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PUBLISHERS NOTE

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The Ghost, Josephine

a novel by Brad Rau

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Tonight is warmer than the past week's worth; the sky's clouded over. In an alley beside the Rockland Inn, I empty out the dumpster, tossing heavy, rotten smelling bags into the back of my truck. Ray's waiting in the cab, but with the security light shining past my shoulder, glaring off the rear window, he can't be seen at all.

Winding back to pitch another bag in, the thin plastic splits, spattering trash across the pavement and my boots and the cuff of my pants.

"Goddamn it!" I shout. Kicking the dumpster, I swear again, more colorfully, when a stampede of pain charges through my cold toes, running up my leg. Hopping around, I continue swearing until I've run out of blue words and the pain's dull enough so I can put the foot down again. I can't see Ray, but I can hear him snickering.

A breeze blows down the street, momentarily pushing the stink of garbage away and I hunker down to paw the pile back into the

bag, jerking to attention when Sarah Goldstein calls out the kitchen door, “Cookie, Ajna wants you.”

She’s already gone by the time I turn to her, muttering, “Don’t call me...” The door thunks closed.

In the kitchen, Ajna’s chopping down chunks of carrot with a cleaver, her nose twitching when I come up beside her. Without turning from her task she tells me, “I need more lobster, Barry.” Her accent is riddled with rough, sour r’s. In my head her speech looks like the Russian alphabet, backwards r’s and n’s and the number four as a letter.

“Jesus, Ajna, I just pulled my traps two days ago...”

Ceasing her chopping to lift her head, she still doesn’t look at me.

“I mean, sure, I’m happy to try and pull again, but...” I say.

Without even looking at me, the woman—four foot and some inches, probably a third my weight, swaddled in her heavy, drab clothes—manages to dominate me. The way the veins in her neck stand at attention makes me shrink. She pushes the knife down again, dismembering another chunk of carrot, sending it spinning off as the blade cracks down on the board.

“I need the lobsters, Barry. By tomorrow I need twenty lobsters. You need to be here, tomorrow evening with them. No excuses.”

The hotel is small and now, with the summer tourist trade having ebbed out entirely, I know there aren’t guests enough to eat any twenty lobsters. She’s selling them out to someone else—must

be. Still, I can't make myself refuse. Maybe it's the accent: a relic of my murky, long-ago childhood, when the inevitability of Soviet attack and that thing on Gorbachev's head were daily news items. Really, it's more than that, though. There's an aura about the woman. I can taste it in the air, it's so thick and grimy.

She lived through that ignored European war of the Nineties and something of that dark time stained her. Stained her right down to her core. So, when she asks for anything, I agree—as quick as I can. And I keep my eyes on her as I retreat outside.

“...And if we can't get them?” Ray asks as we pull out onto Union Street. I don't answer him, but I'm obsessing over what the answer might be.

1

Smacking the side of the boat, the waves sound a slow rhythm; regular and in two beats. Like a heartbeat. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. From a far off buoy, a bell clangs and that sound is bright but lazy and irregular—like the bell can't be bothered. Like there are things the bell would rather be doing.

Pulling hand over hand until the trap breaks the surface of the sea, I drag it in, over the side of the boat. It sloughs water at my feet. Over and above the pissing water, the bell, the heartbeat-waves, is Ray's voice, steady and animated even though I've given him no encouragement, no sign that I'm listening at all.

"...When I hear tires in the gravel out front, she jumps right off me. I've never seen a girl move so fast..."

Our mother said that death couldn't quiet Ray. That not the devil or God Himself could quiet Ray. That his voice was a force, like the wind—given to changing temperaments, but otherwise permanent.

She's dead, our mother. She's quiet and Pa moved south to Florida. He got hot weather, bikinied ladies. I got the old house. I

got frozen fingers pulling up lobster traps from an icy October sea. I got Ray. I got Ray's voice talking my ears as numb as my fingers.

Ray is my older brother. He's got fifteen years on me, but you wouldn't know it to see him.

There was no time, for me, when he wasn't around. He's always been there. So constant that I can't be sure of what I'm seeing when I look at him. I know I'm not seeing him, not in the way a stranger might: I can't see him for what he is, because the sight of him is all bound up in the knowledge of him: the man I grew up idolizing, the secrets we share, the lies we honor for one another.

I know him so well that if I wanted to tell you about Ray, I wouldn't know where to begin—what truths to conceal, what tall tales to include. The end result being: I wonder if I could convince you that I know the man at all; that he even exists. I could tell you he's the handsome brother, the talkative brother, the confident one. The brother with all his teeth.

“...So, I'm rushing to gather up this bread-crumbs-trail of clothing we left through the house, but Mr. Ernhart's already inside. In the living room...”

This has been going on for hours; Ray talks like this. And then, with the water running around our feet, he quiets. The trap is empty. They've all been empty.

For thirty-five dollars a year a man can keep five traps in the state of Maine. It's what's called a hobby license and if I hadn't gotten myself so dirt poor it might be just that.

We straighten up, Ray and I, standing at once as though only one of us is the man and the other, his reflection. We stand in unison, hands on our hips, frowning down like we're imitating each other, so used to each other's postures and presences that we can't help but mimic. Ray shakes his head and looks at me, clears his throat to continue on. I try and cut him off, but he won't wait, “...He's got

his shotgun, right? Raising it up, leveling it out towards me. And I would've ended up full of buckshot, I'm certain of it..." I raise my hand, open my mouth. Undaunted, Ray keeps going, right over me, "...If at the last moment, he doesn't realize his daughter's bra is hanging off the end of the barrel! Off the end of the shotgun like a goddamned Christmas ornament!" He looks at me, his face punctuating the anecdote, his mouth wide and waiting for me to give a smile. Waves knock the side of the boat. The water in the basin sways.

"I've heard this story," I point out, "So many goddamned times."

Looking at me, his jaw clams up and he gives me the sly smile he tried to earn. "It's a good one, though."

I nod down at the trap again.

He shrugs. "It's empty."

"I know it's goddamned empty, Ray. You think I don't see that?"

"What else to say about it, then? Did I ever tell you about Sharon Wickworth?"

I step back to sit on the overturned milk crate by the motor. The boat's only fourteen feet long. Barely big enough for Ray and me and the empty trap between us. The boat sways. Rockland sits on the horizon, peeking out through a soup of cold fog.

"Fuck Sharon Wickworth," I say. "Ajna Canth is gonna cut off my balls." Gesturing to the floor of the skiff, to the empty trap, to that metaphorical summation and culmination of our empty, fruitless day, I tell him, "Not to mention..." I throw my arms up. "We could've hung drywall today. Hauled trash. That would have been some money. Here... What've we got outta today?"

Ray weighs it. He says, after a moment, "Fresh, salt air. Good for the spirits; that's what Pa always said."

Stomping the water in the basin of the boat so it splashes up on my waders, I yell, “I don’t give a good-god-damn about the spirits, Ray. I need to pay some bills.”

He shrugs and looks away. Standing again, I take the trap and loll it over the side. It slaps the water and sways, giving in to sinking slowly, like it’s settling into bed. As it slips off into the cold, black sea, away from sight, I say, “What about the traps around Owls Head?”

“We don’t have traps around Owls Head,” Ray tells me. We look at each other a moment before he says, “You trying to get shot?”

“I won’t get shot.”

Ray nods. “Last summer some dude got shot off Islesboro just for setting his traps in the wrong cove and you think it’s a smart idea to go out poaching?”

The motor wakes grudgingly when I yank the cord, coughing and gurgling to life. I aim the boat deeper into the gray sitting away from shore—the gray sky that blends without margin into a gray horizon where one must suspect the sea begins, or ends.

