“Nonna,” you say, “This is Travis Joseph. He’s one of the cooks here.”

Your grandmother nods politely.

“How long you around?” Travis says.

“Just today,” you say.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. I’m here to celebrate. It’s Nonna’s eighty-second.”

“Happy birthday, Nonna,” Travis says.

“Thank you,” your grandma says.


“What time?” you say.


You assure him you’ll be at Murph’s, though you’ll certainly flake. You wonder why you don’t say, I can’t make it. Somehow it’s easier this way. He’ll leave you alone faster if you just agree to see him later.

“How’s your daughter?” you say.

“She’s beautiful,” he says. “I wish I got to see her more often. But man, she’s fucking beautiful.”

There’s a lull. Travis looks at you longingly, like he wants sit at your table and jabber about old times. You consider saying, Take a seat, bro. Maybe, for once, you’ll knock a few back, stay in town tonight, get drunk, retell stories of egging houses, of smoking yourselves giddy, of filling super-soakers with gasoline and stupidly shooting at lit matches. It could be fun
to catch up. But you have to work in Hartford tomorrow, and Travis will expect the night to go on and on. And he’s a handful when he’s wasted.

So tonight’s not the night. You need to sober up and leave town. You can shoot Travis a text saying something came up. Next time, you’ll promise him. And he’ll understand. Even if it pisses him off, he’ll get over it. He always does.

“Listen, man,” you say. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yeah, bro, good.” Travis slaps you upside the head and walks away.

Your grandmother says, “Friend?”

“I went to school with him,” you say.

“He’s very ugly,” she says.

You shrug and wince. You recall a time when you and Travis were the same height. Junior high. Both of your faces caked in acne. Bad acne. Acne on top of acne. You’d like to laugh about it now, but you can’t. It was so embarrassing, being that ugly.

You try to smile. The accordion grows louder. The dancers clap harder. An old woman cackles, witchlike. The room seems hotter. You loosen your tie. You massage your temples and try to forget your pubescent face.

You can’t. Right now you’re nothing more than that embarrassed kid.

It’s so strange, that you can still be that kid.

You imagine yourself as a deck of cards. On each card is a person you’ve been at a different point in time. You can be any of those people again, depending on which card you’re randomly dealt. Your grandmother just dealt you the pimple-faced middle school card, and it hurts the same way it always does. And then it strikes you that no matter how much you change and grow, you’ll never stop being who you’ve already been.
Unless, of course, some versions of you get lost in the shuffle—now there’s an idea that scares you. Even though this ancient embarrassment aches, you don’t want to lose it.

Travis kicks his way into the kitchen. The swinging white door closes, but you still see his profile through the little window. He’s grinning. He’s talking. He adjusts his glasses with his middle finger. His teeth grip his lower lip to shape the word “fuck.” He laughs. He lurches forward, then back, then forward again. Too much movement. You want him to stay still, just so you can keep looking at him through the window. He’s really cracking up. That laugh. That aggressive Travis laugh. You can hear it without hearing it. A little boy laughing. The little boy Travis. You can see the boy Travis. It’s in the way he’s smiling. He’s the same kid. Beneath that scraggly beard. Beneath that sickly skin. He’s the exact same kid you knew. At least sometimes he’s that kid. He must feel it, every now and then. Just like you do. Sometimes you’re both kids again. Embarrassed. Alike. Friends.

God, you hope so. You really do.

END
Notes from Chuck

dear len,

it’s 2015 and old jay baldwin is still dead. hope the west coast is treating you OK you jarheaded freak.

remember the barbeque your parents had right before you went off to east bumblefuck for basic? i remember two specific things from that day. first is when me and chalk hands were playing horseshoes with your uncle sal and uncle sal was going on about how one time he drank a whole 24 pack of coors lights and then barfed on the 24th because he COULDN’’T STAND THE TASTE. as if the two dozen beers foaming in his fat gut had nothing to do with his puking. then chalk hands was like WHY DID YOU DRINK SO MANY IF YOU DIDN’’T LIKE THE TASTE? and uncle sal couldn’t riddle out an answer to that question so he punched chalk hands in the chest and told him to go fuck a dog.

i guess that’s the man thing to do. drink all the beer you’ve got and don’t be a bitch about it. but it ain’t the man thing to pretend it was the taste that was too much for you when really you just drank more than your system could handle. no man i know wants to admit when his system’s had more than it can handle and that’s a fucking shame if you ask me. instead of your uncle sal going ape he should’ve just said YUP I HAD TOO MANY. but then he would’ve been basically admitting he was a pussy and nobody wants to be a pussy.
the other thing i remember is when we were all shithoused around the fire and somebody (i think it was goodbird) brought up jay baldwin and then you said OLD JAY BALDWIN DIED STANDING UP. and i said WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? you were sitting on a cooler and you said I’LL DEMONSTRATE. then you said JAY BALDWIN WAS SEATED. LIKE SO. AND THEN HE DECIDED HE WAS GOING TO DIE. SO HE STOOD UP. LIKE SO. AND HE DIED JUST LIKE THIS. ON HIS TWO LEGS. AND HE WOULDN’T GO DOWN! THEY HAD TO BURY HIS ASS VERTICAL! then we all went ballistic about jay baldwin dying upright even though everybody knew jay died flat on his back with his throat clogged with vomit.

do you remember saying that or were you too shitfaced? i like thinking about jay’s corpse standing all stubborn like. i think that’s one of the cleverest things you ever thought up len and you’ve thought up some clever shit over the years. we should all die standing up.

your friend,

chuckie

*

dear bobby,

you know the time you threw that frog into the fire? if i could do it all over again i wouldn’t change a thing. i’d still break your nose. you knew the frog was alive and you incinerated his ass because you’re a sick bastard. i’m glad you got fat.
love,

chuck

* 

dear jada,

i’ll be surprised if this address i found is even really yours.

i’m sorry i held you down and hit you with the clothes hanger. you didn’t deserve it. even though i told you you did. i guess there’s no reason not to tell you now that i was sleeping with other women the whole time we were together. not just the one whore i confessed about. i was running around with len when you were working nights at the cleaners. i chased women every chance i got and i don’t know why i couldn’t stop. and the truth is i hated you. because you were nice to me and i didn’t think anybody who acted the way i acted deserved a woman as good as you. simple as that. i was bad to you and i wished you were bad to me too so i wouldn’t have to feel bad for being bad to you. when i upped and left i know you thought the problem was you but i need to take this opportunity to tell you right now once and for all. the problem was me.

also. i hope little madison is doing OK. to this day i’ve never seen a kid so beautiful.

chuck

* 

Dear Mom,
Dear Mom,

I know Bobby screwed you over with all of that money you cosigned on. And I know you probably won’t forgive him. But if I’m allowed to have one request (I don’t know if I’m allowed) I would request that you forgive Bobby. Nobody makes you laugh like Bobby does. And you should let him make you laugh again.

Nothing I have ever done is your fault.

Love,

Charlie

dear bobby,

i already dropped one letter in the mailbox and i can’t get it back now that it’s in there. it’s kind of a cruel letter. so i’m writing you another one that’s more about explaining some shit and less about being cruel.

i’m sitting on a bench outside the post office in wallkill and i’m writing to the people who are on my mind. i’ll tell you what i’m going to do after i’m done. i’m going to drive over to the police station and park my car and shoot myself in the heart with a nine millimeter. i’m going to do it
right there in the driver’s seat. i originally planned on shooting myself in the head to be extra
extra certain but i thought about that scene in the godfather where the godfather wants his son to
be able to have an open casket but the bitch of the whole thing is the son’s face got mutilated. i
figure if i put the slug in my heart mom won’t have to see me all headless and gory and shit and
she can give me an open casket if she decides that’s important to her. also i’m going to do it so
the cops find me because those fucks are already traumatized. what’s seeing another corpse to
them? i imagine my body will be about as upsetting as a piece of road kill.

i just sent a note to len about jay dying standing up. you weren’t there. but one time len said this
ting to how jay died standing and i always admired the shit out of that idea. if anybody
could possibly die standing up it was jay. i thought you’d like that since jay was yours before he
was anybody’s. i still remember you two playing wiffle ball in the backyard using that old box
spring as a backstop.

jesus bobby thinking about you and jay as kids makes me so sad i want to vomit.

i just realized you might open this letter before you open the mean letter. oh well. one way or
another it doesn’t matter.

chuck

*[

dear len,
that time we were in puerto rico and all those homeless men surrounded us on the beach while we were banging those hookers… i think about those hobos all the time, grabbing at their crotches and watching people screw. what the fuck was going on in their heads? WHAT THE FUCK WAS GOING ON IN OUR HEADS? we’re lucky those guys didn’t try to fuck US.

i wish i enlisted. they straightened you out alright. i guess it’s stupid to even think about. we both know i can’t take orders from anybody.

chuck

* 

Dad

* 

dear bobby,

i remember the first night you ever came out drinking with me and len. you were only 16 and i gave you my old ID and it worked perfect since you and me look the same. it was 50 cent beer night at p and g’s and we ordered a whole tray of beers. remember HOW we used to order our drinks? throw a sawbuck on the bar and say GIVE ME TWENTY BEERS. we were bat shit if you ask me. anyway i remember dragging you by your feet into len’s apartment and then i watched you sleep the whole fucking night because i was afraid you were going to die and it’d be my fault because i was a deadbeat older brother who could hardly make any friends his own age. besides len. who didn’t even count.
i’m realizing this is the first time i ever mentioned to you that i watched you sleep. i sat next to you. you were on the bathroom floor and your chest was going up and down and up and down and bobby that might’ve been one of the last times i ever prayed. i kept saying GOD DON’T LET BOBBY DIE. it’s funny how serious i took it. how many times after that did we get plastered blackout blind together? too many to count. hell even when you collapsed on that church lawn in oneonta i didn’t panic the way i did that first night. i got used to you drinking yourself sick and besides it wasn’t all bad. at least i try to tell myself it wasn’t all bad. we had some good times out at p and g’s and cuddies and oasis. some real good times. especially once jay got his fake ID and it was the four of us. you, me, len, and jay. trying like hell to get pussy. drinking so hard i could feel the alcohol pooling up in my skull. i always wonder if you’re right about how you and jay would’ve had different lives if it wasn’t for me. i wonder if you wouldn’t be such a disaster if i hadn’t taught you my lifestyle. and when i wonder about jay i get sick.

*

len,

i ever tell you i got genital warts from that puerto rican whore? i gave the warts to jada. and now she’s carrying that shit around. in her fucking crotch. i fucking hate that she has to spend her whole life dealing with my shit. nobody should have to carry around my shit. nobody. especially not jada.

chuck

*

jada,
i remember we were in queens with the baby and we had that sketch artist draw the three of us and he managed to make you look like a blockhead and me even more horselike than i already looked… that dude might’ve drawn us hideous but he got madison just right. she didn’t look like a caricature. she looked like a real baby girl holding her bobo in her chubby hand. god did i love that girl. especially when she’d grab my thumb and hold it. i’m glad you let me into your life for the short time you did. i know i was no good for you or your daughter and i know you probably regret having met me on account of a lot of reasons. but don’t regret that day in queens when that guy put madi down on paper perfect.

chuckie

* 

listen len. i never told you this but i feel i’ve got to. you shouldn’t have gone to jay’s funeral. i know you said OLD JAY WOULD WANT US THERE…and maybe you were right. but you knew jay’s mom didn’t want me or bobby or you anywhere near that church. you should’ve respected her wishes. you should’ve let the old lady grieve how she wanted.

* 

bobby,

i forgive you for the frog. i forgive you for how you fucked over mom with all those loans. i don’t know if she’ll forgive you.
remember when we were kids in bed i’d always say ROBERT YOU AWAKE? and you’d be in the bottom bunk like YEAH? every night you passed out before i did and that always made me a little sad because then i couldn’t talk at you. but i guess i was also glad you were asleep because i could sleep better once i knew you were out. i don’t know why it worked that way.

anyway bobby i’m still a shit sleeper. all i do is thrash around. just like when we were kids.

talk to mom if you can find it in you.

your big brother,
charles

* 

jay:
i’m a dumb thing that kicks and drinks and needs needs needs. i can’t sleep. i can’t sit in a chair and feel OK. maybe if i could figure out the word for WHAT i need... if i had a single fucking clue what the to call the thing i need then maybe i could GET IT. fuck you fuck you fuck

* 

i want to be a thing with no head. a tree. or a mailbox.
jay,

i’m out of stamps. so i figured i’d write to a dead guy with no address. which as far as i’m concerned is the final confirmation that i’m fucking nuts.

what am i supposed to say to you? i know you didn’t die standing up.

you want to know what’s happened since you kicked it? here’s what. shit’s hit the fan. i guess that’s no surprise. the way we live somebody’s always lobbing a turd at the fan. bobby’s gone. lives in pennsylvania. he’s found some woman to feed off of. my mother’s still paying his debts. it’s a fucking disaster.

not a lot else to report. i feel like whole years have happened that i don’t even remember.

i hope i don’t see you soon. i hope it’s just nothing.

chuckie

END
The only thing that was fair about the fight was that both guys knew they were in it. I stood there watching just like everybody else. We were at an outdoor basketball court in our town. We were all friends.

Salem was going to get his ass beat. He was tall and lean, but not in that veiny, athletic way—he was tall and lean like Gumby. Tom Walls, his opponent, was an all-state offensive tackle, an agile bear on its hind legs. He even had a beard.

Salem and Walls cursed at each other a lot and squared off. Salem made the first move by throwing a wide right hook that probably packed as much punch as a pillow. Walls retorted with a barrage of thick fists to Salem’s chest. I wanted it to stop. I didn’t want to see Salem get pummeled. So I jumped in.

That’s probably the wrong way of putting it. It insinuates that I jumped in between the two of them. And that’s not what I did. I wanted to break up the fight, but my instincts told me that I’d be in danger if I went anywhere near Walls. So I put my shoulder into Salem’s stomach, wrapped my arms around his waist, and tackled him to the ground. I smacked my temple on the asphalt pretty good, which worked out in my favor, in the long run. The back of Salem’s head hit the pavement; he looked woozy and vaguely cross-eyed. He was probably concussed.

Salem and I were on the ground together.

“What the fuck, man, what the fuck,” Salem said. He looked at me like I’d just sold his ass down the river. I didn’t say anything. Then he said, “Such a fucking cheap shot, bro.”

“You punched me in the face,” I said.

“No I didn’t,” he said.
I sat up and looked at all the guys we were playing hoops with. None of them seemed to doubt that I’d caught a punch in the scuffle. So I repeated my lie: “I was trying to break up the fight. You punched me, so I took you down.”

I got a bruise on my temple, and somehow I managed to convince Salemo and everyone else that the bruise came from Salemo’s fist. I claimed he’d socked me when I was keeping the peace, when I was being a good friend.

I was being a shit friend, of course. And because I don’t like fighting—or maybe because I thought myself a hero—I destroyed the guy I knew would lose. So he lost anyway.
Ro Ro’s new thing is I gotta eat healthy. I says to her, “Fine. I’ll eat healthy.” I figure why not? She’s my sister. It’ll make her happy if I get my act together. So I’ve been following this diet Ro Ro found on the web. I eat fish and fruits and whole grain bread and all kinds of nuts. Cashews, walnuts, peanuts, almonds. The whole nut kingdom is now a major part of my life. And vegetables, too. More vegetables than I ever thought about eating. Kale, cabbage, broccoli, you name it. It’s flavorless and awful. All day I want bacon and Belgian waffles and a whole oval of ham with the bone in the middle. I have such specific cravings. I want French fries in a basket, but I want it to be one of the baskets from the diner down the street from where I grew up in Hoboken, and I want the basket to be overflowing just so. I don’t tell Ro Ro none of that. She’ll get mad. She’ll say, “Dom, your health is important. You’re fifty-six now and you’re not getting any younger. I don’t want you ending up like daddy.” And so I don’t whine about the diet because I don’t wanna hear her yap. Plus I don’t wanna end up like daddy neither. Daddy’s heart crapped out on him pretty unexpected. He was real fat. Me, I could stand to lose a few pounds, but I ain’t spilling over my belt like daddy was.