Ray is talking again, but the wind and the motor do a fine job of out-shouting him, so his voice becomes just another layer to the noise, until I’m far away, drifting off in my own thoughts. Ray’s yelling brings me back to the world.

There’s a big lobster boat not far off, baring down on us. Shaken to, I wrench the motor, cutting out wide, away from the oncoming ship and then turning quickly back into its wake after it’s passed.

Bracing against the rollicking-splash, the bow digs into the wave—water coming over us—before the hull rises and we come thudding down on the other side. The boat nods pleasantly—all quiet now with the motor stalled out—and I’m wringing wet, getting to

my feet, throttling the air with a fist and letting fly a string of obscenities. I can see her name, *The Bloody Rudder*, as she cruises off into the gray distance.

Lightheaded and shaking, I finally run out of words and breath and sit back down.

“You’re gonna blow a gasket, getting worked up like that,” Ray tells me when I’ve stopped panting. In my silence he muses, “Uncle Ernie died from a heart attack. That’s in the family.”

I pull the starter and the engine gasps to life. “Uncle Ernie smoked three packs a day and ate bacon at every meal.”

I can’t help, as we come around the jagged, black-rock serration of Owls Head, I can’t help but ache over the money wasted on today’s venture. Even if we do get every last lobster that I promised Canth, having boated this far will bite into any profit we’ll manage. And I’ve no faith the lobsters will show.

In a little, darkened cove, I hook a buoy with coloring that I don’t recognize and snatch the line and pull while Ray looks out. The trap is heavy and when it nears the surface I can see why: it is teeming with lobsters. So much so, that when I latch on and tug, the boat bucks to the side and starts sipping from the surface of the sea. Panicked, I manage to get the trap onboard before we’re sunk.

The next five traps we pull aren’t so chock-full as that first one, but are full enough to furnish us twice the lobsters Canth demanded. Singing with delight, I do a little jig that gets the boat rocking. I’m smiling all the way back to port.

2

At the public launch we line up behind a big boat just coming free from the water, where the gleaming-red-ghosts of the trailer lights groove. I know the boat. It's out of Minister's Cove, North Haven Island. The fancy, curlycue lettering along the back is easy enough to read even through the gathering dusk. *The Bloody Rudder*. I grind my teeth and wait.

As I stare beyond him, Ray tries catching my eye. He has something he wants to say. The boat pitches and bucks lightly in the waves, while I play the motor back and forth to try and keep still and in the queue—practicing avoiding eye contact with my brother the whole while. Finally, he says, “Let it pass.”

I intend to let it pass. But, I don't like being told to. So, I say nothing.

After the *Bloody Rudder* is out, sluicing water as the truck pulls her up the grade, I push our boat forward to land against the dock. Stepping up, out of the boat, I raise my hand dismissively when Ray reminds me, a little louder, “Let it pass.”

I intend to let it pass. But coming through the narrow, dirt lot a murmur of conversation followed by a riff of laughter stops me.

I don't quite turn, but my head nods their way to listen. Those boys are quiet now, working in the fragile red glow of trailer lights, readying their boat for the road.

Satisfied that it was only a trick of my imagination, I start forward again, immediately halted by a voice calling, "How was the luck, Cookie?"

On the subdued stage of Autumn dusk that voice sounds shrill; crude. Maybe it's the trumpeting of that voice, maybe it's the little dig of the nickname, whatever it is, I feel my face flush and I turn to the two.

"Fair," I say plainly.

One of them responds but it's quiet—muttered for only the other to hear.

"What's that?" I pipe up.

They rearrange themselves, standing tall and glaring me down. "I said," a voice chimes through the darkness. I need to count on the movement of his body to determine which one is speaking. "It's a funny word for you to use—fair."

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

The quieter boy speaks up now. "Nothing, Barry. Take it easy. Keep moving."

"Easy?" I say. "You're the ones yelling at me. If you got something to say, say it."

"I'll say it!" The loud boy says, dropping down off the trailer and stepping closer. Gravel cackles under his feet. "It's bullshit, you

coming in with a goddamned haul. You don't hold a single trap at Owls Head. Everybody knows that."

When I say again, "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?" I'm moving too. Only when we're closer—coming closer with every breath and step and I have him half-silhouetted with the tail lights from his trailer—can I see that he has some long armament hanging from his hand. I come to a stop.

He stops, too—a few paces out. "You're a fucking thief, Cookie. Everyone knows it." He aims the tire iron at me.

"Yeah?" My face is hot enough now so that my eyes are getting watery. "Yeah?" I say though my teeth.

"Yeah," he says, real quiet.

Night has congealed around us. There is only a long blue strip of day left across the horizon and it is in hurried retreat, slipping away across the earth, maybe in New Hampshire now. Maybe Vermont. The man standing in front of me is all nighttime—a man-shaped-cutout of nighttime—black and flat, eclipsing the red of the taillights. A little red hangs onto the feathery edge of his sweater. The fleece shimmers in the wind.

"Come on," the brother insists impatiently. "We don't have time for this."

"One second, Todd," the boy before me says over his shoulder. Turning back to me he huffs, "You're lucky you weren't into our traps. You're lucky I have respect for the Andrews family." He says, almost whispering now, "You're just a piece-of-shit-thief, anyways. Not even worth my time."

I do not plan any of this; simply moving, like a cat on the Savannah. He's turned and before he's landed a full step toward his

truck I'm leaning down and taking a fist sized rock from the ground by my feet and before I've thought or breathed or pumped a solitary heartbeat, my hand is coming back and, without cognition or reasoning, the hand has already started forward again and the pebble, the stone—it's a rock, really: big enough to crush a skull, big enough to buckle a truck door—is free from my hand. Given fully to the air.

Maybe I'm lucky I was never an athlete. Well over six foot tall, bulky and strong, these aspects are largely experienced by the world as varying degrees of clumsiness. Todd's brother is, without a doubt, lucky I was never an athlete: though I have aimed for his head, the rock has a path of its own, that curves with a significant downward arc, hitting him dead center of his left ass cheek. Twisting and pitching, he lets fly a sour sort of grunt before I hear the tire-iron clang, bell-like, on the frozen ground.

The boy falls to a knee and I'm still moving forward, like the cheetah, not toward him now, but past him, toward Todd who's dropped down, off the trailer—launching himself forward like another predatory cat. I can hear him let out his war-cry as he comes on: we are two cats playing chicken. My feet leave the ground, diving forward, aiming low at the last moment, taking him out across the midsection. Todd's war-cry deflates. We hit the ground together, rolling, and somehow I manage to get on top. Aiming for his chin, I jab forward into the darkness beneath me, missing—but only the darkness knows by how much.

Behind me I hear the bright scraping of metal against cold stone. Knowing the younger brother is back up and on his way, I have to accept that missed-punch as the only shot I'll get. I roll off Todd and away. There is a quiet, invisible form breaking through

the darkness, and I'm only half risen when I reach up, blindly catching the tire iron as it comes down. I wrench it free from him, staggering up to my feet. Todd's brother falls away into the blackness behind me.

The ground is quiet: no crunching footsteps any more, just the heavy hush of panted breath. They both, at once, seem to realize what's happened: that now, with the tire iron, I firmly have the upper hand.

Without discussion, they back-step toward their truck, light glaring across the lot when the doors pop open and they jump in. And I realize, just in this moment, that I am screaming like a maniac.

The hull of the boat gets smacked with debris as the tires tear into the dirt and the whole rig jerks forward, pulling away. I'm still screaming as I cast the tire iron aside. Then I'm left alone, panting in the resumed, crystalline silence; ragged breathed, worn.