Couple weeks back Ro Ro comes to the house to watch American Idol. When she shows up I’m in the kitchen eating my kale and of course Ro Ro’s got a problem with how I eat kale. Which is like this. I stand over the sink and eat it right off the stalk. She says I’m a barbarian. I says to her, “Relax.” She asks why I don’t steam the vegetables or prepare them like a civilized human. And I says, “It ain’t worth the dirty dishes. I just wanna get it over with.” She says, “Dom, that’s no way to live. You’re not some animal.” I says to her, “Yes I am.” She laughs.
Then *American Idol* comes on in the living room and Ro Ro runs to the couch because she don’t wanna miss a minute.

I’ve lived alone for nine years. I’m divorced and I have no children. I think Ro Ro’s always visiting me because she’s afraid I’ll lose my mind out here by myself. I don’t think I’m gonna lose my mind but I like the company. Back in the day I always said that if I got old and had nothing much going for me I’d buy a lethal dosage of heroin and go out in a haze. I never did no heroin before, but I heard that if you OD on heroin it’s painless. I found that attractive because I was scared of it hurting. Anyway now that I’m old I know I’m never gonna go out in no haze. I’m gonna eat healthy and do everything I can to die slow. The weird thing is I don’t know why. There’s something in me that says, Don’t die. And even though I’m retired and alone and wear sweatpants most days, I gotta follow that voice. I gotta not die.

Ro Ro’s got diabetes. I don’t. That seems unfair. I don’t know why she’d get it and not me. I spent my whole life eating like a slob. The thing that worries me about Ro Ro is she don’t watch what she eats the way she should. She tells me about how sometimes she gets upset and eats a whole sleeve of Oreos. She says when she really misses her dead husband she’ll lay in bed and eat three pints of ice cream like it’s nothing. Then she gets migraines. I says to her, “It’s okay.” But every time she goes to the doctor it’s not okay. I think I’m a bad brother. Telling Ro Ro something’s okay when it’s not. It’s cowardly really. I hope she sees me eating good and it rubs off on her. I hope she follows the advice she gives me. Because I don’t got the heart to hurt her feelings. I know how it feels, people telling you to stop something you don’t wanna stop. It don’t feel good.

I used to booze hard. Not no more. Nine years sober. Cold turkey. I don’t need nobody to hold my hand. If I decide to do something I do it. That’s that. I just took a long time to decide to
quit boozing. I don’t think I was ever really an alcoholic. I think I just needed to be eating or drinking something. I still need to. I drink so much coffee nowadays it feels like my teeth are going to crack and fall out. I don’t care. I just drink more coffee. I need something going in at all times. I don’t know why.

My ex-wife Karen used to call me The Neediest Man in the World. She said I’d never get enough food and drink and love. Karen was Ro Ro’s good friend. Ro Ro’s son Tony had his first communion, and Karen came to the party. That was where we met. I impressed her by juggling eggs while telling dirty knock-knock jokes. I was a real cut up. I still remember how when Karen laughed she leaned back in her lawn chair and kicked her leg out and her calf muscle wobbled. Jesus, I don’t like to think about her leg. I’m never going to touch another leg like that. Ro Ro warned Karen about me. She told her I was a no good drunk. I got pissed at the time, but Ro Ro was only calling a spade a spade.

Sometimes I get a little lonely when I haven’t done nothing but slog from the television to the microwave to the pisser to the television to the microwave to the pisser. It’s mind-numbing, doing nothing. Sometimes I scream and then in the quiet after the scream I feel stupid. Then I talk to the empty room. I says, “Quit being dramatic.”

I go on walks. That helps with the lonely feeling. I live in a ranch house between a cow farm and a hay field. When I walk along the hay field I think about how much I miss being in Hoboken. But I won’t go back. Reason I moved to the country was because I didn’t want a bar or liquor store in walking distance.

I like walking by the cow pasture. Especially when the cows are near the fence. I lean on the fence and look at them. I get spooked by how much the cow eyes remind me of human eyes. Sometimes I imagine what it’d be like if the cows were naked human women with huge, swollen
breasts that some other species used for milk. And I imagine how if the milk-drinking-species wanted to slaughter the human women for meat, they’d need to make more human women if they wanted to keep having milk. So they’d cut a few muscular men loose in the pasture, and the men would screw the women so there’d be more human cattle.

One time I says to a cow, “Are you happy?” It just stared at me and chewed on some kind of leaf. I wonder if that cow would OD on heroin if she knew she had the choice. Probably not. She’s probably got that thing in her that says, Don’t die.

I’ve been going to church lately. First time since I was a kid. I don’t believe the stuff but it makes me feel good. My favorite part is the homily. It’s where mass gets some personality. It’s where the priest can show off a little. Father Mike is kind of a wise ass, and I like that. He always makes jokes about drinking Budweiser, but I can see by the blotches of red on his face that they ain’t really jokes. That’s the best. When a joke is really about a problem the person talking has. Last week Father Mike was going on about the fruits of the spirit. I memorized them and when I got home I wrote them down. The fruits are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you’re righteous and believe and do good, the fruits grow out of you. I would normally say that’s stupid. But the way Father Mike described it was great. He stood with his arms spread and said to imagine he was a tree and his arms were the branches. He said the tree represented his soul. Then he said that in his day-to-day life he was doing good and believing and helping people and not being selfish. Then he acted like he was surprised by something on his right hand and he turned the hand over so the palm was facing the ceiling. He said a tomato sprouted in his hand. He said the tomato was a fruit of the spirit. He said some people will call a tomato a vegetable and those people were wrong, but if you wanted to call the tomato a vegetable of the spirit, that was fine by him, since the point of the whole
thing wasn’t whether or not a tomato was a fruit. Everybody laughed. Then Father Mike said the
tomato was love. That’s the first fruit of the spirit. Then he made like he was tossing the tomato
up in the air and catching it. Everybody laughed. Then he took a pretend bite out of the pretend
tomato and he chewed and then swallowed. Then he said that if you do good and believe and act
righteous, the fruits will sprout out of you, and you can eat them, and they will give you eternal
life. I liked that idea. It’s like the things you need to live good are already in you. I don’t know if
it’s true, but it’s nice to think so.

I tried explaining the whole concept to Ro Ro but I didn’t say it right. If you can’t tell a
story right, the story don’t matter. We were in my kitchen and I pretended I was a tree and I said
the tree was my soul and I grew the tomato on my hand and all that. And I said the fruits grow
out of you if you do good, and I pretended to eat the tomato. But I did it clunky. I had no
charisma and so it all fell flat. It’s not that I can’t tell a story. I just can’t tell a story that ain’t
mine. Ro Ro stared at me blank and said, “Dom, cool it with the religious talk. You’re getting
weird on me.” I told her she was right and she laughed.

Then I asked her if she wanted to hear a joke. She said of course. I made up the joke on
the fly. I says, “What do you get when a priest fucks a cow?” Ro Ro laughed, and I was proud of
coming up with a joke that didn’t even need a great punch line because the question was funny. I
told Ro Ro to take a guess. She said, “A holy cow.” I laughed. The truth is I thought her answer
was cheesy, but I told her she got it right because really I didn’t even have an answer.

Then we ate together. We had salmon with steamed broccoli and carrots. I told Ro Ro I
only steamed the veggies because she was there. She said she appreciated that I didn’t expect her
to eat like some kind of animal. I told her I appreciated her company even though she was a
complete asshole. We laughed. Then she told me all about her son Tony. He’s got a kid now. A
kid and wife. Sometimes I think it’d be nice to go back and do it right. Live a life like Tony. But the truth is I don’t got the energy for it. What I mean is if somebody gave me the option I’d say no thanks because life seems like too much work to do again. And if I had to go back I probably would live the same way. I’d work my job and drink hard and spit at anybody who didn’t like it. The difference between me and Tony is Tony’s always had the Don’t Die voice in the back of his head. He’s got a fire under his ass to have a family so that when he gets old he’s got people to look after him and care about him and be there and all that. Me, I didn’t get the Don’t Die voice until later, after I’d screwed everything up by living like I was gonna live forever. Sometimes I wish I could’ve lived the same life but without hurting nobody. I know that don’t make no sense, since how I lived was what made people hurt. Sometimes I think I always had the Don’t Die voice and I boozed because I didn’t wanna listen to it. I don’t know. Alls I know is I’m going to eat right and try to live good for the rest of the ride.
The Fourth Boy

It was 6:30 PM and I was still at school, grading verb conjugation quizzes and ogling Skyla, a senior at St. Joseph’s College who lived in my apartment building. She’d texted me a picture of herself just out of the shower. She aimed the camera at a mirror, which reflected her ass and back. Her wet hair clung to her shoulder blades. I imagined the two dimples in the small of her back were designed for my thumbs. *I wanna see your cock*, she said. I found an old picture of my dick and sent it to her. *I’ve already seen that one*, she said. *Take a picture right now.* I liked this demand. For Skyla, the act of taking the picture was as erotic as the picture itself. I understood that feeling: the idea of Skyla in her bathroom, thinking of me, posing, wanting attention—that got me going as much as the shape of her ass, if not more. I desired desire. The more shameless and needy and animalistic, the better.

Still, I was at work. *Can’t right now*, I said. She responded, *Pleeease.* The begging gave me an erection; the picture hadn’t. I got up and locked my classroom door. I was half excited, half ashamed. Excited because of Skyla’s appetite. Ashamed because: Jesus Christ, was I about to whip out my dick in the room where, earlier that day, I hosted a pretty packed lunch detention? Yes, I was. Next to the door, there was a window through which you could see most of my classroom. I went to the back corner, in the nook between the bookshelf and the filing cabinet, the spot most hidden from the sightline of a passerby. I unbuckled my belt.

My phone buzzed. Skyla again. A close-up of her vagina, two fingers with purple nails spreading the lips. I looked up from my phone. For some reason, my eyes were drawn to the corny posters on the walls: Read like a Champion; Make an Effort, Not an Excuse; Today a Reader, Tomorrow a Leader. I tried to focus on Skyla’s picture, but I was distracted by my
sloppy handwriting all over the whiteboard… and a pen on the floor beneath a student’s desk…
and a collage on the wall that one of my classes made for my birthday last year… and a pink
book bag a student left behind that afternoon.

*I’m waiting,* Skyla said. But these remnants of my students muddied everything. My
erection had softened. I wasn’t about to send Skyla a flaccid dick pic. I needed to will myself
back to life. I looked at the pictures she’d just sent me, but they weren’t enough, so I went to my
photo gallery and began scrolling through images of Shelly, Miriam, Melissa, Jennifer,
Stephanie, Jackie, and Rachel: arched backs, kissy faces, legs, breasts, pussies, bitten lower lips.
Every woman I’d slept with over the past few years was compiled in my phone, posing for me.

I reached into my underwear and began rubbing myself. A picture of Jackie bent over my
couch was doing the trick. But then I caught a whiff of pencil shavings and that reminded me of
the kids. “Fuck,” I said, releasing myself.

I’d jacked off at school a few times before. Always a similar situation: after hours, dirty
text messages. Always in the faculty restroom, where there were no windows and no posters and
no signs of the young people I taught. I considered going down the hall to take the photo, but my
excitement had already been neutralized. Like most sexual acts, the idea of tiptoeing to the
restroom to take a picture seemed ridiculous without the brainwash of total arousal.

I buckled my belt. I texted Skyla: *Can I see you tonight?*

I unlocked my classroom door and continued grading. A half hour passed. Skyla never
responded. This didn’t bother me. One of the main reasons I continued my casual relationship
with Sklya was I didn’t care about her. If she told me she was done sleeping with me, it would
not have mattered. She had no power, and that was how I liked it. Sex was a problem I solved
with blunt, dirty, discardable relationships. I was twenty-seven years old and I didn’t want to
take on anybody else’s burdens. I worked constantly and I was tired all the time. The care I put into my job drained most of my emotional energy.

My computer dinged: an email from Principal Jackson. There was no subject, which was abnormal enough to pique my interest. I stopped grading and opened the message. It was addressed to the entire faculty.

hello to all:

i am writing to inform you that a student was allegedly sexually assaulted today during school hours. we are working with law enforcement officials to identify all involved. the 3 boys who perpetrated the alleged attack were identified by the victim.

according to the victim, a 4th boy was present. the victim indicated he did not assault her, and she refuses to provide his name. the 3 accused boys claim no other boy was present. they also claim the incident was consensual.

all of the identified students were marked present or late for class during the period in which the assault occurred.

if you have any information that could help law enforcement, please come forward.

David Jackson, Principal
I knew who the victim was.

No I didn’t.

Yes I did.

No I didn’t. I was being rash.

My cell phone buzzed. Skyla again: a picture of her in a red lace bra. *Yes, I want to see you tonight.* I deleted our conversation. Then I turned off my cell phone, just in case she tried to message me again. Her bra, her pussy, the dimples in her lower back: I wanted to eradicate all of it from my brain.

Seventh period, that afternoon. Shaydeene Williams showed up a half hour late, slightly out of breath. Normally she carried her huge pink book bag at her side, like a suitcase, but this time she wore it on her back. Even after she sat down she kept the book bag on. I asked her for a hall pass. She didn’t have one. “Give me my work,” she said. “Shaydeene,” I said, “where...” “Give me my work,” she repeated. Her brow was speckled with sweat. I didn’t feel like arguing, so I provided her with a verb conjugation quiz, which she finished in fifteen minutes. Then she stood up, took off her book bag, and placed it on her desk. “What are you doing?” I said. She ran out of the classroom. I followed, poked my head into the hallway. Shaydeene sprinted to the corner, pivoted, and was gone. There were maybe ten minutes left in class. I didn’t report her early exit to the behavior technician, as I probably should have.

Yes, Shaydeene was the victim.
How could I be so certain?

Her face. Her sweat.

Was I revising my memory? Was I imposing this trauma upon Shaydeene?

I didn’t think so. It made perfect sense.

The fact that she left her book bag behind. The fact that she ran.

Jackson encouraged us to come forward if we knew anything that could help law enforcement. I didn’t know if I knew anything that could help. I only knew who the girl was.

I rifled through a stack of paper on my desk and found Shaydeene’s quiz, which I’d already graded. 100%. Had the quiz been a kind of solace in the wake of the assault? A momentary distraction from the trauma? Perhaps.

Perhaps she simply wasn’t the victim.

Two knocks on my door. A formality. Elizabeth, the new biology teacher, walked right in. Like most young teachers, she practically lived in her classroom. It wasn’t uncommon for the two of us to be the last people in the building.

She asked if I’d seen the email. I said yeah. She asked if I knew the victim. I said yeah.

“Who?” Elizabeth said.

“Shaydeene Williams,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“I think it happened right before she came to my class.”

Elizabeth grabbed her Teacher ID, which dangled from a lanyard around her neck, as if to keep herself from falling over.

“Shaydeene,” she said. “Are you sure?”

“No,” I said. “But yeah.”
“I mean maybe you’re wrong…” “That’s hers,” I said, pointing at the book bag on Shaydeene’s desk.

“You should bring that to Jackson,” Elizabeth said. “He’s probably still here.”

“I’ll give it to Shaydeene. Tomorrow. Or whenever.”

Elizabeth thumbed her cell phone and placed it to her ear.

“Who are you calling?” I said.

“Shaydeene.”

I hoped the girl would answer the call. I wanted to know if she was okay. I wanted to know if she was even really the victim.

Elizabeth mouthed the word “voicemail” at me. Then she said, “Hi, Shaydeene. This is Ms. Provenzano. I, uh… I wanted to see how you were doing. Call me when you get this.” She hung up.

“Maybe she’s not even the girl,” Elizabeth said.

“I hope she’s not,” I said.

“You’re sure, though?”

“I’m pretty damned sure. She seemed—I don’t know—distraught. Weird. Off. She was late for class. Very late.”

“That’s not like her.”

“I know. And she was sweating. And she left early. She ran out of the room. She seemed messed up.”

Elizabeth sat down in my guest chair and used her thumbs to massage circles into her temples. I wondered if she was about to cry. She’d only worked here for a little over a month, after all. As far as I knew, this was the first major violence she’d seen. During my first year in
Hartford, one of my students, John Jumpp, got killed in a drive-by shooting. I cried about him for weeks, once in front of my students, who looked at me aslant, like I was being a baby, or, rather, like my tears were distasteful.

Now that I’d been at it for four years, I never cried when something violent happened. Desensitized wasn’t the word. I was, quite simply, guilty. For being a white guy feeling bad for brown kids. For grieving wrongly. For being an outsider feeling something for an insider. And so I didn’t cry because I didn’t feel like it was my place to cry. I couldn’t shamelessly express my feelings because I knew I was a third-party feels, somebody who was affected by tragedy only because of nearness.