"Jesus Christ, Ray," I say when he jogs up beside me. "Good fucking timing."

"I came when I heard you yell."

By the time I pull the truck down the ramp, load up and lash down our boat and pull out onto Route One, Ray is yammering on about some other girl, April something-or-other. Interrupting him I say, "What the fuck took you so long?" It isn't a question, it isn't a statement—I can't help the hurt in my voice.

Ray says, "I had to secure the boat."

"How long's that goddamned take?"

"I think everything happened a bit quicker than you think it did, little brother."

"Well," I say. "It would have been nice if you'd made an effort."

He sighs. “I told you to let it pass. Fuck, maybe when I heard you yell I didn’t rush right over. Maybe I rolled my eyes a little beforehand. You don’t listen to advice. What am I supposed to do?”

In Meredith’s driveway, Ray sits silent a moment. “Tomorrow?” he asks.

“If there’s work.”

“Don’t be all pissy.”

“I ain’t all pissy,” I say, a pissy strain in my voice.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says, reaching for the handle.

I tell him, “It costs me to come out here. It’s gas, you know.”

He nods. “Something will come up. We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

I say, “I can’t just hang out. I need to make money, Ray.”

He says nothing.

We both turn when Meredith’s shape appears in the front door of the house.

“I should go,” I say, reaching to put the truck in gear.

“Say hello. Don’t be a fucking weirdo,” he nods at me, pats the door—thump, thump—slipping out and falling off into the darkness. Then Meredith’s rapping at my window and I know it’s too late. I let my hand drop to the crank and wind the window halfway down.

“Hey Barry, whatcha doin’?”

“Going over to the Inn.”

It takes her a moment; looking back at the boat, she says. “Where you coming from?”

“The bay.”

“This way?”

“I should go,” I tell her.

She laughs. “You only just rolled in,” she says and laughs. “Come in for a beer, hang out a bit. I haven’t seen you in awhile.”

“I gotta go,” I say and put the truck in reverse. It bucks eagerly, ready to go.

Meredith looks at me. Blinking weirdly, she steps back from the door of the truck, consumed almost instantly by darkness. “Good seeing you, Barry,” the nighttime tells me in her voice. Moments later the door to the house opens again, throwing light across the dooryard and the tangle of her and Ray’s shadows slip inside. And I am alone.

Finished counting the lobsters out, having weighed them on her skewed scale and entered some marks in a ledger that are a mystery to me, Ajna Canth mutters in her mangled English, “It’s more than I asked for.”

“We settled on two dollars a pound,” I say and I have to clench my jaw to keep the apologetic ‘I’d thought,’ from worming its way out. I have to be strong. She’ll cheat me if I’m not. Honestly, she’s going to cheat me regardless; all I can do is damage control, try to keep my losses minimal.

Turning to regard the coolers on the countertop by her side she touches her fingertips to her lips, shakes her head thoughtfully. When her gaze isn’t on me I straighten. But when she looks back again I flinch, my posture failing, like a man about to puke. A smile creases her face—only there a moment and then gone like a ghost.

The kitchen is empty—quiet but for the lobsters tapping mutedly on the other side of that narrow styrofoam wall. From a guest room above there’s a dull drone of conversation. Behind me, the cricket-song of refrigerators.

Shrugging, Ajna says, “What would I do with so many?”

“Whatever you always do. There’s never been an issue with...”

“But, so much, Barry,” she says, eyeing again the coolers. “Too much. I can take them, but only as a favor to you. I won’t use them all and I can’t pay more.”

Determined not to be swindled by the ninety-five pound Croat again, I counter, “No,” as firmly as my throat will allow. The word comes out weaselly.

Her eyes are dead-gray, but again her smile surfaces. It rings as a taunt, when she says, “No?”

“I’ll get a fair price, thank you.”

It’s not a question; it’s a dare, a challenge when she says, “You take them somewhere else?”

“Fine,” I say, but she blocks my path when I step forward. Now, here, the smile is evident—put on for me to see when whispering my name, “Barry.”

I’ve back-peddled. She’s willed me to the place where I started. I manage not to look away while she studies me, but it takes effort. When my head starts getting light, I realize I’ve been holding my breath.

“I wouldn’t cheat you, Barry. You come here to do business. And we are friends.”

We are not friends. I nod.

“Grappa.”

I shake my head.

She nods. “Grappa.” Stepping away, she returns with two small glasses and a narrow bottle. Normally, this is reserved for the end of our dealings and the fact that it’s coming early makes me nervous. Like maybe she’s planning on killing me.

I don’t know what Grappa is. I suspect it is rubbing alcohol. Or poison. Maybe both, mixed together for dilution. It tastes like industrial solvent. We drink, her lips parting as though for a kiss, her

eyes delicately closing to savor. I swallow hard, staring at her. Her throat is pale and the skin is thin enough so that I can see the webbing of black veins beneath. She would kill me with a knife, I think, kill me if she thought she could get away with it. Over those lobsters in the cheap styrofoam box, she would gut me. Probably over less. But she knows, we both know: she's too small to drag my body anywhere. That simple reality keeps me alive right now, I'm sure.

Showing her smile again—little teeth, almost brown—she gestures with the bottle. I shake my head, no, and she says, “Business. The problem: I didn’t ask for so many. You see the problem. I do not have money for this many. This is the problem.”

“Take the half we arranged for and I’ll take the rest back.”

“Back to the ocean? What?” There’s a momentary panic in her fluttering eyes when I step forward again. “Fine. It would be fine for Ajna. But, what about Barry? What will Barry do with the other half? Out all night selling lobsters,” she says, eyeing me.

“Maybe I’ll take them home. Eat them myself,” I say. “It doesn’t matter. It isn’t your concern.”

“But, Barry doesn’t like lobster.”

Weird, giant, prehistoric bugs. Eyes wandering out of their strange, hooded skulls. Perhaps it’s a form of sacrilege, being a native Mainer and detesting sea-spiders. I wish I’d never told her how they make my skin crawl. It’s another weapon in the arsenal she has against me. I say, again, “It isn’t your concern what I do with them.”

Clucking her tongue, she shakes her head and repeats, “Out all night selling lobsters.” Giving pause to think it over and then, leaning in closer, she whispers, “Stolen lobsters,” shaking her head, as though ashamed for me.

I feel my face flush. “I didn’t steal.”

She shrugs, doesn't care. "So many rumors. So many things said about Barry. Only Ajna sticks up for Barry. No one else."

Though I've said nothing, my face burns and I know that that has told all—I've sold myself out. "Two dollars a pound for the half we agreed on. What are you offering for the other half?"

"I don't have the kind of money you're asking for." She turns up her hands.

"I haven't asked. I want to know what you're offering."

She makes a big act of mulling it, but I know she's only pausing, not giving it any thought at all, before she says, "Fifty."

"Cents? A pound? That's cheaper than liver. Cheaper than bones. I'll take them home."

Again she sidesteps, blocking my path. There is no smile this time. We've come down to money now. The risk to my life is tangible—material.

"Seventy five," she says. The words are husky, whispered low, mired in an accent that has gotten thicker; twisting up the words.

"A dollar."

Her bony, little hands wring quickly and curl closed. "Eighty."

"I won't take less than a dollar. I won't be made to count coins." I'm sweating. My hands are damp. The collar of my shirt is damp. This could be the closest that I have stood to death and I have stood very close to death, you could ask my brother.

I let a moment pass. She's fuming-pissed. She's a goddamned oven, simmering with quiet, steel-still rage. Softly, plainly, I say, "Or, I can take them elsewhere."