Elizabeth’s phone rang.

“Shaydeene, hi.”

She stood up and left my classroom.

If Shaydeene were the victim, I would have been in a situation I’d never been in before. A student had been hurt while she was supposed to be in my class. I wished I’d marked her tardy in the online attendance system and reported her early departure to the behavior technician. I wished I’d followed protocol. Why hadn’t I?

Laziness. That was why. I simply marked her present for class because that required the least of me. And so, while I was worried about Shaydeene, I was also worried about myself. Clearly what happened happened before Shaydeene came to my room. I couldn’t help that. What could I possibly have done to cause this event? Nothing. But a teacher would’ve been a convenient scapegoat, especially if parents put pressure on administrators.

Elizabeth came back into the room.

“It was her,” she said. “She’s the girl.”
“How does she sound?” I said.

“How does she sound?” I said.

“Okay. She didn’t want to talk about it.”

“It was nice of you to contact her.”

“I’m thinking about going over to her house. I didn’t ask her. But I think maybe I should. Do you think I should?”

“I have no idea,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll wait until tomorrow,” Elizabeth said. “Maybe she needs space.”

* 

Next day, 6:45 AM. I was hungover and decided to get an egg sandwich. I trudged along Farmington Avenue, counting sidewalk slabs and muttering queasy curse words. In an hour I’d have to act happy to see my students despite my throbbing skull. I should’ve called out. I could’ve called out. Why didn’t I call out?

Shaydeene—that was why. I wanted to see her. When seventh period came around, I wanted to say, *Good afternoon, Shaydeene.* I wanted her to greet me the way she always did, *Hey Tru.* I wanted to know that she was in one piece.

A hobo approached. He wore a faded Pats jacket. I did all I could to inspect him without making eye contact. I’d seen this guy before. He usually sat on an upside down bucket by the Jamaican restaurant and shouted the word please over and over again, but not today. Today he smiled yellowly and carried what appeared to be an industrial-size tube of toothpaste.

Dunkin Donuts was two blocks away. I wanted to get there. This homeless man was a hurdle, and I already hated him. His inevitable plea would feel like an accusation: *give me money or else you’re evil.* I smiled, a defense—a terrible one, I realized, because it invited the hobo to
speak. I wondered how he’d come at me. The friendly, Hey, my man... Or the formal, Excuse me, sir. Or perhaps the indignant, Listen, bro, I’m hungry...

He didn’t say a word.

He simply did an about-face and started walking next to me.

I got militant about staring at the Dunkin Donuts. I sped up. So did the hobo. Our shoulders touched. I didn’t look at him. Our shoulders touched again. I still didn’t look at him. He wheezed. He sounded like a dog that had come down with something.

Finally I glanced at him. Not at his face. I wanted no part of his face. I registered three things: his bootlaces were untied, a rosary dangled from his jacket zipper, and the tube of toothpaste in his hand was actually a tube of caulk. I did a double-take at the caulk. What the hell was this guy going to do with caulk? Did this man have a home? Whenever I walked from school to Dunkin Donuts, he was on that bucket and he seemed pretty damned homeless. But the caulk… Who needed caulk without a home? What did this hobo aim to mend? Was he going to try to sell me the caulk?

An intersection. The last thing I wanted to do was stop walking. But the Farmington Avenue traffic was thick, the cars filtering from the suburbs to downtown Hartford. The drivers would soon populate skyscrapers, drain the city of its money, and leave. I was like those drivers. I exited the shitscape at the end of the workday. I got paid.

The hobo backed off a little. He stood a few sidewalk slabs away, facing me, bouncing from foot to foot like a boxer or a guy standing on hot coals. I imagined him caulking me, clotting my crevices and holes. I pictured my mouth plugged up, my ears filled, my eyes sealed. The image was weirdly comforting: hear none, see none, speak none.
My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. I wondered if it was Skyla. A bright snap of memory: texting Sklya at 11:00 PM, *Let’s Fuck*; Skyla showing up at my door ten minutes later, laughing at how drunk I was, taking off her clothes, rolling around with me, going back to her apartment down the hall. The recollection seemed under water. I’d polished off a bottle of Jack the moment I got home from school, hoping to put myself to sleep, hoping to forget, momentarily, about what happened to Shaydeene. Skyla, like the whiskey, was an insufficient, fleeting distraction.

The hobo chuckled.

I once heard that on elevators all tension is relieved if two strangers said hello to each other. I considered saying hello to this man, to relieve the tension, but I didn’t want to exacerbate whatever internal conversation he might’ve already been having with me.

“Hello,” the hobo said.

Normally when he was screaming please on the bucket his neck was all corded and gruesome, his forehead webbed with veins. But now there was a clean calm about him.

“Hi,” I said.

Traffic hummed by.

Turns out the elevator thing was true. I breathed a little easier.

“I found this,” the man said, extending the caulk toward me.

The caulk tube was blue and unopened, the packaging glossy. I imagined the guy finding it on the construction site over on South Marshal, where some projects had been half-built for a long time. “Sweet,” I said.

The hobo sniffed. Was he sniffing me? I’d showered. I’d brushed my teeth. I’d deodorized. Could he smell the booze? Could he see the hangover in my eyes? Was he going to
accuse me of being a no-good drunk? Was he going to whip out a flask and offer me a swig? Was he going to tell me I had no right working with his city’s youths? Was he going to punch me? Bite me? Try to take my wallet?

The hobo raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“You got any money?” he said.

“I don’t have any cash on me, man. I’m sorry.”

“Come on, you know that ain’t true.”

But it was, so I pulled out my wallet and held it open. It felt good to show him I wasn’t full of cash like perhaps he imagined. He leaned forward and looked into my wallet, as if I was somehow hiding the goods. I had a strong urge to punch him and run away. It wasn’t that I was scared he meant harm; I simply hated being near him. There were filthy, homeless, begging men and women all over Hartford. They represented the fate of some of my students. I hated to think that this man once sat in some teacher’s class, full of potential that had since been squandered by bad fortune and strange choices.

Of course I wasn’t about to actually punch him and run away. The urge dissipated as quickly as it had struck me. The world had fucked this guy over in ways I couldn’t comprehend, and perhaps I hated being near him because of the depths of my incomprehension.

“I’m going to Dunkin Donuts,” I said. “Do you want a donut or a bagel or something?”

“Boston cream,” he said, showing all of his mangled teeth.

The traffic came to a halt.

“Come on,” I said.
I crossed the street. The hobo followed, his boots scraping the pavement. I congratulated myself, silently, for being a good person; then I remembered that only a moment prior I’d fantasized about assaulting the guy.

He followed me into Dunkin Donuts. I wished he waited outside. Not because I was embarrassed about standing next to a man who stank of rotten banana peels, but because somehow it seemed more demeaning to have him dependently following me around. Also, I didn’t like the way I was being looked at by one of the other patrons, a chubby little black woman in business attire who narrowed her eyes at me like she knew this little act of charity was really about quelling some ineffable guilt.

Before I placed my order, I checked my cell phone. It wasn’t Skyla who’d texted me. It was Elizabeth. She wanted to know if I was at school yet because she wanted to borrow my Doc Cam. *At DD*, I said. *You want something?* Elizabeth requested a cinnamon raisin bagel with butter, and I bought one for her. I asked the homeless man if he wanted anything to drink with his Boston cream donut, and he said, “Milk.”

After he got his food and drink, he said, “Good looking out, brother.” Then he left. I watched him through the window while waiting for my egg sandwich. He headed toward the Jamaican restaurant where he did most of his begging.

* Second period. I had the kids doing a reading activity. The classroom phone rang. I answered. It was Principal Jackson.

“Hey, man,” he said. “You busy right now?”

“I’ve got a class. What’s up?”

“Anybody nearby that can cover you?”
“Elizabeth’s got her prep period,” I said.

“See if she’s available. I’ll only need you for a second.”

I hung up and went across the hall. Elizabeth’s door was open, so I walked right in. She was standing on a chair, stretching her body up and to the left, balancing on, it seemed, a single toe. She was trying to pin a NO EXCUSES banner to the top of the wall. I asked if she needed a hand. “I got this,” she said, straining. I asked if she’d watch my kids for a minute. She said yeah. She finished pinning up the banner and hopped to the floor with gymnastic dexterity. I found this sexy: the grace in the way she caught herself on the balls of her feet, the way her small, taut body seemed coiled with potential, the slight flush the exertion brought to her cheeks. For a second I forgot to be nervous about going to see Jackson. Elizabeth often dizzied me that way.

I went back to my classroom and grabbed Shaydeene’s book bag. It felt full of cinder blocks. I carried the bag at my side, like a suitcase, out of respect for its owner. I prepared for Jackson to tell me I’d be held responsible. How would I be held responsible? For what? I didn’t know. But I knew that was why Jackson called me. I knew I was going to have to answer, one way or another, for Shaydeene.

* *

Jackson wasn’t alone. Sitting in his guest chair was one of my students. Karim Dickson. The kid was long-limbed, thin, taller than I was. Karim sucked his teeth when he saw me.

“Ah fuck,” Karim said. “Tru here to snitch.”

“One question, Mr. Tru,” Jackson said, smiling at me. “Was my friend Karim in your class yesterday?”

I’d been so prepared to talk about Shaydeene that it took a second to even comprehend Jackson’s question. Karim’s left eyebrow jumped. The boy grinned at me the way he always
grinned at me during class: like he was ready to say something obscene or crack a joke or call me out for not knowing what I was doing. The kid wasn’t a behavior problem, not really. But he was quick-witted and physically imposing. A double threat. Even though he hadn’t acted out once during that first month, I feared I could overstep some invisible boundary that would make him snap. I didn’t know if I’d imagined this boundary or not, but what made me think it existed was that aggressive, knowing grin of his.

“No,” I said. “Karim wasn’t in class yesterday.”

Jackson smiled.

“He playing,” Karim said. “You just playing, Tru. Tell Black Clean you playing.”

“You mean to tell me your English teacher is a liar,” Jackson said.

Karim examined his lap: “Nah.”

“Thanks, Mr. Tru,” Jackson said. “I already checked out your attendance online, but I just wanted to see if Karim would call you a liar to your face. That’s all I needed.”

I pointed at the book bag in my hand. Jackson shrugged like: what’s that?

“Uh,” I said. “Can I have a word?”

“Sure,” Jackson said. “Give me a minute to finish with our friend here.”

I sat on the wooden park bench in the hallway outside Jackson’s office. It was where you usually saw troublemakers awaiting punishment. I put Shaydeene’s bag on the floor, clamped it between my heels, and thought about that hobo following me around Farmington Ave. I tried to imagine the landscape of his brain. How did it feel to be that feral? To follow a man with a tube of caulk in your hands? To sleep in shelters or abandoned buildings or on sidewalks? His problems seemed so immediate, so pressing, so concrete. Food. Shelter. Cash. Maybe add crack
or booze to the equation. No paperwork. No job. No abstract critical thought. Just get get get everything you could get because who knew when the next opportunity to get would turn up.

Had I actually just thought the word *feral*? Had I mentally sucked the humanity out of the poor fucker? Yes, I had. *No abstract critical thought*—Jesus. Unchecked, my mind reduced people to animals and puppets.

My phone buzzed. This time it was Skyla. A picture of a hickey on her tit. She’d written: *thanks for the love bite.* I had no recollection of making the mark. Our sex was only a vague, kaleidoscopic mess in my brain. I didn’t respond to her message. But I saved the image.

“Maaaaaan,” Karim’s voice came muffled through the closed door. “Why you gotta act like you know some shit, Black Clean? Real talk: I wasn’t even in the fucking building!”

Jackson’s voice was a calm rumble.

The first time I heard Karim call Jackson Black Clean was after a Welcome Back assembly Jackson held on the second day of school. Initially I thought “clean” was employed ironically, to signify dirty; perhaps Karim believed his principal, the only black person on the whole faculty, was a kind of sell out. But then I asked Karim about the nickname, and I learned that it had phenotypical origins. Karim said, “That dude don’t got a neck. He’s Black Mr. Clean.”

Strawberry rounded the corner. He was digging through his purse. He laughed when he saw me, his teacher, seated outside the principal’s office. “You got in trouble, Tru?” he said.

“You know me,” I said. “Always mouthing off.”

“It’s about time somebody called you out on your shit.”

“Language.”

“Yeah yeah.”
Strawberry loosened his tie, which looked toyish, since his neck was so fat. As he walked away, I recalled Shaydeene Williams, not three weeks prior, shouting at Strawberry across a lunch table: “You know who you look like. You look like Super Mario. But, like, a Puerto Rican Super Mario who got a thing for Luigi.” I’d been minding my own business, doing lunch duty, when the description, thanks to Shaydeene’s staccato voice, emerged clearly through the cafeteria’s murmur. I couldn’t help but laugh. Strawberry was famous among his peers for two things: his hugeness and his gayness. But Shaydeene had highlighted what really made Strawberry Strawberry: his masculinity, his mustache, his constant five o’clock shadow, his ability to act dainty until a conflict arose, when he could flip a switch that turned him into a streetwise hard-ass. Because even though Strawberry carried a purse and let his wrist go limp, what he resembled most was not a queen. What he resembled most—as Shaydeene noticed—was a chubby plumber.

Strawberry disappeared into the boys’ bathroom. He and Shaydeene were good friends. They sat together at lunch. I wondered if he knew.

Jackson held his door open. Karim stepped into the hallway.

“What up, snitch?” Karim said, grinning down at me.

I stood. The three of us made a triangle. Karim’s mouth worked on some gum.

I put two and two together: Karim and Shaydeene were in the same class. Seventh period English. Karim was absent, and so maybe he was involved in this assault.

“Karim,” Jackson said. “Class time.”

“You got it, Black Clean.” Karim skipped down the hallway. He reached up and pushed a paper-light ceiling tile into the rafters. He laughed.
Jackson and I exchanged a glance in which we silently agreed not to bother with reprimanding Karim. He wasn’t hurting anybody, anyway.

“Come in, Tru,” Jackson said.

I followed Jackson into his office and then held the book bag high like it was a fish I’d just caught. “This belongs to Shaydeene Williams,” I said.

“And?” Jackson said.

“Do you want it? Could it be, like, evidence?”

“Why don’t you have a seat,” Jackson said.

He closed the door and sat in his desk chair. I sat across from him.

“You know anything about what went down yesterday?” he said.

“All I know is from the email you sent. And I know Shaydeene’s the girl.”

“How do you know that?”

“Elizabeth called her. And, I don’t know. I just knew.”

“She was supposed to be in your class when it happened.”

“I know. She showed up late. She left early. I marked her present. I didn’t mark her lateness or call Rondell about how she left early. I don’t know why.”

“I do. Because you didn’t feel like dealing with the behavior tech. Because she was a good student and you figured you could let her slide once.”

I didn’t say anything. I felt small and stupid because of how right Jackson was. My face reddened.

“You okay?” Jackson said.

“Yeah. Sorry. Do you want this bag?”

“You know what—keep it in your classroom. For now. Shaydeene should be back soon.”
“Okay.”

Jackson, probably sensing my discomfort, changed the subject.

“How we looking for CAPT this year?” he said.

CAPT: The Connecticut Academic Performance Test. Every tenth grader took it. I recalled Ms. Mackey, a math teacher who’d gotten fired a few years prior. All of the kids loved her because she’d let them watch Netflix in class. Her CAPT scores were in the dirt.

“The numbers are very low,” I said.

“You gonna find a way or what?” Jackson said.

“Thirty-four percent,” I said. “I’ll make it happen.”

“Damn right.”

For three years running, over 34% of my students scored proficient on the CAPT—surpassing the dismal-yet-immensely-difficult-to-achieve goal the school board set for us. Ms. Mackey got fired because one boy broke another boy’s arm during her class. How she was supposed to prevent this—who knows? But it didn’t matter. Jackson wanted her out, and the boys gave him a reason. I wondered if my success in the classroom might keep my head from rolling.

“I better get back to class,” I said.

Jackson lifted a finger, which kept me seated.

“One thing while you’re here,” he said. “Our friend Karim—keep an eye on him, will you? Let me know if you hear him bragging or talking shit about what happened with Shaydeene.”

“Was he involved?”
“I’m not sure. I know he moves with the boys who jumped her. I’m inclined to think he was the fourth kid.”

*

Seventh period. Shaydeene Williams was absent for the first time all year. Karim Dickson didn’t show up, either.

*

That night, I didn’t want to drink. I didn’t want to fuck around with Skyla.

I couldn’t, for a second night in a row, force myself not to think about her: the biggest pain in my ass; the best reader, by far, in the entire school; the only student who seemed on fire about learning; the student who, during September, had read three novels while her classmates were two chapters deep into their first. She sat in the back row, by herself. She had her own curriculum. I planned lessons specifically for her. She often called her classmates retards. If I didn’t come up with an assignment that appropriately challenged her, she called me a retard, too. I tried to talk to her about why she shouldn’t use the word retard, and she said, “I know it’s offensive to retards, but I also know you know what the fuck I mean by it.”

Once I planned an elaborate “jigsaw” activity that involved stations all over my classroom. I split the kids into groups, and Shaydeene, sitting alone, said, “What you got for me?” The answer: nothing. In planning this intense group activity, I’d forgotten to design a Shaydeene-specific lesson. “Hold on, Shaydeene,” I said. “Let me get your classmates started and then I’ll draw something up for you.” Shaydeene stood and folded her arms across her chest. I asked her to sit down. She refused. I said, “Shaydeene, listen…” “You’re incompetent,” she said. Her classmates were grinning, but I was pretty sure none of them knew what the word meant. “Tru forgot about you,” Strawberry said. “I ain’t surprised,” Shaydeene said. I threatened
to call the behavior technician. “Go right ahead,” Shaydeene said. She’d called my bluff. My lesson hinged on efficiency, on time—five minutes per station. A showdown between Shaydeene and the behavior tech would’ve ruined all my planning. So here’s what I did: I taught. I helped the students work at their stations. Shaydeene remained standing. Mostly her classmates ignored her. At one point Karim called her the ghetto statue of liberty, and she said, “Fuck you.” I ignored them. I focused on my well-planned lesson. I was helping my students learn.

That’s what I was thinking about—Shaydeene protesting my incompetence, Karim talking shit—when I saw somebody I recognized on the seven o’clock news. A mug shot: black kid with a square head and a lopsided edge-up, black tie, white button down, our school logo stitched on the left breast. Above his head, these words: GANG RAPE HARTFORD. Not one of my students. But a nice kid. A clueless kid. An upperclassman. Once he popped his head into my room and said, “Hey, yo, Tru, what period is it? I don’t know where I’m supposed to be.”

The newsman said: “Three high school students are under arrest for allegedly sexually assaulting a fifteen year old student at Hartford High School. Dominique Hixon, age eighteen, the only adult involved in the case, was arraigned today at Hartford Superior Court. Two other boys participated in the alleged rape. They’ll remain John Does because they’re only sixteen years of age. The victim, a sophomore, reported the assault to her principal not long after it happened.” Jackson’s head took up the whole screen. He spoke into a thicket of microphones: “This is a tragedy. We cannot stand for this kind of violence in our hallways.” He paused, rubbed his chin, continued: “I’ll be addressing this issue with my faculty. We will do everything in our power to ensure that Hartford High remains a safe place for students to learn.”
I ran to my bedroom, opened my laptop, checked my email. Jackson had already reached out to the entire faculty: “local news outlets have gotten wind of the assault that occurred earlier this week. please report to the auditorium at 6:30 am for discussion re: damage control.”

I got into my car, drove to the liquor store, bought a bottle of Jack Daniels, and drove home. I put the bottle on my kitchen table and sat there staring at it.

I wished I could know what exactly happened. When, specifically, was Shaydeene assaulted? Was it really before she came to my class, as I suspected? Or was I totally wrong? Had it happened after she left my classroom? That narrative—though it didn’t make much sense, considering her odd behavior and sweaty forehead—made me want to vomit. It made me a thousand times more culpable.

I imagined myself on the news: the teacher who didn’t notice.

Maybe Shaydeene was lying.

With that thought, I reached for the Jack, pulled it close to me, and hugged it.

She couldn’t be lying. She wouldn’t.

If only I could just know.

Maybe Karim knew.

My cell phone buzzed. I pushed the bottle of Jack away from me. Don’t be Skyla, I thought. It was Elizabeth. She said: Shaydeene’s not responding to me. I’m worried. I might go to her apartment and check on her. I responded: Don’t go driving around Hartford after dark. Elizabeth didn’t respond. There was something typical about her concern. A first year teacher growing too attached, wanting to save the day.

Elizabeth was better than me, though. All I could think was: Will I be blamed?
I didn’t want to think about myself anymore. I felt like I had no right to, considering the circumstances. So I drank a lot of Jack. I drank until my worries turned into a mossy, wordless stupor, and then I went to sleep.

2:00 AM. I woke up sweating. I’d dreamt of opening up Shaydeene’s book bag and finding a bottomless pit of arms, legs, tits, feet, torsos, necks. The shock of the dream wasn’t the gruesomeness; it was that I recognized all the body parts. I could identify a tattoo on an ankle or a mole on a wrist or an abnormally large areola. I knew what body each part belonged to, but I couldn’t remember the women’s names.

I showered to wash off the whiskey sweat, to try to forget the dream. I preferred incomprehensible dreams, and the obviousness of this one pissed me off. There was a part of my brain—a kind of inner altar boy—that wanted me to feel guilty about sleeping around, that wanted me to settle down and quit “using” women. I hated this part of my brain because it made me think less of women, because this inner altar boy believed that sleeping around was inherently disgusting and selfish and harmful, as if I was doing sex to women and not with them, as if my sex partners weren’t enjoying themselves, too.

And I was doubly pissed off because my mind had linked this stupid, reductive guilt to Shaydeene, and the two didn’t belong together.

I couldn’t get back to sleep.

A text message from Skyla: You awake?? I typed in response: Hey I think you and I ought to take a break from whatever it is we’re doing. But then I deleted the words. I couldn’t bear to give up easy ass. I just couldn’t. I ignored Skyla’s message. I always ignored her messages if I wasn’t in the mood to fuck her. She did the same to me.
3:30 AM. I gave up on sleeping, got dressed, and went to school. It was the earliest I’d ever entered the building. The only other people present were the night security guard and a hobo who slept in the foyer by the gym (a former student the guard turned a blind eye to).

Shaydeene’s book bag was the first thing I noticed in my classroom. It was sitting right on my desk. I stuffed the thing into an empty filing cabinet drawer, where I wouldn’t have to look at it. I tried to grade papers, but all I could do was wonder why I’d hidden the book bag. Hidden. I had nothing to hide. I took the bag out of the cabinet and placed it back on my desk, in plain sight.

I graded papers and grinded my teeth until my jaw ached. I found myself muttering curse words and tugging my own hair. I kept calling myself a piece of dog shit. I kept saying, “What the fuck are you even worried about?” I repeatedly muttered, “You couldn’t have fucking known.”

Finally I dropped my red pen and sat completely still. The only light in the room came from my desk lamp: a green cone. Reminded me of the lighting in movie interrogation scenes.

Here was what had me boiling: I’d let her leave. I hadn’t cared. I was apathetic. A girl had been assaulted, minutes before she came to my class—most likely—and I hadn’t noticed a thing. I remembered other female students behaving strangely: Yvonne, two years prior, quite randomly telling me to go fuck myself, demanding that I and everybody else in the room quit looking at her, even though nobody was really looking at her until she started making a seemingly unprompted scene; Sirimarie, that past spring, weeping uncontrollably for a whole week, refusing to explain what was wrong; Yackara, not two weeks earlier, looking as if somebody had flipped her light off, seeming drugged, afloat, sitting at her desk with her head
wobbling like a balloon in a weak breeze. What changed these girls? Were they like Shaydeene? Had something terrible just happened? A day earlier? A week earlier? Years earlier? Where did these odd behaviors come from?

More and more examples popped into my head. Girls acting out of character. Girls crying. Girls cursing. Girls shouting. Girls leaving the classroom. How common were these things? How often did this kind of violence happen right in our hallways? Were girls being dragged into dark corners and bathrooms every day? I didn’t know. This rape, somehow, seemed uncommon. Though I knew it couldn’t be. Still, the students never talked about crimes happening at school. Sometimes students wrote about assaults in their journal entries, but they were almost always from childhood. Nothing current, nothing local, nothing like what Shaydeene had reported. Maybe it was as simple as this: nobody wanted to be a snitch.

Shaydeene: she was the true anomaly. What happened to her might’ve been disturbingly common. But she was not common. She’d been through something terrible. Something I knew, from my limited experience with victims, sewed lips shut, forced people into silence, created dark channels of misguided blame and self-hatred. And even though Shaydeene might’ve been hating herself and blaming herself, she managed to immediately do what many would call the most difficult thing: she spoke.

* *

Morning light began to fill my classroom. My stomach whined. I decided to go to Dunkin Donuts for a bagel and coffee. On Farmington Ave the hobo was sitting on his bucket, shouting, “Please! Please! Please!” I didn’t feel like walking past him. I was afraid he’d recognize me and expect me to buy him another Boston cream donut. I didn’t care about the money. I just didn’t like the idea of this guy latching onto me, claiming me as a regular donut provider.
But did I owe him something? Should I have happily become his benefactor? I was draped in privileges this vagrant would never know—my education, my white skin, my warm bed, my paychecks, my food. But I didn’t think about that. Not really. A flicker of awareness—I am lucky; he is not—followed by a more brutal, animalistic thought: he seems dirty and unhealthy and a bit crazed, and I don’t want to deal with him this morning. I turned around and headed back toward school. Walking past this man wasn’t worth Dunkin Donuts. I could go elsewhere.

Still an hour before the faculty meeting. I left the city. I bought an egg sandwich at a diner in West Hartford—the suburb where I lived, not a ten minute drive from Hartford. I ate with my head down, surrounded by men in suits. They shared the newspaper and muttered pleasantries over their white mugs of coffee. These men were Hartford bound, too. They worked, no doubt, in the insurance industry. They lived in McMansions in the towns that ringed the city. They had healthy, brilliant children. Or so I imagined as I sat next to them, simultaneously repulsed by and jealous of the cushy, wealthy lives I assumed they lived. I recalled something Jackson once told the faculty: “Central Connecticut is like a glazed donut. You’ve got this circle of towns full of tasty stuff—big money—and in the middle you’ve got the donut hole, where there’s nothing to eat. That’s us. That’s Hartford. We’re the hole.”

*

People had gathered outside the project buildings across the street from school. They craned their necks and spoke into each other’s ears. They wore bathrobes, big sweatshirts, blankets. They folded their arms across their chests for warmth. Their breaths were visible in the cold October morning.
They were watching the spectacle. There were two news vans in front of the school. Students were being interviewed.

I got out of my car and walked through circles of gossiping kids. I overheard one question at least twenty times in a single minute: “What happened?” Through the throng I spotted Strawberry speaking into a long fluffy microphone. He used his hands to emphasize whatever point he was making: it looked like he was shaking an imaginary baby. I wanted to know what he was saying, but I didn’t want to get too close to the news van because I feared the reporter—a pudgy white lady in a royal blue track suit—would try to ask me questions I couldn’t answer.

It occurred to me that I could go back to my car and go home. I could arrange for a sub to cover my classes from my cell phone. There was just enough time.

But if I did that, I wouldn’t get to hear what everybody had to say about this newsworthy incident. I wouldn’t be privy to the gossip, and I wanted to know if the gossip involved my name. I wanted to know if any teachers were going to be implicated, and I’d already decided that if I were at fault—even if only slightly—I’d accept my punishment without appeal. I didn’t want to hide. Not out of some sense of righteousness, either. It simply seemed less torturous to know all the facts and repercussions—no matter how horrible—than to slink away and wonder.

A girl named Destiny tapped me on the shoulder. I’d taught her a year prior. The thick glaze of makeup on her cheeks and eyes shocked me. I hardly recognized her. She wore a Miami Dolphins Starter jacket; the juxtaposition of the faded old coat and her heavily made-up face struck me as crude and gaudy.

“Did something bad happen, Tru?” Destiny said.

“Yeah.”
“What was it?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

To fill the disappointed silence, I asked Destiny how she was doing. “Great!” she said, seeming to forget about the commotion around us. She told me about her quinceañera. She whipped out her cell phone and showed me a picture of her in a pink dress. I told her she looked like a grown woman; she laughed. Then she rambled about the party: how many guests she had, who she danced with, what kinds of dishes her grandmother had prepared. While she talked, I thought about this: if not for the media attention, there’d be no faculty meeting this morning; Jackson would’ve swept the assault under the rug.

“Destiny,” I said, cutting her off. “I have to run inside. It was great seeing you, though!”

“Bye,” she said, her voice going small with the realization that I was hardly listening.

I felt like an asshole, so I said: “I hope you’re having a good year. I miss having you in class!” A total lie. Destiny sucked in every way. She was a pencil throwing, whispering, laughing, argumentative ball of kinetic disrespect—and I cringed at the thought of teaching her again. Actually, I cringed at the thought of teaching most of my students again. Even the students I liked. Why? Because when I saw my students, I saw their needs. Destiny needed behavioral goals laminated and taped to her desk; she needed me to call home once a week, so her mom could know how she was doing. Strawberry needed me or one of his classmates to slowly reiterate every set of instructions, because he had trouble comprehending anything on the first go. I had one student, Julio, who needed a square drawn with masking tape on the floor around his desk, creating the illusion of a box he couldn’t exit without permission. Shaydeene needed books and lessons that were years and years ahead of the books and lessons I provided for her classmates. Karim needed manipulatives—puzzle-like lessons that required his physical
involvement—or else his mind wandered. Jayzelle needed visuals—PowerPoints, Prezis, etc. Ashlyn needed small group work. Ta’Cori needed rewards—stickers, candies, bookmarks—to keep her motivated. Rinor needed space to figure things out on his own. All these needs and there I was, the man in charge of the room, only meeting one need at a time, and thereby failing.

* 

The faculty took up the first three rows in the auditorium. I sat in an aisle seat, next to Elizabeth. Jackson introduced us to a Detective Spinelli, a greasy little Italian guy in a black suit. The man spoke quickly and coldly, and I had trouble following him. I felt nauseous. I only picked up select words and phrases. Responsible parties, three assailants, sexual in nature, the fourth boy, identify, come forward if you know anything, more common than people realize, gathering evidence, gang rape, assault, rape, the victim’s mother, assault, rape, gang, victim, rape kit, precautions, interviews, media, rape, victim, trauma, pressing charges, television. I had a very strong urge to hold Elizabeth’s hand, mostly because her impeccable posture seemed motherly and protective. I wanted the detective to shut up and stop making me think about Shaydeene in the hands of those boys. Those boys. Those fuckin’ boys. They hurt her while I was nearby, vaguely curious about why Shaydeene wasn’t in class, distributing verb conjugation quizzes, living peacefully and lazily and comfortably—and that was it, I was too comfortable and I wanted to be blamed. I wanted to stand up and say, It’s all my fault! I should’ve known she was in trouble! No, I knew she was in trouble! I knew it!

But I didn’t know. Somehow I wanted to be guiltier than I actually was.

The detective finished speaking, and Jackson took the floor.

*
Elizabeth’s route to Hartford was the same as mine: Teach for America. She showed up four months out of Duke University and heavily armed with TFA buzz words. She was prepared to “effect change” and “close the achievement gap” and “uphold high expectations.” During her first faculty meeting, she said the school board’s goal—34% proficient on the CAPT—was an insult to our students. Everybody outwardly agreed with her, but I could practically smell the condescension wafting off my colleagues: just wait, you privileged little shit, until you get to know “our” students. I recognized myself in Elizabeth’s naiveté. I, too, had once been drenched in idealism, and it was nice to have a new staff member that hadn’t yet started resenting the kids.

Because resentment was nearly unanimous among the faculty. Myself included. The students were low-performing and wild. Roughly half were spec. ed., and a third were English Language Learners. Functional illiteracy was the norm. The hallways were hot with anger. I lost count of how many times I wrestled a fighting kid to the ground and held him or her in a full nelson until help came. I’d been pushed against lockers. I’d had two laptops stolen. I once taught a class in which all of the students refused to call me anything but Mr. Tomato Face—the angrier I got, the redder my face, so the name was a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. During my first year a kid poured bleach in my coffee while I wasn’t looking, and thankfully a boy named Ramon shouted “Stop!” just before I took a sip. After the coffee-spiker was expelled, Ramon came to school with a face caked in bruises.