I get my sixty-four dollars handed out in pained accounting—each bill smacked on the countertop as though an act of vengeance—the dollars rolling out to me from a bundle that looks far from exhausted when she's finished. I know it's intentional, her allowing

me to see it. She wants me to know that I didn't win. That I didn't get the best of her. I do.

I'm not gloating with success, I'm barely holding it together when I cross through the kitchen toward the door, knowing that for days I will obsess over how badly I was cheated. With Ajna, even success is defeat. Right now, though, I just want to get free, even if it means leaving my back exposed to the Croat.

Ajna's voice stops me at the door. Radiating through the handle, the frigid Autumn night tempts me out; promising that I'll be snuggler with her than inside the warm hotel with Ajna.

"Barry," she says. Her renewed, crooning tone sends a cold wave of dread through me. Turned back to face her, I catch sight of the twenty-dollar-bill in her hand. "There's other work for you."

I've turned, but even the monumental gravity of that twenty-spot isn't enough to get me moving again. She must, I realize, have some horrendously lowly act for me to perform to warrant such a fee. I say, "What work?"

"You must promise me."

"Promise you what?"

Setting the bill on the counter, sliding it in my direction with her tented, arachnid fingers, she finally steps aside but I dare not move. This is almost certainly a trap; my potential movement an invitation for her knife. I can imagine it perfectly enough, buried to the hilt in my gut-fat. "Barry, I think you do not trust me."

"What work?"

"Take the money and promise," she says and allows for an inviting moment and when I do not take it, when I still do not move, she says, "This promise. I must have your loyalty. You work for me, you only take money from me. We are partners. We split everything fifty-fifty. I will be your..."

"Pimp," I say.

She smiles—enjoying the word, the ring of it, thinking it might suit her, but unwilling to let me be the one to bestow it. “Agent,” she corrects.

“Nicer word.”

“Do you want the work?” she asks and she isn’t asking if I want the work, but if I need the money and, sourly, the answer is yes. I trundle forward, back across the tiled floor to the counter, slipping the bill into my pocket without ever-once looking at it; as though I’m thieving on the sly. The scar of her smile deepens.

4

Passing through the swinging doors I realize that I've never seen anything of the hotel, beyond the narrow, fastidiously kept kitchen.

In the hallway, in the lobby beyond, the rugs covering the floors seem too big for the spaces they inhabit—too big, too ornate; old and worn. Everything has that look. Brass and dark-wood and heavy shadows settled in the corners—it is a place from another age where rooms were small and cluttered—full with claustrophobic patterns. The glittering eyes of a taxidermied bunny-head flash at me as I pass.

When Ajna pivots the banister and starts upstairs, I feel my legs weaken and I come to a stop. A fog of melancholy, almost completely opaque, guards the threshold, blocking my path.

I made the wrong decision taking her money. I know that now.

A few steps above me, our faces on level, Ajna turns back to command, "Come."

I finger the bill in my pocket. I could slide it free, let it loose. Let it drift to the ground. Turn. Leave. Never come back.

Rather than rising, her voice drops. "You cannot stand there."

I step forward into the gloom, onto the first stair. And it's suddenly too late to turn back. The wallpaper on the second floor greets me like sea-serpent-tentacles, pulling me in, dragging me down to the farthest door in the hallway where Ajna steps aside. When I hesitate again she says, "Through," brusquely.

"Who's in there?"

"Through," she says again and I step through. Beyond the door is a narrow flight of stairs, leading up. I climb up into an attic room.

Like what I've already seen of the hotel, the room I emerge into is narrow, dark and cluttered; an old smell steeped into everything. At first, not recognizing the man in the chair before me seems a relief, but as he starts his silent appraisal the feeling erodes.

We watch each other.

"How much did she give you?" He narrows his eyes as though speaking is a discomfort. I say nothing. "I gave her a fifty to pass along. Did she give you that?"

A bed on one side of the room looks untouched—the quilt across it as uniform as cured concrete. There has been an effort made to furnish the room to the point of bursting. The nameless man before me sits in one of two big wicker chairs that dominates what floor space the bed doesn't occupy. A coffee table rigged from a lobster trap and a slab of glass is wedged between the chairs. The sight of the trap makes my lip curl—acid rising in my gut.

"Have a seat." Leaning to the side, he dislodges a wallet from his pocket. Searching a moment, he lays a bill out atop the table. I come and sit. The bill is a fifty. The acid in my belly abates. Something inside me wriggles nervously, like it wants to be happy but can't commit.

“Take it.”

Pocketing the bill, I announce, “I don’t do sex stuff. Not with dudes.”

He cringes, looking away. “I wouldn’t be interested if you did; I wouldn’t want to hear about it if you did.” His face is hard; the face of a man who routinely violates one principle in order to maintain another; the face of a man who does so without conflict or question; the face of a man who weighs out decisions in an instant.

I tell him, “I don’t sell drugs, either.”

“I’m not into drugs.”

I shrug. “If you are, I can get you some. But, it’ll cost.”

We’re both silent for the moment it takes him to tamp down a pack of Dunhill’s. Lighting up, the little room fills instantly with smoke. He looks at the cigarette in his fingers. “I told you I’m not into drugs. You ever a smoker?”

“In high school, socially. Not since.”

“I quit twenty-five years. Had one and it was like I’d never quit at all. Went right back. Pack a day.”

“That’s expensive.”

“I don’t have to worry about money. Not that kind of money, anyway.” He exhales. A noxious pillow of smoke plows over me. I close my eyes. When I open them again he says, “Nobody ever wishes to be poor. That said, being rich isn’t great either. You have more money—less time, it seems. You spend your time worrying about your money.”

“Hard life.”

“I’m just explaining to you how it is,” he says.

“I’ll tell you how it is.” Something in the way he’s sitting and looking me over is rubbing a raw nerve, deep down. “I’m so poor that when I told you I don’t do sex shit, I had to wonder if I was lying.” I look at him—serving back his practiced stare. After he’s said nothing, I say, “I do some construction around here. In the area. Big houses. Houses built for rich people. People like you. You know what I think about in big, empty houses? I think: these rooms aren’t for people—they’re for egos. But, you know what? I don’t care how big your bathroom is, fuck-head, you’re still dropping trow, and laying brown-pipe like every other filthy mammal on the goddamned planet. No matter how big the room gets, you’re still sitting over your own fresh-baked, steaming butt-bread. No amount of money can reverse the reality that you’re not actually better than anyone else. You just have more stuff.”

There’s a look on his face: twisted up. Hard to tell if he’s come to respect me, or is already worn out on me—already through talking with me. He holds the expression. “Butt-bread? Never heard that one. You came up here for fifty bucks. You sat for another fifty. What’s it gonna cost to get a civil conversation from you?”

“I only got twenty to come up here.” Smiling, I show him my missing tooth. I start to stand, stopping when I see him spread four fifties out on the tabletop.

He keeps his hand on the bills, his eyes locked on mine. “That get your attention?”

When he pulls his hand away I ease back into the chair. I don’t reach for the money, but I can’t take my eyes from it either. “I worry,” I tell him. “What you’d be paying me for, if you’re willing to pay so much.”

“Civil conversation,” he says. “For now, civil conversation.”

“In the future?”

“No one knows the future.” He looks at me. He smiles. “Or is that not quite true? I’ve heard tell you have a window to it.”

I just stare back at him. His smile dies. He settles back in his chair.

“You were in jail some years ago. How long did you serve?”

When he doesn’t acknowledge that my hand’s landed on the cash, I scoop it up and jam it into my pocket. My heart is beating so hard, I worry he can hear it. “Five months.”

“Breaking and entering.”

“If you knew, why’d you ask? It was a misunderstanding. I was drunk; stumbled into the wrong place.”

“That a lie?”