I assumed it was only a matter of time before the fucked-up fact of our school clobbered Elizabeth’s let’s-change-the-world-one-child-at-a-time mindset. I thought perhaps this Shaydeene incident would represent Elizabeth’s first step toward jadedness. But Elizabeth was all spine, and she showed up to the faculty meeting ready to fight for the girls we taught. That
impeccable posture of hers was no accident: she had shit to say and she was politely waiting for her opening.

* 

She got her opening from Cindy Yackel, a math teacher who was also our union representative. Jackson was talking about our responsibility to our students when Yackel raised her hand.

Before speaking, Yackel stood. She wore a yellow pantsuit. Her hair was a blonde helmet. She looked like Hillary Clinton, but fatter and with a nose that appeared to have had its tip lopped off. The woman cleared her throat and held eye contact with Jackson.

“Now,” she said, “I’d like to set the record straight. We are not and cannot be held responsible for acts of violence committed outside our classrooms…”

“I didn’t say anybody’d be held responsible, Cindy,” Jackson said, showing her the palm of his hand. “I was in the process of saying that, going forward…”

“Let me finish,” Yackel said.

Jackson’s smile was an avalanche of teeth. He hated Yackel.

“We must remember that,” Yackel continued, turning to the faculty, “after tragedies like what occurred on Monday—and it was a tragedy, there’s no doubt—administrators will often guilt faculty into doing more than they’re contracted to do. What we need to consider here…”

“We should do more,” Elizabeth said.

Every head turned toward Elizabeth—each face aging, white, suspicious.

Elizabeth stood. Her butt was six inches from my nose. I leaned forward in my chair and craned my neck so I was looking up at the side of her. She was a small, slight woman, but from this vantage point I might as well have been looking at a giant. She wore a black pencil skirt and
a teal, button-down blouse, and she smelled of some flower I couldn’t have named if my life depended upon it. Her pink cheeks glowed so brightly it seemed like a spotlight was hitting her. The blushing was the only way her nerves betrayed her. Her voice was strong and clear. I was simultaneously proud of and embarrassed for her. I admired her intentions but I wanted her to sit down and shut up. She was right, of course. But nobody wanted to hear her let’s-band-together crap.

“Here’s the thing,” Elizabeth said. “We all have one prep period per day. It’s sixty minutes. If we each dedicate a third of that time to hall duty, then…”

“And how,” Yackel said, “are we expected to prep during our prep period if we’re doing hall duty, Ms. Provanzano?”

“You wouldn’t even have to sacrifice the whole period, Ms. Yackel,” Elizabeth said. “And we’re talking about the children’s safety here. What happened on Monday wouldn’t have happened if we had faculty checking hall passes and keeping an eye on the…”

“I hate to be the one who has to enlighten you about this, but these things will happen,” Yackel said. “We cannot prevent them.”

I felt suddenly warmed, protected by Yackel, which angered me because I was on Elizabeth’s side. Or I wanted to be.

“Mr. Jackson,” Elizabeth said. “I would like to propose two things.”

An audible sigh from somewhere among the faculty.

“First is what I already mentioned—hall duty,” Elizabeth said. “Second, we need to have conversations with our students about sexual violence. And not just off-the-cuff, after-the-fact conversations. We need to formalize discussions geared toward understanding why girls get raped and how we can prevent this kind of thing from happening again. The reason…”
“I’m a math teacher,” Yackel said.

Elizabeth’s exhale was practically an expletive, but she managed a smile.

Yackel continued: “Don, you teach physics. Ella, art. I’m not here to counsel students about trauma… I’m not trained to do that kind of work and I’m certainly not *contracted* to do that kind of work. Neither are you, Ms. Provenzano. Neither is anybody else in this room. Besides Mr. Janakowski. He’s our social worker. He’s prepared…”

Elizabeth said, “So you mean to tell me…”

“I mean to tell you, Ms. Pro,” Yackel said, “that we are educators first and foremost. We are *already* overworked. Most of us are *already* doing more work than we’re contracted to do. I simply want to caution against…”

“Who *cares* what we’re contracted to do?” Elizabeth said.

She nearly shouted the question, and I loved it. Elizabeth, thirty years younger than Yackel, seemed so insolent and disrespectful and absolutely right. It was like when a student tells a teacher what’s what, and the teacher can only bow his head and try better next time.

The whole auditorium fell into a screaming silence. Everybody hated Elizabeth. They’d make fun of her in the coming weeks. They’d call her Hilary Swank and Michelle Pfeiffer behind her back. They’d call her White Man’s Burden. But they’d be doing hall duty. Most of them, anyway.

“Why don’t you two take a seat,” Jackson said. “I have some ideas that might help us find a happy in-between.”

*
Shaydeene’s name was in every mouth. The hallways seemed full of her. Between classes, as kids moved in jabbering cliques, I listened. It felt as if my ears stood higher on my head. I felt physically pulled toward the pockets of conversation involving the rape.

“You know, Shaydeene. That smart bitch.”

“I talked to Dominique. He say she was down. He say she was *always* down.”

“Shaydeene, shoot. She’ll suck anybody off.”

“They ran the train on that THOT.”

“She just snitched on herself because she embarrassed about being a ho.”

At one point I spotted Destiny—still wearing her Dolphins jacket, because the hallways were cold—walking alongside Mercedez, another former student of mine. The girls’ shoulders were touching. They seemed conjoined. I overheard Destiny say, “That’s not what Dom said.”

“Destiny, Mercedez,” I said.

“What up, Tru?” said Mercedez.

“Come here.”

They approached, exchanging glances. They were smiling and excited because they sensed that I wanted them to confide in me.

“Are you talking about what happened with Shaydeene?” I said.

“Who’s that?” Mercedez said.

I was appalled that they were talking about the incident but didn’t know Shaydeene’s name. I lowered my voice.

“The girl who got jumped by those boys. The one the news people wanted to know about.”

“Everybody say she’s lying,” Destiny said.

“Why?” I said.

“Because Dom’s brother posted what happened on Facebook,” Mercedez said. “He said they went down to the boys’ room by the auditorium and Shaydeene was, like, down. And they did what they did. And only after it happened she started to get all emotional or whatever.”

“Do you believe that?” I said.

“I don’t know,” both girls said.

The next student I asked was Strawberry. It was my prep period, and I was sitting at my desk creating a PowerPoint. Strawberry opened the classroom door, leaned on it, and asked if we had a vocab quiz that afternoon. I reminded him that the vocab quiz wasn’t until Friday, and then I asked him if he’d heard from Shaydeene.

“No,” he said. “She won’t answer my texts.” He adjusted his purse and stood up straight, holding the door open with his foot. He squinted at me. “Why?” he said.

“I’m just worried about her,” I said.

Strawberry stopped squinting, but I could still feel his skepticism. Somehow he was the adult and I was the child.

“She deleted her Facebook and Instagram,” he said.

“Why?” I said.

“Probably because people was giving her shit,” he said. “For snitching.”

“Oh.”

I had questions. What were they saying to her? Was she responding to them? Who was giving her shit?
But I didn’t ask. I didn’t like the way Strawberry was looking at me. He seemed to know I felt guilty.

*

After the morning meeting, Elizabeth sent around an email with a hall duty sign-up sheet attached. Roughly half the faculty signed on. They hated it. But it was the right thing to do. Any idiot could see that. Jackson sent a follow-up email urging people to voluntarily participate. Then Yackel sent a note saying that nobody should feel pressured to do anything they weren’t contracted to do. People felt pressured, though. Jackson must’ve loved Elizabeth. She didn’t give a damn about being liked.

I did hall duty for the last twenty minutes of my prep period. I stood in a corner looking at my cell phone. Mostly I thumbed through photographs of women and felt vaguely disgusted with myself for still wanting sex despite all the rape talk in the hallways. Whenever a student walked by, I asked for a hall pass.

Then Karim Dickson turned the corner. He had his tie draped over his shoulders and he carried a belt by its buckle, the length of the thing dragging behind him like a whip. His shirt was untucked. He was smiling.

“Where you heading?” I said.

“I gotta poop, Tru,” he said.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

“What’s with your uniform?” I said.

“I was in gym,” he said. “Everybody was getting changed back into they uniforms but I had to poop so I left.”

“Why didn’t you just go in the locker room?” I said.
He stopped walking and looked at me severely.

“I can’t do it with all them people around,” he said.

I nodded, and then I wondered if Karim hadn’t joined in the gang rape because he couldn’t do it with other boys around. Perhaps that was why he just watched.

“I’m assuming you don’t have a hall pass,” I said.

He only smirked and squirmed and pointed at his butt.

“Alright alright,” I said.

He went to the nearest boys’ room, his belt following him.

The boys’ bathroom. Not the one Karim just entered, but the one by the auditorium. That was where it happened, according to Destiny and Mercedez. My phone told me I had seven minutes left in my hall duty, so I made for the auditorium. I wasn’t sure why exactly I wanted to go to the scene of the crime, but I did.

It was the first time I’d ever entered a student restroom. I was shocked to find that the mirror wasn’t even a mirror. It was just this shiny rectangle made of something that resembled tin. I saw only a vague, wobbly shape of myself. Where there should’ve been faucet heads, there were rusted screws. I couldn’t figure out how to make the water run. In the toilet a huge coiled shit floated unflushed. The stall door hung on by one hinge. As I looked at the filthy toilet, it was like when somebody says not to think of a pink elephant, and bam, all you see are pink elephants. I saw Shaydeene getting raped by a line of laughing boys. I imagined they’d trapped her in the stall, and Karim stood where I was standing. Near the broken faucets, watching, considering joining, saying nothing, letting it happen, deciding not to join, letting it happen, wondering if perhaps he should get his friends to stop, choosing not to, letting it happen. I
imagined a soldier at some war, queued up, waiting his turn, thinking about his kid sisters back home.

Of course I had no idea how the rape played out.

I realized, then, that the word “rape” had a kind of euphemistic quality to it. At least for me. Sure it was a terrible word, but it somehow masked the specific, sweaty brutality of what really went down. It served as a catchall for a lot of different kinds of violence. Every rape was unique, horrific, and a thousand times worse than the word. There were so many possibilities that existed inside the wide net cast by the term, and standing there in the bathroom I couldn’t stop thinking about those possibilities. Some rapes involved punching and mouth-covering and name calling. Most rapes involved the pulling down of pants, the tearing of clothes. Some rapes involved a fistfight. Some involved kicking and screaming. Others involved silence. Some rapes involved poison and others involved terrifying, intimidating teamwork. Some involved high fives and laughter. Others involved a firm hand on the back of the victim’s neck, a mouth whispering close to an ear. Most involved entrapment and surprise, coercion and manipulation. The vast majority involved friendship, as I imagined Shaydeene’s had.

A little Puerto Rican kid entered the bathroom. He had a freshman’s baby face.

“What’re you doing here, Tru?”

Every kid knew my name, even those who weren’t my students.

“Do you have a hall pass?” I said.

“No,” the boy said.

“Where are you supposed to be?”

“Math.”

“Why didn’t you get a hall pass?”
“I just left because I had to pee.”

“Who’s your teacher?”

“Viani. She don’t care.”

I ought to have gotten the kid’s name and reported him to the behavior technician, but I just told him to have a nice day. He seemed harmless, and I was too upset to play the authoritarian. I left the bathroom and got ready to teach.

* *

Seventh period. Shaydeene was absent. Karim wasn’t. He sat in the front row, his long legs reaching almost to the wall underneath the white board. I gave the kids a writing prompt, and then Mrs. Johnson, a retired librarian who worked part-time as an aid, came to cover my class. I had to go to the main office for a meeting about a spec. ed. student’s Independent Education Plan. The meeting couldn’t have lasted more than ten minutes.

When I returned to my room, nobody was working on the writing prompt. Instead, everybody was laughing. Mrs. Johnson sat at my desk, reading People. The moment she saw me, she got up and left the room. “Have a nice day,” she muttered, avoiding eye contact with me.

The cause of the commotion: Karim Dickson. He was in the front of the room, playing tinny reggaeton from his cell phone’s speaker, and twerking. He’d hiked up his pants so they were alarmingly tight. He smiled at me and said, “Fee fi fo fum.” Then he grabbed the white board’s sill, bent over further, and wobbled his butt. A girl shrieked. The kids were in hysterics.

“That’s enough,” I said, so weakly that nothing in the room changed. My head got hot and my neck began to sweat. My usual move during student outbursts was to wax calm, to speak quietly and directly.
But something about Karim’s body—its length, its inherent confidence—sent blood rushing to my arms and legs and head.

_He was there._

_He could’ve helped her._

I walked until I was not six inches from Karim, flanking his left side. My proximity caused him to slowly bring his ass to a halt. He stood up straight. He smelled like the paper casing of crayon. The musk was so pungent I crinkled my nose.

“I ain’t giving you my phone,” Karim said.

“I don’t want your phone,” I said.

Karim backed away from me. The boy was 6’6’, three inches taller than me, but he was rail thin, and I decided that I could take him if it came to it.

“Turn the music off and sit down,” I said.

“You sure you don’t wanna dance with me?” Karim said.

“I said sit down or I will sit you down.”

The classroom went silent. The music kept going.

“You can’t touch me,” Karim said.

“I can if you touch me first,” I said.

“I ain’t gonna touch you first.”

“Who’s gonna know?”

“Everybody in this room.”

“There aren’t any snitches in this room, Karim. They aren’t going to see a thing. They all know that what’s going on here is between you and me and nobody else, and they won’t run their mouths about something that’s not their business.” I took a step closer to the boy. My head felt as
if it were floating high above my body, detached. I was happy to see that Karim’s eyes moved left and right, searching for an out. He was surprised, and for good reason. I never acted this way.

“You bluffing,” Karim said, but he was worried.

I loved that he was worried.

“Take your seat,” I said, unbuttoning my right cuff, realizing, while rolling up my sleeve, that this was the perfect act of aggression.

Karim turned off his music.

“Man, Tru,” he said. “Chill.”

“You chill. Take a seat.” I had to scowl to keep myself from crying.

I sensed that I was more upset than I ought to have been, but I couldn’t do anything about it. My ears burned.

Karim danced a spin move and melted into his front row chair. Strawberry liked this, and he laughed. None of the kids were on my side. For a moment I recalled the floating turd in the boys’ bathroom and felt a wave of disgust take me from head to toe.

I rolled up my second shirtsleeve as slowly as possible because it gave me something to do. My students’ focus—something I usually had to fight for—was absolute. I was clearly upset, and the kids loved it.

Then Karim pressed his forearm to his mouth and made a wet fart sound.

“Daaaaamn, Tru,” he said.

Laughter.

“At least go to the bathroom,” Karim said.

More laughter.
Karim made another fart sound.

“You nasty, mister,” Karim said.

I didn’t want to reprimand the boy. I didn’t want to send him out of the classroom. I wanted, more than anything, to hurt his feelings. I wanted him to feel bad about being himself.

I clapped my hands together one time and then showed the class my wingspan.

“I can see into your futures!” I said.

I didn’t know where I was going next. But then I suddenly did.

“More specifically,” I continued, “I can see into Karim’s future. Here’s what I see, Karim. This is you.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out a handful of change. Then I assumed the hunched posture of a crack head and hobbled across the front of the classroom, jingling the change in my loose fist.

“That ain’t right, mister,” Strawberry said.

I smiled at Strawberry, approached him, and said, “Can ya spot me a dolla?”

He folded his arms across his chest and looked at me with mustached, motherly disapproval.

“Listen,” I said, placing the change on Karim’s desk, standing up straight, reassuming my own voice. “You think it’s fun to shake your ass and make everybody laugh? You enjoy that? I can see why you would, Karim. Hell, I know it’s fun. You think I don’t know school is boring? You think I don’t know it feels good to get all that attention? And the rest of you, you think I don’t know how exciting it is when somebody ruins class? When you can stop doing your writing prompt and just screw around? Trust me. I get it. I’ve been there. But here’s the thing: every morning I get here at six and I park my car in the school lot and before I enter the building I walk down to Farmington Avenue and get breakfast at Dunkin Donuts, and every day on my
walk I see crack heads and homeless men and women. They ask me for money, and you know what, a lot of times I give them money, because I’ve got it. But do you know what I’m thinking when I’m giving them money. I’m thinking: God, these people look just like my students.”