“Maybe. But, I already have your money.”

He nods, considering it. “This is a test. To see if you can be trusted for the work I need done. Maybe you should think about that before opening your mouth up again. How many homes have you robbed?”

Not that many. I could count them out, if I tried; probably count them on one hand, plus a few fingers from the other. But, I don’t say that to him. Instead, I say, “I can’t answer that question.”

“You’re not interested in making more money?” he asks, nodding to the empty place on the table where his cash had been.

“I’m interested in money,” I tell him. “I’m not interested in returning to jail.”

“I’m not a cop.”

“I appreciate you saying that, but it’s more an issue of confidence than reassurances.”

He nods. “I understand.” Clearing his throat, shifting in his chair, he stubs out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe. Ash and ember drift to the floor as he sets the smoldering butt on the table between us, immediately sparking up another as the glass-top starts to blacken. I wait, watching as he examines the glowing ember of his fresh cigarette. He says, “Let me tell you about myself, then.”

“If you think that’s worth my time and your money. You can talk all you want but I’ll tell you right now, there’s no one in my life I trust well enough to share with, what you’ve asked me to share.” I think of Ray because he’s the one who knows all my secrets, knows me through and through, but I won’t speak his name. Not here. I say, “No one.”

The man across from me weighs this. Having come to some sort of conclusion, he says, “I’ll tell you about myself. And when I tell you about myself you’ll understand why I’ve sought you out and you’ll know you can trust me. You’ll know what I want, and once you know that you’ll know the very marrow of my being—everything I’ve ever been and all that I can ever be.”

“Is that gonna take long?”

His face puckering into a near-snarl, he says, “If I am honest with you, I expect you to be honest with me.”

“If you’re honest.”

“You’ll know. You’ll know I’m honest,” he says. The ash on his cigarette is growing. He holds it out, away from the chair and flicks it toward the floor, taking a puff to tell me, “I am this cigarette.”

“I’m not sure that qualifies as honest.” I shrug. “I’m pretty certain it isn’t true, at any rate.”

His eyes shine, a dark glimmer. “I didn’t smoke for thirty years.”

“I thought it was twenty-five.”

“It was a long time,” he says impatiently. “I quit when my wife quit. Our daughter’s name was Josephine...”

I have already started standing and he trails off, watching me rise. He was right. I do know him. I know him already and I know he’s telling me the truth and I know exactly what he wants from me. And I know he’s honest. And I know it’s all he has, just as he’s claimed. Shaking my head, I say, “You’re better off keeping your money.”

“But, my daughter...”

“Your daughter’s gone. No one can reverse that. Not me—not anyone.”

“But, you...” he stammers. His voice is shimmering, plaintive, fragile. It breaks my heart.

“No,” I tell him. Digging his money out of my pocket, I toss it back onto the coffee table. A few bills slip off onto the floor. “I never did what they claim I did. It was a hoax. The whole thing. Keep your money.”

“You’re lying,” he says, the delicate nature of his grief eroding; I can see the anger now, the frustration bubbling up in his face. It just makes me feel worse for him.

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t help you.”

“I thought you said ‘can’t.’”

“It’s the same answer, no matter how I word it,” I say. I’ve been through this a few times now. And it’s always like this, more or less.

Some sad, sick person crawls out of his grief long enough to convince himself that I can help. That somehow, this person he's meeting—me—whom he's never met, that was famous for five minutes two decades ago can somehow fix what's broken in his life. I cannot. And—maybe the saddest part is—even if I could, I wouldn't.

“I paid you. Stay and listen.”

I shake my head, no. I tell him, “No.”

“I need to tell you about Josephine.”

“I don't want to hear about your daughter.”

“It's five thousand dollars.”

“That isn't enough.”

“Seven... Ten, then. Ten thousand.”

I shake my head. “It doesn't matter how much it is. It won't be enough.”

“Everyone has a price.”

“It's yours, you see; no one can heal your grief but you. You own it and it isn't something you can sell away.”

“This isn't about grief. She's killing me; trying to ruin me,” he says.

I've already turned away. The last word I hear from him is, “Please.”

I shower under a spray so cold it feels like pebbles lashing me. Dressed, I jog in place, punching the air to get my blood going. Without the hum of the refrigerator, without the knock and groan of the radiator, the house is ghostly quiet.

Outside, Ray's waiting for me. "Didn't want you to waste gas coming to get me," he says as I breeze past, climbing into the pickup. The windshield's gray-laced with frost. After getting the truck started I turn the defrost on high. I blow into my hands and wring them, trying to push the nagging cold from my digits. Ray says, "You're welcome. I walked. Don't worry, it's not that cold out."

I roll my eyes, making fists with my hands. "You want cold, go inside for five minutes."

"You're a peach this morning."

"House is a goddamned ice box. Pa was right moving."

"Pa? Pa's turned sissy in his old age. This here, Barry, is fucking weather. This is goddamned weather. This is what the pilgrims traveled to get a taste of."

"That may have been more an issue of religious freedom, I've been told."

He shrugs. “Call it what you will. Historians will tell you they came for God. History will tell you they got New England weather. Who are either of us to speak for them about what it was they were after?” He’s full of it this morning. Talking like a flood-river emptying into the sea. I should be happy he isn’t on a tangent about some long-lost ex of his. I should be happy for the reprieve. After a moment, he says, “Or, you could move to Florida. Sell the house and move. That’s probably what you should do. Have you talked to Pa recently?”

The frost on the windshield is fragile, eaten away quickly by the blowing fan and, with a little half-dome nine inches tall to see through, I put the truck in gear and start out onto the road. After less than a moment of silence has elapsed, he starts, “Suzy Trask...”

“Jesus, Ray. Can we not do this today?”

“What do you mean: this?”

“This thing where I spend the whole day listening to you jabber about girls... Girls from your past, girls you had, girls you wished you had. Girls you dreamt about, girls you looked at, girls you touched. Girls. That thing. This. You know, Ray? There’s more to talk about than just women.”

“I tried talking about pilgrims. You didn’t seem keen on that, either.”

“I don’t wanna talk about pilgrims, Ray.”

“Okay. What’d you want to talk about?”

“What are we doing for work?” I say. “Where the fuck are we gonna find work?”

“Is your thinking that this will be a more pleasant conversation? ‘Cause it sounds depressing and, at any rate, it’s probably a talk we should’ve started before leaving the driveway.” He looks down the road as I turn the truck off onto a narrow, rutted pass that cuts out into the woods. Imprinted with the chunky tread marks of

construction vehicles, the gravel and dirt is bucked up into big ruts. “The McKier job. So you do know where we’re going for work; that was your attempt at conversation.”

“We’re going to the McKier job to see if we can land work for the day. I’m talking about long term goals.”

“Long term goals. Good. Whatcha got?”

Stopping the truck just beyond the curtain of the woods, I can see the house (just a damp framework of two-bys) is empty; the muddy lot around it, empty. A flag of plastic sheeting whips in and out of a hole where a window should go.

Ray says, “No one’s here.”

“I see that,” I tell him. Pulling closer to the house and killing the engine, the resulting silence is staggering. It’s cold out, but the gas gauge is too low to risk running the truck for heat.

“Suzy Trask...”

“No,” I say. “No. No. No. I told you, we’re not doing this.”

We’re quiet awhile, looking at the house. Looking in through the yawning doorframe, the floor inside is littered with wet leaves. It doesn’t look like anyone’s been here for days, weeks. Maybe longer. “They’re not coming, are they?”

“No,” Ray says. “They’re not coming. At least we made money yesterday.”