I smiled and felt strange because there was nothing to smile about. I quelled an urge to laugh. Every student was contemplating his or her lap. Even Karim. Especially Karim. The kid looked like he’d been slapped. His feelings were hurt, just like I’d hoped. I couldn’t believe it. I thought he’d bite back. I thought he’d stay tough. I didn’t think he’d let me squash him so easily. But he did. He had nothing to say. I confronted only silence. The silence heightened my anger.

“Here’s a fact,” I said. “Someday when I’m walking to get my breakfast, some of you are going to be asking me for change. This is not a maybe. This is a truth. It could be you, Karim. Or maybe it’ll be you.” I pointed at Strawberry. Then I aimed my finger at another student, and another, all the while saying, “Or you. Or you. Or you.” I clapped my hands together. A few students flinched, but nobody looked up. “I know you think it’s all a joke. And hell it might feel like it’s all a joke. What does English or Biology or Social Studies matter? What does reading books matter? You know your options: jail, gang, food stamps. Why not make a joke of class? Why not, Karim? Why not shake your butt up in front of the room like you’re a stripper?”

Somebody laughed an abrupt, uncomfortable laugh. A pencil fell on the floor.

I was being a typical Hartford teacher, snapping and berating the kids. They heard this kind of thing often. Still, I felt compelled to continue. I wanted to get a rise out of Karim. I wanted to shout, Is this all a fucking joke to you? Why didn’t you do something? Why did you let it happen?

“Here’s another fact,” I said. “You all can’t read. If going to jail or being poor for the rest of your life scares you, you ought to stop taking this school thing as a joke, because if you can
read and think, if you can take notes and actually understand and remember what you write down, you might have the wherewithal—that means ability—to get the hell out of the projects. I know you’ve heard this before but I’m telling you again. And this isn’t like when you were in elementary school, because now you’re very, very close to having to fend for yourselves out there. What you do over the next three years matters. It’s your last chance. Most of you will end up in the gutter if you don’t decide to take this seriously. So when Karim gets up here trying to ruin your education, don’t laugh with him. Tell him to sit down. Tell him you’re here to learn. Tell him you don’t want to be begging Mr. Tru when he goes to the Dunkin Donuts in the morning. Tell him. Maybe he’ll stop being an idiot and he’ll listen. Because the more you keep up the bullshit, the dumber you’re gonna end up, Karim. And that goes for the rest of you, too. Because eventually—I’m warning you, because I’ve seen it happen with a lot of teachers—if you keep this crap up, I’m going to give up. Eventually I’m going to realize that I get a paycheck whether you all learn or not. I’m going to think: fuck these kids. Pardon my French. I’m sick of biting my tongue because it hurts. And right now I’m pissed off because a young man is making a joke of my classroom. I am not okay with that. Karim, if you don’t want to do anything but screw around in school, do me a favor: skip my class. You’re distracting your peers and you’re annoying me. You’re messing up everybody’s education. So don’t come. Go elsewhere. Leave the building. See what you can find on the street.”

By this point, Karim had his head down on his desk. He seemed asleep, though I knew he wasn’t. He stayed that way for the remainder of the period. My students followed every instruction I gave. The room was somber and I kept telling myself not to feel bad about it. After class, as the students were exiting the room, Karim spat in the garbage can and stared at me with
dead eyes. I couldn’t match his gaze. I pretended to be absorbed in erasing the notes I’d written on the white board during class.

He left my loose change on his desk.

*

I knew from Karim’s journal entries that his father was a non-entity and his mother died when he was ten. Something drug related. I didn’t know the exact causes. He lived with his older sister, Antoinette, whose phone number I found on a survey Karim filled out on the first day of school. That night, I called Antoinette five times. She never answered. Her voicemail was full, so I couldn’t leave a message. I found myself grinding my teeth while waiting for her to pick up the phone. I wanted to set up a meeting with this Antoinette. I wanted to discuss her brother’s ridiculous behavior. What I really wanted was to indict the kid. How? I wasn’t sure. But I knew why: he was the boy who chose not to help Shaydeene. I knew it. Just like I knew Shaydeene was the girl. I was certain.

*

I watched the news, waiting to see the next story about the gang rape, waiting to watch Strawberry’s interview. But one story took up the whole news hour. And that story was Hurricane S——, which had devastated part of Jamaica, nipped an edge of Cuba, and quickly swirled up the east coast. A Super Storm, they called it. Apparently the Jersey Shore was about to get hit. Then New York. Then Connecticut.

*

11 PM. I was in bed and thinking about the first day of school when I asked the kids to write about where they saw themselves in five years; Karim wrote, *In 5 years I will be in the bin.*
My phone buzzed. I considered ignoring it—probably Skyla or some other woman I’d regret losing sleep to. But then I thought perhaps it was Antoinette getting back to me.

I grabbed the phone.

It was Elizabeth. A text message: *I’m upset.* I responded, *What is it?* She said, *Nothing.*

The wind made my bedroom window rattle. Hurricane S——wasn’t supposed to hit Connecticut until 3:00 AM, so these howling, snarling gusts must’ve only been the opening act. A branch snapped.

*Do you need company?* I said to Elizabeth.

I winced after I sent the message. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea. Up until this point, I’d been actively avoiding flirtation with Elizabeth, though I knew she was interested: she had a habit of laughing strangely hard if I made a joke; at work happy hours, after a few drinks, she’d lean close, let her fingers linger on my wrist longer than necessary. I found her attractive, but I didn’t want the drama. I liked keeping my sex life separate from school, and Elizabeth and I had a nice, platonic groove going. Fucking would’ve destroyed our professional rapport. And now she was upset. Which could’ve meant anything. I imagined a late night trip to her house might involve hugging, which might lead to kissing, which might lead to a sex partner right across the hall, every single day, *at work.* I didn’t want to deal with that, not really. But I also kind of did. I was growing sick of sleeping with people I met drunk on dance floors, people I didn’t even know.

Plus, I was tired of silently obsessing over the assault. Perhaps Elizabeth would want to talk about it, and I liked the idea of talking about it, since it was all I could think about.

*It’s so late,* Elizabeth said.

*I don’t mind,* I said. *I can’t sleep anyway.*
Are you sure?

Yes.

Okay.

* Elizabeth lived in Manchester, a suburb on the other side of Hartford. I had to take the interstate through the city to get there. The whole ride it felt like the wind was going to blow my car off the road. I knew Elizabeth and I were bound to hook up. If not tonight, then soon. And I felt an inkling of disdain for her and for myself. My whole life, any woman who liked me seemed flawed because she liked me. I operated under the assumption that everybody who knew me could see that I was an unclever, uninteresting, unintelligent, unattractive pervert—I had no evidence to support this assumption, but it existed inside me, deeply engrained. And so I assumed that a woman who couldn’t see me for the idiotic scumbag I was must’ve been blind.

But Elizabeth wasn’t blind. To her, here was what I looked like. I was, from an objective standpoint, one of the most effective teachers in our school. I pumped absurd amounts of time and energy and care into my work, and it showed. The kids all complained about how hard my class was, but they complained in the way you complain about a strict parent you know loves you. Even the most jaded, older faculty members respected me, since I’d kept my head down and proved myself consistently for four years running. Elizabeth didn’t see any of my stress or dissatisfaction or desire, since all of that existed beneath the thick glaze of a persona called Mr. Tru.

Still, I took that persona for granted. I saw only the dirty, needy, angry, frustrated sides of myself. I was a drunk. I was a user of younger women who were addicted to partying. I often hated my job. Some days when I was at school late, working into the night, I felt what I can only
call absolute resentment for my students: they couldn’t read and they couldn’t write; they couldn’t sit still and they couldn’t listen; they couldn’t they couldn’t they couldn’t; they were a gigantic couldn’t I was trying to turn into a could, and I was bound to fail. So what if last year I got 42% of my students to score proficient on the state test? Did anybody else not see the glaring 58% not proficient? Did Elizabeth see this obvious failure? Did she see that I was hungover a few days a week? Did she see that I was addicted to my cell phone, constantly sniffing my way toward easy, meaningless sex? Of course not. How could she? 42% more than doubled the success rate of the other tenth grade English teacher. I managed my hangovers with a quiet scowl. I was easy to talk to and I did my job well. My head seemed level. My heart seemed to be in the right place.

Elizabeth answered her door in baggy gray sweatpants and a huge Duke Football tee shirt. She was red in the eyes and stank of alcohol. A teddy bear dangled upside down from her right hand. If there’s anything that tells you you’re not here to fuck, it’s a teddy bear—I felt half relieved, half letdown. Her hair, usually falling to her shoulders in brown waves, was in a loose pony tail. Random frizz circled her head. “Hi,” I said. Elizabeth turned around and walked away. I closed the door and followed her into a small living room, where she sat on a black love seat, buried the teddy bear in her belly, and curled up inside a red and white checkered quilt. The room was impeccably decorated. An L-shaped leather couch surrounded a glass coffee table; photographs of elephants and cheetahs and wildebeest adorned the walls. Next to the loveseat was a lamp that looked like a glowing, burlap basket hanging from an upside down letter J. The flat screen television, off, resembled a picture frame containing only reflective black. I saw
myself in the screen, mannequin-like, featureless—I moved my arm, to confirm the image was me. It moved. I wished I’d stayed home; I was very tired.

On the coffee table: a half-gone bottle of Svedka rested on a copy of *Cosmopolitan*.

I removed my jacket and sat in the corner of the L-shaped couch. I yawned and glanced down the hallway and into the bedroom, where, next to the nightstand, I spotted Shaydeene Williams’ book bag.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

Elizabeth sniffled and shrugged. I stared at her bare toes; it was the first time I’d ever seen them. The nails—painted sky blue—had an almost unnatural curvature. Her feet disappeared inside the quilt like they knew they were being watched.

Whenever I was upset, I hated when people pestered me to talk about it, and I hated when people tried to talk about light subjects in an effort to lighten my mood, and I hated when people told me jokes to try to get me to laugh, and I hated when people told me serious anecdotes from their lives in order to make me feel less alone in my pain, and I hated when people spoke or existed near me, and I hated when people weren’t near because I knew I needed somebody near me even though I’d resent their nearness, and I hated myself for existing inside this paradox, for wanting somebody to save me and hating everybody who tried, and I wasn’t sure if Elizabeth was like me when she was upset, so I said nothing. I just sat there in that weird silence. Once Elizabeth realized I wasn’t going to ask questions or perform for her, she bawled for about ten minutes. There was a tissue box on a side-table. I snagged a tissue and handed it to her. I stared at the vodka and waited for something to happen. I wanted to know why Elizabeth had Shaydeene’s book bag.

“I’m a very stupid person,” Elizabeth said.
“That’s not true,” I said.

She cried more.

The book bag had been on my desk all day. Even after school, while I prepared lessons for the next morning, the bag was there. I tried to recall if I’d seen the bag when I was locking up my classroom. I thought I saw it…

The wind howled—I imagined it moving in aggressive streams. The walls quaked. The Hurricane was in New York City now. I wondered what kind of damage it was doing. I pictured it wreaking havoc in Hartford, flooding the Connecticut River, tearing down houses and schools. I decided I wouldn’t stay long. I would get home before the storm really hit.

Elizabeth took a deep breath.

“I went to the North End today,” she said.

“How come?” I said.

“To bring Shaydeene something…”

“Her bag?”

Elizabeth’s eyes quickly found mine; she looked as if I’d accused her of something. A smattering of pink blotches covered her face.

“I noticed it missing from my desk,” I lied.

Elizabeth used a balled up tissue to dab snot from her lip.

“I went into your room when Miguel was mopping,” she said. “You weren’t in there. I just took it.”

“And Miguel let you take my shit,” I said, trying to smile.

“He’ll do anything for me.”

We both laughed. It was terrible forced laughter.
“Did you give Shaydeene the bag?” I said—so she wouldn’t know I’d already surreptitiously looked into her bedroom.

“No,” she said. “I went to the address listed for Shaydeene in the attendance system and…”

“I should’ve told you,” I said. “All those addresses, they’re old. Defunct. A lot of these kids move around constantly.”

“I know. Well, now I know. I went to the apartment and some fucking drunk guy answered the door.”

She pulled the teddy bear out from underneath the quilt and threw it against the wall. The toy fell to the floor, bounced around a little, and landed sitting up straight. It stared at me with its plastic eyes. I really didn’t like that Elizabeth had a teddy bear. It highlighted her youth—twenty-two. It made her seem too similar to the college-aged women I slept with. Clinging to objects of childhood. Thinking stupid things were cute.

“And then what happened?” I said.

“Nothing. I left.”

She scratched her eye with her shoulder.

“Well, where did you go after that?” I said.

“Here.”

“What did you do here?”

She pointed at the bottle of vodka.

I was about to ask why. But if somebody asked me why I drank, I would’ve wanted to punch them in the nose. I kept my mouth shut.

“Shaydeene’s not coming back to school,” Elizabeth said.
“What do you mean?” I said. “Did she tell you that?”

“No her phone is off. Or she won’t respond to me. I don’t know. But I talked to Jackson. This afternoon. Before I took the bag. He said she officially transferred to High School, Inc., downtown.”

“Jesus.”

Relief. I couldn’t subdue it. My limbs relaxed. Immediate, full-body relief. I kept my face neutral and silently admonished myself for the pleasant feeling. But I was happy: I wouldn’t have to face Shaydeene again. I could keep on doing my job the way I’d always done it. There would be no ramifications. The guilt would fade. Nothing was my fault. Still, after this feeling of relief, a surge of the obvious washed over me: a young girl had been raped, and I was glad I wouldn’t have to see her anymore.

Elizabeth got up and sat next to me on the couch. She kept the blanket wrapped around her. She put her head on my shoulder. I didn’t like this. The intimacy felt too abrupt, too unearned. It was because she was drunk and I wasn’t.

She wrapped one hand around my bicep. Her fingers were frigid.

“You have terrible circulation,” I said.

She laughed.

I laughed too hard. It was difficult to act natural.

My left leg shook. I couldn’t sit still. I grinded my teeth until I could hear them squeaking. Every inch of my body seemed to be operating under a feeling of revulsion. Did I believe, on some level, that Shaydeene had been tainted? Was that why I was glad I wouldn’t have to see her? Was that feeling of relief the part of me—as of yet dormant—that wanted to blame her for what happened?
Fuck. No. That was not the kind of man I was.

Or maybe that was exactly the kind of man I was. Maybe I subconsciously believed the girl was at fault.

I wanted to scream.

“Mind if I have a sip of that?” I said, gesturing toward the Svedka.

Elizabeth shook her head no, which created the effect of nestling.

I stood up. Elizabeth tipped onto her side, her body so tightly wrapped in the quilt it looked like she was inside a checkered bag.

“What have you been drinking this with?” I said.

“There’s orange juice and Coke in the fridge,” she said.

I carried the Svedka to the kitchenette and removed a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator. I made a screwdriver that was four-fifths vodka. I really only added the orange juice for the color. I stood in the kitchenette drinking with my back to Elizabeth. The silver toaster showed a warped reflection: a fleshy, human-shaped thing lifting a glass of yellow to its head, over and over again. The storm outside got louder. I heard no rain. Only screaming darts of wind. I told myself to leave soon, before the hurricane really hit, before things got bad outside. I wondered what that Farmington Avenue hobo was up to. Perhaps he was dancing in the wind, arms spread, smiling at the heavens. Perhaps he’d built himself a little caulk house. Perhaps he was dead. No, that guy wouldn’t die from a simple windstorm. He’d been begging for a long time, and you could see a primitive resiliency in his eyes. He knew how to stay alive. He’s immortal, I thought. Then I laughed, quietly, to myself. How stupid.

I’d finished my drink, so I poured another. This time I headed back to the couch. Elizabeth was sitting up, staring at me.
“You drank that fast,” she said.

The quilt had fallen off her. She wore no bra. Beneath the D in Duke, I saw the shape of her nipple.

I sat down, put my arm around her. She rested her head on my shoulder. I asked her if she wanted more to drink. She shook her head no. For a second, glimpsing her nipple, I forgot about how distraught she was, and I only wanted to fuck. Then it occurred to me that I had zero understanding of why she was so upset. Sure the Shaydeene thing was disastrous and horrible. But Elizabeth had nothing to do with it, and she seemed so personally affected. She was beyond concerned or worried or sad. Something else was wrong with her. Something I didn’t know about.