“And I still don’t have enough to get the electricity turned back on, or the oil tank filled. This isn’t a solution, us floundering like this. Chasing all these odd jobs. Living just gets leaner and leaner. And what are we headed towards?”

We sit because neither one of us can come up with anywhere to go where there might-be-money-to-be-made and being outside, in the sun is reasonably less depressing than going home to a house without lights or heat. At one point Ray offers, “We could go to Meredith’s. It’s warm there, even if there’s no cable.”

I shake my head.

“She’s at work.”

I shake my head again.

“We could drive around a bit.”

I tap the dashboard over the fuel gauge.

When Ray starts up again, “Suzy Trask...” I open the door and drop out into the day.

Walking through the woods around the house I kick at wet piles of leaves and, in my most productive moment, push the tall stump of a big, rotted birch over. The soft fiber makes a papery sound as it gives way. It takes me right back to being a kid—spreading a big smile over my face. Makes me remember romping through the woods behind our house. Coming home to Meredith getting dinner ready. She wasn’t much older than I was. Old enough so that Pa trusted her cooking; old enough so she didn’t look like a child to Ray, I suppose. Then I remember, I’m no kid at all. Not anymore. I’m a thirty-seven year old man with no electricity, no job, no prospects.

Past noon, I return to the pickup. We play cribbage with a deck of cards from the glovebox, summing points on the back of a receipt as the day thins out into shadows. Then, finally, it gets too cold to sit any longer, too dim to see the suits. The day has all but evaporated. I start up the truck. The lights flash starkly against the geometric perfection of the unfinished house, against the chaotic scrimshaw of trees behind it. Pulling back out onto the street I try not to think about what a waste today has been.

And then, laboring not to think about it—I’m thinking about it again. Thinking about the electricity; about how far I am, even with getting paid last night, from having the utilities settled out. The nights are already aching cold a week into October. I’m thinking how screwed I’ll be if I let it get to November without power, the

December afterward. The long, agonizing tundra of January, February, March and half of April still ahead. Then all this turns from a sad experiment in minimalism to burst pipes and frost bite. To a house surrendered to deterioration. Then, I'm done.

Without having settled on it, or so much as discussed it, I find myself aiming the truck toward the wealthy enclave of Camden. The wind has started up; the trees sway blackly against a deep blue sky.

“I thought you were worried about gas,” Ray says, and when I say nothing he says, “Have we given up on conversation, then?” I keep quiet, eyes on the grimy windscreen. “It just seems like you’ve made up your mind about something and as your partner...”

“Partner?”

“Accomplice. Brother. Whatever. It just seems to me that if you’re making up your mind about something you should at least fill me in. That if you’re making up your mind over something, you should put it to a vote.”

“I’ve never known you to say no,” I tell him.

“Maybe I’d like the opportunity to,” Ray says.

Taking the turns slowly, carefully: maybe that’s how he knows I’ve made up my mind. Maybe it’s just that he’s my brother. I turn off onto a road that hugs the coast. The driveways out here are far apart, some of them fancy-brick-laid, some of them gated.

The truck lights fall over a tall, ornate privacy fence, and I think about how a single panel probably costs enough to straighten out my utility woes. He says, “Maybe I’d just like the option of talking you out of something you’ll regret.”

I say, “I don’t know what choice I have, Ray. I can’t let it get into November without electricity; with no hot water. With no fucking heat. What choice is there?” I ask, but I know what choice there is—I’m thinking about the man at the Rockland Inn, wondering if he could actually get me the kind of money he said he could. Though, as soon as the thought arises, it gives bloom to a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Looking at Ray the sickness is ripe enough to worry about it blossoming up my throat.

“Meredith would put you up in a heartbeat.”

“That’s no kinda solution,” I tell him, before even considering whether it might be. “What about Pa’s house? Our ancestral home.”

He laughs. “You make it sound like Buckingham Palace. It’s a shotgun shack.”

“It’s our home,” I say.

“Pa’s gone. It’s your house. Yours to sell. Sell it. It isn’t worth keeping. Especially, if it means...” he nods out to the rooftop beyond the fence.

I don’t say anything. Fact is, without the house, what do I have in this earthly world?. This junk truck, armfuls of debt, a fourteen foot fiberglass boat, clothes going to rags. It isn’t anything. Nothing worth a damn.

Ray says, “I don’t think the risk is worth the reward.”

“Yesterday you were all for nicking traps and now you’re making a stink over... What?”

He sighs. “I don’t remember being ‘all for that,’ either.”

He knows about the man at the Rockland Inn, I’m sure. He’s gonna try to talk me into going back there, taking that offer. I stare at him. He says nothing for a moment, finally saying, “What if you’re caught?”

“Jail,” I say. “Won’t have to worry about the heat then.”

He nods. “Right. Just worry about getting punked in the ass.”

“Nobody’s punkin’ anybody,” I say. With the truck off the road, half-tucked into the woods, I cut the lights and kill the engine. In the distance the slate rooftop glimmers dimly. The windows peering over the fence are dark.

Ray says, “I’m not sure this one’s empty, Barry.”

“It’s empty. The lights are off. It’s seven-thirty. It’s empty.”

“It looks haunted.”

“They all look haunted when they’re huge and empty,” I say. I say, “Come on,” and I climb out from the cab.

The night is crazy; the wind blowing the trees around and the booming of the ocean like a warning of something terrible and inevitable stomping its way toward me. We dart across the street together and I take a big, energetic leap at the fence but my leaping isn’t what it once was so, with upheld arms, I hit the fence hard and slide off.

Ray is still laughing when I try the move again, this time managing to latch hold of the top of the fence and pull myself up. There’s much grunting involved. Squirming and wriggling I scrape the inside of my thigh and crush my junk and fall to the ground, a graceless tangle of ache. Ray is still laughing.

“Fuck you.”

“You are so out of shape.”

“I’m bigger than you, so fuck off.”

He’s still laughing.

The house is dark; so dark that the panes of the windows manage to find smudges of light from the nighttime and reflect them back, though wherever this source of light is, is a mystery to me. Ray says, “I’m still not sure it’s empty.”

“You’re nuts,” I tell him. “Course it’s empty. Look at it.”

Ray’s not the only one who feels it. Starting around the house, I’m feeling it too: something is wrong. Like I’m being watched. But

the house is dark and I've made such an argument of my certainty, now I feel bound to it. Negotiating my approach, I duck from hedge to hedge like I'm coming up on something dangerous and asleep.

The house is huge, a confusion of windows looking out. But, for some reason it takes a lot of searching before I find the one I like. It's low and wide and it's the only one I come upon that offers more to see inside than impenetrable pitch. A grand piano cowers in a corner, behind it a wall of books. I find a stone by my feet and with a quick, crystalline splash the window dissolves. I clear out the sill with the rock. Hesitant a moment, I stand, looking in and listening. The ocean crashes. The wind swooshes in the trees.

The drapes framing the window writhe as I lay my hands on the sill and hoist myself in. Before moving on I turn, wiping the window down with my sleeve and thinking I should steal some gloves, maybe a hat, maybe a pillowcase for a bag. My lack of preparedness is embarrassing.

Quiet and still, the house invites me further in. Maybe it's the silence that causes me to sneak, but—some paces in—I'm frozen when a peal of laughter rings down the hall. A sheen of sweat materializes instantly over me. Unable to move or even think for a moment, except to hear the voice screaming in my head, "God damn it, Ray was right," I stare into the gloomy hallway ahead. Suddenly, the prospect of jail seems tangible, nearly inevitable.

It's Ray who pipes up first. "Fuck."

The word is like a cattle prod, jarring me back into motion and I start back-stepping, whispering urgently, "Let's go. Let's get out of here."