I scratched her lower back and she whimpered faintly: she liked my hands on her. I repositioned myself on the couch so I was on my back, and Elizabeth crawled onto me, resting her head on my chest. We lay there together for a few minutes, silently. I drank my drink with my left hand and continued stroking her lower back with my right. I got hard. I leaned toward her so she could feel my cock on her inner thigh. She held onto me tightly, but she didn’t move. I sniffed the top of her head and enjoyed her coconut shampoo. I lifted her shirt so I was scratching her naked lower back. She tightened her hold on me. She squeezed. I put my empty glass on the coffee table and grabbed her ass. It was a good handful.

I put my fingers beneath her chin and lifted her face for a kiss.

Something was wrong. Her head neither resisted my hand nor excitedly moved with it. Her head was dead weight. Elizabeth was asleep.

Fuck.

Of course she was.
I got angry at Elizabeth for passing out and then I got angry at myself for getting angry at her and then I got angry at my erection for existing.

I drank the rest of my screwdriver, got up, walked to the kitchen, and took two pulls from the bottle. I went into the living room and grabbed my jacket. I put it on and zipped it up. Elizabeth was snoring. She slept on her stomach, legs splayed, arms above her head. Her body reminded me of a chalk outline on the street. Should I wake her up to tell her I was leaving? Should I carry her to bed? No. That would’ve been ridiculous. She could get herself to bed.

I decided I should nudge her and whisper goodbye, just so she wouldn’t be surprised I was gone. I squatted to get close to her face. Sensing this, perhaps, she murmured and coiled up into the fetal position. Her shirt rode up and her sweatpants sunk a little lower than her waist. That was when I saw two long lacerations on her hip. They were fairly fresh. Not yet scabbed. Shiny, red. “Hey,” I said. She didn’t respond. I touched her shoulder. Shook her. Nothing.

“Elizabeth?” “No,” she said. She covered her head with her arms. “I’m leaving,” I said. She didn’t say a thing. “I’m going to go now,” I said. She nodded into her arms, signaling that she heard me but didn’t have the energy to say anything. I looked at her hip. I touched right above the cuts with my index finger. “What’s this?” I said. Elizabeth froze. Her breathing snapped out of its comfortable sleeping rhythm. She kept her face covered, remained fetal.

“Elizabeth,” I said.

“Drive safely,” she said.

* 

I nearly sideswiped a tractor trailer as I was merging onto Interstate 84. The truck honked loudly. I slammed the breaks and hit the steering wheel with the heel of my hand. I didn’t even see the truck coming. I had tunnel vision and I was too busy thinking about Elizabeth’s injured
hip. Had she harmed herself as a result of Shaydeene’s assault? That didn’t make sense to me. Perhaps it was a habit of Elizabeth’s, a coping mechanism. Perhaps she used this external violence as a way to distract herself from some internal violence I knew nothing about.

Wind pummeled the sides of my car, creating perpetual instability. No rain fell. I got into the right lane and drove slowly. I was afraid of getting a DUI.

It was 1:15 AM. I choked the steering wheel. Through the windshield, the Hartford skyline grew taller and wider. On top of the skyscrapers: emblems for Prudential, Met Life, Aetna, The Hartford. The city’s one claim to fame: insurance. How much money did this industry generate in Hartford? How much of that money did Hartford inhabitants see? None. Not a cent. Did I even really know that? Of course not. I didn’t know shit about how the insurance industry interacted with Hartford residents, so who the hell was I to sit here thinking judgy fucking thoughts about these buildings that somehow represented inequality…

My engine roared. I was driving 80. I had no idea how that happened.

I hit the brakes, slowed to sixty, slapped myself in the face twice and looked from the road to the speedometer to the road again. “You’re fine,” I said. “Pay attention.” It was just me and a few unlucky truckers on the road. Everybody else was smart enough to batten down the hatches and hole up for the storm. With the highway this empty, I could pass through Hartford in five minutes, tops. But as I drove by exit 46—Sisson Ave, which would take me to school—I hit my blinker and entered the city. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I said.

But I didn’t want to go home. I was drunk and I needed something. What? I had no idea. Stuck in transit, I could be nothing besides in-between. I liked that. I figured I’d drive until this unnamable desire defined itself or dissipated. Plus, if I went home, I’d have gotten horny and texted Skyla. I’d have walked down the hall to her place and fucked her and ever since I left
Elizabeth’s the thought of fucking seemed vile and animal and evil, and I resented my body for
still wanting to do it. I didn’t know if Elizabeth would remember the way I’d grabbed her and
rubbed against her while she was asleep. I didn’t know if I’d done something wrong. Perhaps she
just wanted to be held. Perhaps she thought that was all that was happening.

I hung a right down Sisson Avenue and drove by Clemens’ Place, low-income apartments
where a lot of my students lived. The building looked asleep. A homeless man teetered along the
sidewalk. He was so small. I imagined the wind lifting him up and tossing him around like an
empty plastic bag.

I turned onto Farmington Avenue. Up ahead, near the Dunkin Donuts, a tree had fallen
across the road. The wind was kicking even harder than I thought. I hung a left onto Sigourney
Street. I drove by multiple churches and rows and rows of old, decaying houses. They were two
stories high and the color of Easter eggs left out to rot. These houses called to mind an ancient,
deceased Hartford, a Hartford where Mark Twain lived and worked, a Hartford that was
America’s wealthiest city. Small banners were attached to the tops of telephone poles. One read:
BEAUTY! HARTFORD HAS IT! Another: ARTS! HARTFORD HAS IT!

I was overcome by a sense of absolute meaninglessness: I, like all of my students, was
nothing but a product. I was who I was because of circumstance. I drove down this sleeping
street, drunk, in the middle of a soon-to-be hurricane, because I’d been programmed to do so. By
what? Power structures I couldn’t hope to understand. For years I’d been revolting against this
kind of thinking, which had been ingrained in me by my liberal arts education. It was too
depressing: everything and everybody was explainable, resultant—and therefore choiceless. I
didn’t want to live inside a socially-constructed box, but of course that was exactly where I lived.
I was a teacher, after all. Every day, I told people what to do. I was an agent of the power
structure. A cog. Power structure? What exactly did I mean by that? I wasn’t sure, not in any specific sense. But I knew some nebulous, all-controlling force existed. I was who I was because the Gods of Chance had made me so.

Still, I wanted there to exist some wiggle room, some space for true individuality, some nook for self. But there wasn’t. I knew it. I couldn’t fight the feeling. My fate was preordained. I acted in accordance with what genetics and experience had pumped into me. My decisions were consequences and nothing more. And the same was true for everybody. Elizabeth, Karim, Shaydeene. My recent obsession with Shaydeene’s assault had a hugely irrational element to it. I was trying to connect myself to the assault more than necessary. I knew this, and it contributed to the sense of meaninglessness: I obsessed over the assault because something in me told me to do so, something I had no control over. What something? Why was I drawn to this violence? Simply because violence was compelling? Maybe. Was it guilt? Sure. The girl was my responsibility when she was attacked. It would’ve been weird if I didn’t feel at least a little guilty. Was I worried about my losing job? Perhaps. But I could always get a job. I was an educated white man with a particularly employable command of the English language. If I couldn’t get a job, nobody could. I hated my privilege, not because I felt guilty about it, but because it highlighted how meaningless everything was, since the ease with which I’d navigated the professional world was, to some degree, contingent upon my whiteness, and that detracted from my agency; it contributed to my coghood.

So it really didn’t matter if I lost my job. I’d find work.

Perhaps getting canned would do me some good. Maybe I’d teach in some suburb where the kids knew how to read.
What was I thinking? There was no way I’d get fired. I was too good at my job. My students’ performance on the state test every spring made Jackson look good.

Maybe I should quit.

No. The thought disgusted me. I cared about my students. I did. I did. I really fucking did. I cared enough about Strawberry to conduct a practice interview with him so he could get a job at Foot Locker. I cared enough about Shaydeene to double my workload to make sure she had lessons that challenged her. I cared enough about Bakar to teach him Basic English twice a week after school, since he’d been transported from Kenya to Hartford two months prior, and he struggled with even the simplest sentences. I cared enough about Yackara and Nigielle and Dana—all mothers—to send personalized lessons home when they couldn’t find anyone to watch their babies. I cared enough to teach mini-lessons about how to tell time on an analog clock, since nearly all of my students only knew how to read a digital clock. I cared enough—too much, so much—about Juan and Yenysis and Shambrielle and Carlos. Francesca, Abigail, Christina, Avaughn, Terrica, Chelsea, and David. And so many more. Hakeem, Chevon, Shenell, Zoya, Paul, Keith, Tennicia. Every student with innumerable needs and tendencies and behaviors. I cared. I did. I couldn’t quit. I couldn’t go teach in the suburbs. That would’ve been the ultimate cop out. I was good at teaching. I gave a fuck. And that was rare.

Did I give a fuck, though? Did I really care enough? I remembered how regularly I resented the work I did. I remembered how brutally I’d berated Karim. How thoughtless I’d been. How immature. I must’ve looked and sounded like a monster…

What did it matter if I could meet the school board’s goals for the state test? What good did that do? I could program some kids to score proficient on the exam—big deal. Program?

Yes, program. That was the word that came to mind. In my worst moments, that was how I
thought of teaching: programming. And the kids would forget everything I programmed into them, anyway. They’d have an eleventh grade English teacher who would cultivate their brains via Netflix. And even if they were assigned a decent eleventh grade teacher, they’d get a shitty twelfth grade teacher, and even if they had all good teachers, the streets would eat them.

“It’s all fucked,” I said.

I hit Albany Avenue. The Ave, as the students called it. A two mile stretch of asphalt that represented the highest crime region in the North End. Seeing the street sign scared me a little, but what was I afraid of? There was nobody around. A fat rain drop landed on my windshield. Then another. And another. I got the wipers going. They went thunk, thunk, thunk. I turned onto Albany Avenue, passed closed bodegas, out-of-business gas stations, three story brick apartment buildings, some of which were alight. I tried to imagine living here. I couldn’t. I’d never need a food stamp and I’d always be able to pay rent; this place was a grungy hell I knew existed but would never, ever be stuck inside. On the few occasions I visited students’ apartments—always to talk to their parents—I thought, Thank god I get to leave. I once visited a studio apartment with seven children crammed inside, a fat grandmother all but fastened to a couch in the corner. Three little boys played video games on a tiny television. Two girls played with dirty dolls on a twin bed that lacked sheets or pillows. Another child was reading a pop-up book and eating Cheerios from a plastic bag. All the kids, besides my student Shanika, were under the age of ten. The fat grandmother was obviously sedentary, and Shanika was in charge of everybody. It was my first year teaching. I showed up hoping to discuss Shanika’s failing English grade with her guardian, her grandmother. It wasn’t until I saw the old woman’s state that I realized that Shanika was her own guardian. Not only that, she was mothering a whole brood. How could she possibly give a damn about English homework?
The rainfall suddenly turned torrential. I imagined some deity pulling a cord, releasing the waters, deciding to flush out the dirty earth. I could barely see where I was driving. A red stop light wobbled through the watery windshield. I came to a halt. The rain pelted my car. To my left: a brick building with a yellow awning that said WE CASH CHECKS in red script. To my right: Johnny’s, a closed liquor store, outside of which somebody stood, face pressed against the window. Pathetic, I thought. The person turned and looked at my car. It was a black woman. Short. Skinny. Wearing huge golden hoop earrings. Her teeth emerged. Was she smiling? It was too difficult to tell through the rain. Her outfit appeared to be made out of wind-breaker material. It shined.

The sense of meaningless surfaced once again. If I was a cog, so was this alcoholic woman. So was Hartford. So were the suburbs. So were the boys who’d attacked Shaydeene. For a split second, while staring at this soaking wet woman, I imagined Hartford as a gigantic gang rape, a city fucking itself against its own will, while the suburbs looked on, shrugging, doing their best to ignore, and thereby partaking.

Karim Dickson popped into my mind’s eye. His intimidating smile. His buoyant prowess. His sense of humor. Were you there, Karim?

The soaking wet woman ambled toward my car. The traffic light was still red. The woman entered a streetlight’s halo. She was definitely smiling. Her teeth were perfect and big. The rain had flattened the hair on top of her head and created dripping ringlets on either side of her face. She shouted something inaudible and waved to me. She was getting closer. The traffic light remained red. It would turn green in a moment, for sure. What did this woman want? Did she expect me to give her a ride somewhere? Should I? Who knew what she was capable of? She was close now. “Hold up, man,” she shouted. She grabbed my passenger side door handle and
pulled. The door was locked. She tapped the window with her index finger, lowered her face and smiled at me. Her eyeballs seemed to aim in slightly different directions. One of her earrings knocked the window.

I wasn’t surprised by the traffic light’s lag. Hartford lights were notoriously slow. There was a red light by school I often ran if no cars were coming, because it had you waiting forever. I considered running this one. But the rain was so thick. Some idiot zooming through the intersection might not be visible until the last second.

The woman smacked her hand against the window and held it there. The flowing water traced her fingers. “Come on, man,” she shouted.

The light was still red.

“Man, it’s fucking pouring out here!” She jiggled the handle.

Was she serious? Did she expect me to unlock the door and let her in? This woman was out of her mind.

I ran the red light. I went home.

* *

The morning after the storm, I woke up later than usual—6:30 AM—expecting a hangover but not having one. I felt comfortable in bed, content with myself; it was as if I’d forgotten who I was. Not two minutes passed before the shroud of sleep was lifted and I remembered everything: obsessing over Shaydeene, demolishing Karim in front of class, fondling Elizabeth’s sleeping body, driving drunk, leaving that woman in the rain. I sat up and looked out the window, which gave me a view of the forest behind my apartment complex. I expected the trees to appear ravaged by the hurricane. But all I saw was a gray, wet morning.
I showered quickly. Got dressed in two minutes flat. I wore a loud purple shirt and tie the students always loved. I gelled my hair, guzzled water. Ate a banana and toast.

Nothing motivates me better than my own stupidity, or, rather, the self-loathing that emerges as a result of stupid actions—and by “stupid actions” I mean actions I find ugly and selfish and potentially dangerous… Suddenly I wanted to act noble. I wanted to quit drinking. I wanted to talk to Karim. I wanted to make sure Elizabeth was okay. I wanted to check on Shaydeene, if possible.

It wasn’t until I had my jacket on and my hand gripping my apartment doorknob that I decided to check my cell phone: Jackson had emailed the faculty. School was canceled. The governor had declared a state of emergency because the storm had pummeled the shoreline. All state-run institutions were shut down. I pulled up NPR on my phone. New Haven was flooded. Staten Island, too. The Jersey Shore looked like a war zone. In Central Connecticut, we got lucky. A few hours of wind. A few hours of rain. Some fallen telephone poles and trees. Some scrapes and bruises. Not a single fatality.

Normally I’d have been thrilled for an unexpected day off. But I wanted to face Karim and Elizabeth. I wanted make sure everything was alright.

I paced around my living room trying to think of something to do. I considered calling Elizabeth or Karim’s sister, but it was too early in the morning to call Karim’s sister, and Elizabeth was probably sleeping off the vodka. I attempted to grade, but couldn’t focus. I attempted to lesson plan—couldn’t focus. I attempted to watch porn and beat off—couldn’t focus. I found myself wincing constantly. This non-storm had trapped me with myself and I kept thinking about the weird muck of my own behaviors. Everything I did was guilt-driven, fear-driven. I disturbed myself. I always envisioned myself a clean and honest man with good
intentions. But when I thought about my actions, I didn’t see a clean and honest man. Hell, I didn’t even see a man; I saw an animal. An animal following self-preserving instincts it didn’t even understand. I spent an hour on my couch clutching my own head, trying to cry but finding myself physically unable.

So here is what I did: I took a ton of Nyquil and slept through the entire day. I didn’t have a single dream, and on the occasions when I got up to take a piss, I was too stupefied by the drug to feel much of anything besides the desire to fall back asleep.

When I woke, it was to the sound of my phone ringing. It was Elizabeth. I glanced at the clock: 6:30 PM.

“Hi,” I said.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“I’ve been sleeping all day.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, you?”

“I can’t even remember the last time I ate,” she said.

“You want me to pick something up and bring it to your place?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want?”