"Fuck," Ray says again and when I turn I find that he hasn't retreated a pace. Standing rigid, his face is twisted up in an expression of shock and, following his gaze to the doorway, I see now, there in that miry darkness, what was hidden before. In the

blackness before us, two white eyes blink calmly, watching Ray. A blanket draped over his arm, three digits of a hand stuffed into his mouth, the little boy steps into the relative light of the big room around us.

Removing the hand from his mouth, turning to face me, the child asks, “Are you here to turn the lights back on?”

Relief briefly floods in. “Yup. Yup. Here to turn the power on. I just need...” Resuming my retreat, I say, “To look at this switch over here.”

The child watches. His wide-opened-eyes are impossibly bright through the darkness. In my careful back-peddling, I’m aware of (not hearing for the first time, but for the first time really aware of) a voice calling, “Gregory? Gregory?”

And, as if that name is an incantation, bringing form into the world—suddenly, in the same dark doorway a woman appears. In the cast of the milky light coming through the window, she stops—just as the boy had. Her eyes are wider and even brighter than his. Raising my hand, as though in apology, I find myself frozen—still once more. She’s the first to move, grabbing the boy, pulling him back into the darkness. At once, as though agreed upon, Ray and I spring into action, jumping back, through the window.

Launching myself outside, a little tooth of glass from the windowsill bites my hand. Blood starts down my fingers the moment my feet hit the ground. Breaking into an all-out sprint, I cut across the yard, running myself so hard that within the first few paces I’m already winded.

Lightheaded and full of dread, I realize I’ve only brokered a quarter of the lawn when I begin to have doubts about my escape-readiness. I should have paced myself.

And that’s when I hear the dogs. How many of them, what breed, I can’t discern from their yapping and growling, but in my

mind they are at least five, maybe seven strong, a threatening mix of mastiffs and dobermans and pit bulls, all frothy mouthed with thirsty-rage.

Up ahead the fence is bobbing closer, just beyond an apple tree. Having covered half the lawn, the dogs' barking is already unbearably loud. They're right on top of me—at my ankles. I jump, grabbing a tree limb and yanking myself up, just as a dog's muzzle brushes my foot.

Jail, I think. Boredom and danger. Desperation. But, at least I'm not dog food. My heart almost chokes, suddenly overfull with shame as I climb, groaning, "Uuuuggghhh."

By the time I realize that I've been cornered by a pekingese and two aged border collies, it's too late. A man's already crossing the lawn toward me. I'm already in the beam of his flashlight. The barrel of his rifle peeks out, bobbing along with him as he says, over the frail barking of the ancient dogs, "Stay where you are. The police are on their way." Shadows from the tree limbs tattoo my sleeves and belly and face and rotate dizzily as he advances, like the branches are seizing me—holding me for him.

7

“You’re going to pay me back,” Meredith says. It’s the first thing she’s said as we drive through the long, low fields, away from the Knox County Jail. It’s a bright day. Bright and cold and my insides are filled with similar, bitter contradictions after a long week inside. And, while I’m happy to be driving into the constrictions of court-approved freedom, the future I’m headed for can’t be seen as anything more than vague and dismal. Lawyers fees, fines, an almost-certain, extended jail stay awaiting me in the not so distant future; my prospects have, somehow, gotten worse. “What the heck were you thinking, Barry?”

“You’ll get your money back when I go to the hearing.”

“You better show. If you don’t show I swear I’ll hunt you down,” she says and then repeats the phrase, “Hunt you down,” as though for emphasis, but it’s barely loud enough to hear.

When I reach for the radio dial she smacks my hand away, scolding, “Nope.” But, then it becomes less apparent who she’s scolding when she says, “No, no, no. You’re not my child.” Her saying that only manages to deepen the raw teenage-embarrassment that I’m feeling; shamed and without good answers to give and

knowing that I've fucked up royally and wishing there was some fantastic way I could go back in time; wishing I could make different choices. I say, "I owe you."

The tires warble over the pavement while I watch out the window. Beside the road the grass is still green, but there's not a leaf left on the trees beyond.

"Yeah. You do." She sighs, shakes her head. After a moment she says again, "What were you thinking?"

It sort-of shocks me when I lament aloud, "I'm gonna lose the house."

"Yeah. I'd say that's the least of your worries. You oughta sell it, Barry. Get the money, get a lawyer. Or, take the plea. That's what you should do. Take the plea. Whatever they offer." Pinching her eyes shut a moment, she rubs her forehead. Looking back to the road she sighs. "I don't even know what that means: take the plea. I think I heard it on a cop show."

I tune her out. I don't want to dwell on any of this. I wanna get the cash from the house, go to a cheap hotel, get drunk and take a hot shower. Wash away my sins, inside and out. Put on clean clothes. My shirtsleeve is stained—old blood now, gone brown—from having cut myself on the Farmer's window. That was their name. The damned, shitty irony. Their name was Farmer and it burns me worse than the cut or the trashed shirt—that someone with that kind of money, that kinda house, would have the audacity to be named Farmer.

In tuning her out, somewhere along the trip Meredith has come to this conclusion, "You'll come home with me. That's what will happen. I'll take you home. We'll work this through; come up with a solution."

"Don't get yourself involved, Meredith; you've already done too much."

Ten minutes out of jail, the thought of Meredith taking over as my personal warden already feels suffocating. Only when she turns up Lakeview Drive, Chickawaukie Pond calm enough to reflect the wooded hills behind it, do I realize the futility of my arguing. She's made up her mind. This is how it will be. She says, "I paid for you to be free, so now I'm in charge, I guess. That's what's best."

My last argument is feeble. It doesn't even sound like an argument when I say, "I need clean clothes."

Apparently, it doesn't sound like an argument to her, either. She tells me she'll run to my house while I clean up. There's no arguing, then. She's decided.

She shows me the bathroom and when she leaves I turn the water on and sit on the toilet, listening to it hiss until the front door slams. I shut the water off.

In the fridge I find a bottle of beer. On her couch, I sit still while a cat explores my personal space cautiously. After testing my lap with her paw, she climbs aboard, curling up to resemble a gag-store plastic-poo and falling to purring. Something about the cat's warm weight holds me in place, so I'm still sitting there with only a sip of beer left when Meredith comes back in.

Glaring at the bottle in my hand, turing her scowl to my greasy hair, she doesn't say anything until she's dropped my wardrobe onto the couch. "That's my beer," she says. "And your house is gross. You should kiss my feet that I was willing to walk in there."

I finish off the beer in a callous swig before telling her, "I didn't ask for that."

"I could have left you in jail."

Pushing the cat off my lap, it lands on the floor with an irritated whine. "It feels like you have." She stands watching me, until I say, "I'm sorry. I'm being an asshole. I know I am. I'm just fucked. And that's not your fault. And I do appreciate the help."

She nods and leaves the room and comes back with two beers. Handing me one, we both have a long sip before she says, “You’ll have to sell the house. Quickly.”

“I’m not selling the house.”

“I don’t have any more cash to sink into the Barry fund.” She watches me a moment. “Do you even have a job?”

“I’ve been working with the McKier brothers, out off Buttermilk Lane.”

She laughs, a sharp, humorless bark. “The McKier brothers are shut down. Months ago,” she says. “The bank took them over. You didn’t know that?”

Swallowing twice before pulling the beer from my lips, I manage to drain half the bottle.

She shakes her head. “You’re gonna have to sell the house, that’s all there is to it.”

“No. I’ve got something else lined up that I can do. An opportunity...”

“An opportunity? Sounds dubious.”

“Ajna Canth introduced me to this guy... His daughter’s dead, I guess...”

“Oh,” she says and we’re both quiet. I drink and she watches me, her eyes narrowing before she says, “You can’t...”