She thought for a long moment and said, “Taco Bell.”

I found this hilarious. It was the last thing I expected her to say. I went to Taco Bell and purchased half the menu items and brought them to Elizabeth’s. She answered the door and laughed because I had so many bags of food.

“I didn’t know what you liked,” I said.
“Come in,” she said, shaking her head. She wore the same Duke shirt and sweatpants from the night before.

We gorged ourselves on tortillas and processed meat.

Then we watched a movie about a guy who, after being incarcerated inexplicably for twenty years, escaped. He had a daughter and he wanted to find her. He hadn’t seen her since she was an infant, two decades prior, so he had no idea what she looked like or where she was. Eventually he surmised she was killed by the men who’d imprisoned him. Then he fell in love with a woman. Their relationship appeared healthy and good. Until the man discovered that his new lover was actually his long lost daughter. He was, of course, disgusted, distraught, and heartbroken. But he ended up sustaining a relationship with this young woman, who had no idea she was fucking her father.

“Jesus,” Elizabeth said when the movie ended.

“I know right,” I said, biting into a cold chalupa.

What struck me about the movie wasn’t the moral gruesomeness of the plot, but the fact that somebody imagined it into existence. I felt something I can only describe as terror. The human imagination. It was limitless. It wouldn’t stop churning. And most, if not all, imaginings could be made real. So long as they weren’t physics-defying. There was nothing particularly inventive about the notion of incest. I’d thought about it. I was sure most people had. But to enact incest, in art, highlighted the fact that somewhere somebody was enacting it in life.

I once heard that if you can imagine a fetish, it already exists.

I wondered if that law of fetishes applied to violence, if every violent act I imagined was already happening.

The violence I could imagine seemed infinite.
“Disturbing,” I said, swallowing.

“I find disturbing things compelling,” Elizabeth said.

“Me too,” I admitted.

Elizabeth rested her head in my lap. Her hair spread across my thighs. She was looking up at me, smiling.

I crumpled up the chalupa paper and threw it at a trash can in the corner. I missed.

“Thanks for coming over last night,” Elizabeth said.

“No problem,” I said, surprised: I’d forgotten that it was even possible that my presence might have been a good thing. “What was wrong? Why were you so upset?”

“A lot of things were wrong,” Elizabeth said.

I didn’t bother asking what she meant. I knew she’d eventually tell me.

“You know what, Mr. Tru?” Elizabeth said.

“What, Ms. Pro?” I said.

“I like you.”

Something snakelike moved up my spine and gloved my brain. My face reddened and my palms began to sweat. A knot of shame formed in my throat. But it was not shame for anything I’d done. It was shame for the future. It was shame for what I would do. *I like you.* Those words lashed me with the weight of the relationship I was stepping into. I didn’t foresee the specifics, of course, but I sensed the shape of them, and they came to me in the form of a two-pronged feeling. Prong one: I could fall for Elizabeth. Prong two: I could hurt her.


Because of the hurricane, all state-run institutions were shut down for a week, and during that week Elizabeth and I spent inordinate amounts of time together, watching movies, napping,
playing long, thoughtful, competitive games of chess, grading papers, lesson planning, devising a Saturday School program for sophomores, fucking, laughing, talking about our childhoods.

When school was back in session, she and I operated inside the thrill of a secret: we were two teachers who taught right across the hall from each other, and we’d seen each other naked. In bed, I told Elizabeth everything. About the unceasing guilt I felt whenever I thought about Shaydeene. About how Jackson suggested Karim was the fourth boy. About how I wanted Jackson to be right. About how I wanted to know the facts of what had happened to Shaydeene. About how I felt guilty for wanting to know, since it was none of my fucking business.

Elizabeth listened. She told me I’d done nothing wrong, and I told her that wasn’t true. She asked me to explain, specifically, what I’d done wrong, and I struggled to find the words—then I resented Elizabeth for cornering me. I felt that I’d done something wrong. But that wasn’t enough. Not for Elizabeth. She told me I was being too hard on myself. She told me she admired my resolve, my work ethic. She said the kids responded to my teaching because they could sense how much I cared. I found this kind of talk disgusting, perhaps because I couldn’t hide from my brain, and so being a competent teacher didn’t shield me from how, at a moment’s notice, I could resent my students to the point of hatred—nor did it shield me from my frustration with their inability to learn, or my occasional desire to quit on them.

* 

Shaydeene eventually got a hold of Elizabeth. The girl changed her cell phone number and deleted all of her social media accounts because she’d been harassed by her peers. She’d even gotten jumped by a bunch of girls three days after the rape. This group was led by the older sister of one of the boys who’d attacked Shaydeene. It was a revenge plot. Shaydeene, these girls believed, was a liar. The girls waited outside Shaydeene’s building, and when Shaydeene was
walking to the bodega, running an errand for her mother, they dragged her into an alley, tossed her to the ground, and kicked her until she was nearly unconscious. She wandered home, concussed, missing two teeth. “That’s what I get for snitching,” she told Elizabeth.

I never contacted Shaydeene, though of course I could’ve. Elizabeth had the girl’s new phone number, and she was constantly giving me updates about how Shaydeene was getting acclimated to her new school. Elizabeth said Shaydeene would be glad to hear from me. But I didn’t want to face Shaydeene or hear her voice. I had no idea why.

For months I wondered why. How come I couldn’t talk to this girl who’d been my student? I hadn’t harmed her. I hadn’t done a single thing wrong. Why couldn’t I give her a simple phone call, just to say hello and see how things were going?

I began to understand why when Elizabeth told me about her own history of sexual abuse. She was raped twice in college. Freshman year she was drugged at a night club and taken to man’s car. She was conscious for the assault, though she couldn’t move her arms and legs. The second time was during her sophomore year, in a dorm room with a man she thought was a friend. He held her captive for hours, using her body, verbally berating her, calling her names she’d never since reiterated to anybody, though she thought them daily.

Elizabeth told me these things in the dark, while we were in bed. I held her and listened. During her senior year of college, Elizabeth slept with every guy she could. She aimed for three per weekend—Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. She developed a roster of regulars, but she preferred strangers, men she’d just met. If she went too long without fucking somebody, she’d hole up in her room. She’d cry. When she slept, she had dreams in which she died and then remained asleep, aware only of the fact that she no longer existed. She’d get drunk in order to avoid the dreams. Alcohol made it impossible to dream. She liked that. Still, no amount of
alcohol could make her feel like she mattered. “I understand—like, intellectually—that I’m not a thing,” she said. “But no matter how many times I tell myself that, I believe in my heart that I’m a thing.” I kissed her legs and stomach and back and toes and hands. I crawled all over her body and told her how much every part of her mattered. No matter what I tried, she said, “I feel like I’m made of paper.” It was this feeling—being made of paper—that caused her to slice into her hips with razor blades, to dump boiling water onto her thigh, to smack her head against the wall—never in my presence, always alone. Elizabeth loved being in charge of her pain. It reminded her that her body was a body. Bodies felt pain. Pain was felt by people constructed out of flesh, not paper. Because sometimes the feeling of being paper made her feel fragile in ways that terrified her, like somebody could tear off the front of her torso as easily as tearing a poster off a wall—and behind the poster: nothing, a hole in the wall. The pain confirmed that there was no hole, that she was whole. The pain confirmed that no matter how tiny and breakable she felt, she was thick with body and could hurt like a human.

While I listened to Elizabeth, I was thinking about Shaydeene. I was wondering if the girl, like Elizabeth, was destroying herself. I was also thinking about the limits of empathy. I was staring into the face of something I could never truly grasp, and maybe that was why I didn’t have the courage to contact Shaydeene. The circumstances of her trauma, the fact that it happened so near to me, the fact that she was technically my responsibility—all this, plus the incomprehensibility of what she was going through, repelled me. I never had to see the girl again, and so I wouldn’t. My cowardice was profound and absolute. I could only sympathize, and nothing more. I hated that—perhaps because I could do more than sympathize with the three assailants. With them, empathy seemed possible. Even though I didn’t even know them. They were, to some extent, using sex to take revenge. Against what? Certainly not Shaydeene. The girl
was an unlucky symbol. A body the boys could take, take, take in order to feel good, good, good and strong, strong, strong in spite of—because of?—the shitty lives they’d been dealt. Nobody rapes if he does not feel hopeless. Nobody rapes unless he decides—consciously or not—that everything that exists around him is meaningless. I’d never raped anybody, and I never would, but because I was hopeless, and because everything that existed around me felt meaningless, the boys’ actions, though reprehensible, made sense to me. The boys found hope in each other and in Shaydeene’s body. She was a momentary antidote to their cynicism, their hatred of themselves, their inability to cope with the absolute isolation of being a person.

No. I was projecting. Because in thinking about the boys, I was thinking about myself. I was the first man Elizabeth had slept with since Duke. She’d had a healthy summer before moving north to start her job in Hartford. The way she’d been living—allowing so many people into her body—would’ve killed her. She vowed that she wouldn’t fuck anyone she didn’t admire. When she told me this, it stung, because it implied that I was admirable. I didn’t deserve her admiration, because even after we clearly established that we were an item, even after she’d uttered her deepest, darkest memories, even after she told me she was thankful to have me in her life, I was a hound. I fucked Skyla weekly. Whenever I went to a bar or nightclub without Elizabeth, I got drunk, pinned a woman against a wall, made out with her, and, if she was willing, took her home. I was as aggressive as ever. And every time Elizabeth spoke kindly of me, I silently hated her. I hated that she couldn’t see how obviously horrible I was, and I hated myself for being obviously horrible. Despite this hatred, fucking was my salve. It was the one act that destroyed, momentarily, the sense of meaningless plucking at the back of my head.

But there was always that moment after I came, when I was in bed with somebody I didn’t even know, when all I could think about was fleeing. I feared Elizabeth would show up.
unannounced and catch me in the act. I even imagined this when it was impossible—like, for example, if I was at Skylà’s apartment.

I liked sleeping next to Elizabeth, but only at her house. At my house, I imagined Skylà knocking on the door, drunk, looking to screw around. She actually did this once. I was home alone. She rung the doorbell and I found her in a black dress, flushed from a night of dancing. I told her she couldn’t just pop up like that. “What if I had somebody here?” I said. “What if I fucking had another girl here? Just because you live in the building doesn’t mean you don’t have to give me a heads up. You know that.” Skylà gave me the finger. She called me an asshole. She told me I should quit fucking her if I didn’t want her coming over. Then we fucked right in my living room.

Every time I cheated on Elizabeth, I thought, You have to stop—not just because I liked Elizabeth (I did, a lot), but also because if she found out what I was up to, she’d punish herself in ways I couldn’t comprehend. Or so I imagined. Because in cheating on Elizabeth, I made Elizabeth into what she feared she was: a thing; a usable body in a series of bodies. How violent would she become if she discovered my treachery? How thoroughly would she blame herself? How inadequate would she feel?

I stopped.

It was the spring time, just before the students took the CAPT, and I stopped. I told Skylà I was seriously involved with somebody. I ignored text messages from women I didn’t care about. I thought about telling Elizabeth about everything I’d done, but I didn’t want to lose her and I didn’t want to hurt her. So I decided the guilt was mine to bear.

*
In April, Elizabeth took Shaydeene and Strawberry to Red Lobster—Strawberry’s request. She asked if I wanted to join. I said no. The sound of Shaydeene’s name pricked me. I still saw her sweaty forehead. I still saw her running down the hallway, away from my classroom. I still imagined those boys attacking her.

It was at Red Lobster, with Strawberry at her side, that Shaydeene explicitly discussed her assault with Elizabeth.

That night, in bed, Elizabeth said to me, “You know, at lunch Shaydeene talked all about what happened to her with those boys.” I didn’t want to hear about it. I remembered how, initially, I wanted to know everything, as if knowing everything could somehow make the whole thing comprehensible. Now I’d come to terms with the fact that Shaydeene had been attacked, and the specifics of the violence would change nothing.

Elizabeth told me one thing, though: “Shaydeene lied to Jackson about what happened that afternoon.” At this point, the two underage boys were locked up in some juvenile detention center, and Dominique Hixon, the of-age assailant, was in jail. I imagined these boys serving a sentence for having consensual sex with a girl who’d told an elaborate lie. I grappled with how that injustice must’ve felt, but before I could finish grappling, Elizabeth said: “There wasn’t a fourth kid. It was just the three. Shaydeene said there was a fourth kid when she was explaining everything to Jackson—she had no idea why. Right after the rape, she really believed there was a fourth boy present. But a couple days later she realized he wasn’t actually there. For a while she kept imagining him—the one boy in the room that didn’t want to hurt her. But the more she imagined him, the more she realized that if he were real, he would’ve been this, like, passive guy who didn’t want to help her, and so she decided she hated him for not helping her, and she hated herself for imagining him.”
I thought of Karim. How much of my anger had been directed at him because Jackson had simply suspected him of being involved? Sure, the boy was a bit of a wise ass, but had I aimed so much animosity at him because I thought he was an accessory to a gang rape? Yes. I had. Karim dropped out of school around Christmas. That was the time of year when a lot of students disappeared. He never came to my class after our confrontation. I told him to quit showing up, and so he did. I rarely thought about him, but whenever I did, I felt fucking sick. He represented all the ways I failed my students. I assumed he was guilty without proof. I assumed he believed school was a joke. I assumed he was going to be swallowed by the streets. And if enough people assume that about you, you must start to believe it.

*  

June. Two weeks left in school. I stepped out of the shower and heard, through the wall, what I thought was the sound of sobbing.

“Everything alright?” I said, drying my leg.

No response.

I went into my bedroom and found Elizabeth sitting cross-legged on the floor, her back against the radiator, my cell phone in her hand. She wore a yellow sundress, the hem of which made a circle around her. *Don’t panic*, I thought—the phone was passcode protected, and even if she cracked the code I’d deleted all of my dirty messages months earlier. If she found a message from another woman, it couldn’t have been that vile.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

Her head was bowed. Her shoulders shook. She sobbed silently for a few moments.

“There are so many,” she said.

“So many what…”
The pictures. I hadn’t deleted them. I kept them so I could look at them and beat off every now and then; it was as simple and disgusting as that. I’d received countless dirty photographs during my time with Elizabeth. Had she checked the dates? Had she seen that I’d saved some of the pictures while we were together? Of course she had. It was probably the first thing she checked.

“So many,” Elizabeth repeated.

She must’ve already put it all together. She saw that as our relationship was growing, as she was divulging her traumas to me, I was receiving naked pictures from women, which meant I was probably fucking them. She also saw many pictures of me naked. Pictures of my cock. Some I’d sent to her. Some I’d only sent to others. Also, in this library of sex, she found pictures of herself. One among many.

I fell to the floor. I was naked and wet from the shower. I pleaded and begged and apologized and cried. I thought about how this might cause Elizabeth to harm herself, and I began hyperventilating and repeating, “I’m so sorry I’m so sorry.” Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest and stared at me. The more hysterical I got, the stonier she grew. She was seeing me for the first time, and she didn’t like what she saw.

After a half hour of this—Elizabeth silent, me a mess—I calmed down. I breathed slowly and deeply. I stood up and paced around the room. Elizabeth remained seated on the floor, my phone in her hand. I got dressed: jeans and a baby blue polo; we had dinner plans, and I mechanically put on the outfit as if we were still going. My face was swollen from crying. I sat on the edge of my bed and calmly explained that I’d changed, that I’d stopped, that all of those women were part of a past I’d relinquished.

“You have to understand,” I said. “None of them mattered.”
“I’m one of them,” Elizabeth said. “And therefore I don’t matter.”

“You matter…”

“I don’t. I don’t. I don’t.” She said the words at the floor, her head pecking forward with each “don’t.”

“To you,” Elizabeth said. “I don’t matter.”

I didn’t say anything.

“To you,” she repeated.

I opened my mouth to speak.

“To you,” she said again. “To you to you to you.”

She was still talking at the floor. She wasn’t talking to me. She was convincing herself of something.

“To you,” she said, without looking at me, “I am a thing. To you. To you.” She paused.

She appeared to be biting the insides of her cheeks. “To you. Not to me.”

She stood up, handed me my cell phone, and put on her shoes.

“Stay away from me,” she said, pointing down at my face. “I am not a fucking thing.”

Then she left.

I didn’t follow her. I sat there shaking, holding my phone. I went to my photo gallery. I erased the pictures.

END