“Of course not. Of course I can’t.”

“I don’t think I like this, Barry.”

“I don’t either,” I say. “But I don’t think I have any options at this point.”

“There’s always an option. A choice to do right or wrong. Trust me on that, I know: there’s always a choice.” Standing, she goes into the kitchen behind the couch, pacing there a moment. Her footsteps beat out an aimless loop. Returning, she sits in the lounge

across from me and says, “We’ve known each other... How long, Barry?”

I shrug.

“Right. I was a junior in high school when Ray and I started dating. You were ten. Ray was, like, twenty-four.” She shakes her head, muttering, “I still can’t believe your father was okay with that. Now, looking back it seems like...”

“I think Pa approved of anyone being in the house if they’d cook...”

Meredith laughs. “Yeah. That sounds about right.” Laughing again, awkwardly, she says, “Here’s what you don’t know about me, Barry: I used to be trouble. I used to shop lift. A lot.” She looks away, something dreamy and embarrassing and sensual flitting in her gaze. Wrangling up a severely adult tone, she tells me, “It was a rush. That’s why I did it. And I’d steal anything. One time, I stole a pair of boys’ jockey shorts, just cause it was there, within reach and I knew I would get away with it. I took them from the general store downtown and threw them away in the first trash can I passed on my way home. The point was getting that rush. It never mattered what I stole.” Clearing her throat, she says, “You see, I was always making ‘bad’ decisions, Barry. Always doing wrong just for that charge, that rush. Ray was the one who got me to stop. I’d had a few close calls—couldn’t go into the general store by then, if you know what I mean. Anyhow, I started taking drama classes and, you know what?—I found that same rush was possible, doing something productive. Doing something good...”

“...I remember that production of *My Fair Lady*. It wasn’t good... And, for the record, I didn’t break into that house for a fucking rush Meredith. I’m trying to survive here.”

Ignoring me she says, “Besides, if you know you can’t do what he’s offering to pay you for...”

“I don’t need to,” I say. I’ve already thought it through, that part anyway. I say, “I just need to convince him that I can. I mean, if he’s crazy enough to think that I can summon the dead or commune with them, or whatever it is that he thinks about me, then he’s crazy enough to trick into thinking I’ve done it, right?” I say.

She lets out a slow breath that sounds like the distillate of disappointment before she says, “Do something good, Barry. For a change. Do something good. This is how you start: sell the house and go look for a job—a real one. That way, when you go before the judge you can show...”

“A job? From the job tree?”

“Or the want ads. Whichever.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It’s not that hard, either: you have to try.”

“I’m not selling the house. That’s the last time I wanna hear about it, because it’s not happening, okay? You may as well drop it. As for a real job—I say, what? ‘Please hire me: in a few months I’ll be going to jail, but please train me and pay me until then. Also, what’s your benefits package look like? I’d love full dental.’ Does that sound about right? ‘Cause no one hires that, Meredith. There aren’t any open doors for someone standing where I am.”

“What is it with you and that damn house? It’s a trailer, for Christ’s sake, Barry.”

“It’s not a trailer; it’s my ancestral home. Our ancestral home. Ray’s and mine and Pa’s and, yeah, yours too. It’s our home.”

“It looks like a goddamn trailer.”

“That’s just because it’s rundown,” I explain.

“It’s a curse, Barry. That’s what it is. It’s the reason you tried robbing that house. If you didn’t have the bills to worry over...”

“If I didn’t have the house, I wouldn’t have anything at all.”

She looks at me.

“You see a trailer. That’s fine. That isn’t what I see—you have to understand that,” I take a breath. Turning away from her to a non-point on the ceiling, I say, “I see my father and my brother sitting together, playing cribbage at the dining table.” I sigh. “I see the girl from down the street, only a little older than me, trying to be a mom for me out of the kindness...”

“Barry...” she says, cutting me short. “I was trying to act like an adult so Ray would notice me. I think we can both look at that honestly now.” Her eyes shift a little as she watches me and we’re both quiet. She says, after a moment, “Is any of this illegal?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I won’t do anything illegal, or help you do anything illegal.”

“I probably wouldn’t ask.”

She nods, eyes closed. “I’ll help. Okay? I’ll help however I can... What’s your plan?”

“I don’t know. Convince him that I can contact his dead daughter, I guess.”

She inhales, breath hissing across her lips.

Back in high school, Sarah Goldstein and I were friends. But it's been a long time since high school and when she sees me walk into the lobby of the Rockland Inn, her face turns stiff and cold. Meeting at the reception desk, she tells me in a rigid whisper, "You better not let Canth see you coming in the front door, Cookie..."

"I guess you haven't heard. I've been hired in a professional capacity. So, I'm sure..." I trail off. Turning away, she's given up listening and I follow her gaze beyond the big, dark staircase, to the narrow dining room at my rear. Expecting to find Ajna standing there, instead I find two people who've broken off their conversation to quietly stare at me. Neither one of them is Canth, but the man seated there, I do recognize. Abandoning my conversation with Sarah mid-sentence, I cross to their table.

"Mr. Cook," the man greets me.

I nod down at him and the woman at his side, in turn.

"I don't believe I introduced myself to you properly, the last time we met," he says, offering his hand. "Nevers. Davis Nevers. I'm surprised to see you, Mr. Cook. I suspected we wouldn't meet

again.” Filling my gap in the conversation, he says, “This is my associate, Priscilla Bloomfield. Priscilla, Mr. Cook.”

The woman’s in her fifties or sixties, shaped like a lightbulb and has a shock of purple hair topping her head. She smiles and says, “I’m familiar with your reputation, Mr. Cook...”

That word—reputation—gets my face cooking and I stammer a moment, desperately trying to construct an insult to volley back at her; only managing to mutter through my teeth, “Easter egg.” It comes out acidic and whispered.

Puzzled by the premature holiday greeting, Priscilla raises her eyebrows to say, “Having saved those vacationers years ago; that man and his daughter.”

I exhale. “Right.” Nodding nervously I brush the sweat from my forehead.

“Well, good seeing you, again.” When I don’t move away, Nevers asks, “Was there something in particular you wanted?”

“Yes,” I say. I open my mouth once or twice, failing to create any further sound, before I finally manage to make myself say, “Your offer. I’d like to take you up on it...”

“Well. This is a bit awkward. Priscilla happens to be the woman who took the job.” Folding his fingers together, he lays the knot of them on the table and affords me a look.

I say, “Her?”

“You weren’t interested; it seemed. And Ms. Canth...”

“Well, now I am interested. And I’m...” I can’t think of anything to say. After half a moment, I manage, “The man for the job. The man you came for...”

“That may well be, but Priscilla has stepped forward and has proven herself to be... reliable.” The word seems lackluster after the long pause but Priscilla smiles anyway.

Stealing one of the unused chairs at the table I plop myself down before either of them can argue against it. Scooting forward, I say, "What are her qualifications? May I ask that? She knows my reputation, said so herself. You know it too. It's what brought you here, right?"

"... Yes and no."

"I have experience here. Documented..."

"No one's arguing that..."

"So," I say, turning to the woman now. "Let me ask: what are your qualifications?"

"We're not in competition, Mr. Cook," she says. I stare at her and, obnoxiously, she straightens, rising to my gaze. "Very well. For starters, I received my Bachelors from Johns Hopkins University; majoring in Neuroscience. After that, I had a bit of a life change, took a few years off before my Doctoral Thesis on Paranormal Psychology. After that I studied shamanism at the Four Winds Center for Contemporary Shamanism in New Mexico. I've since studied Wicca under renowned oracle Christine Evenclaw..."

"So you're a Witch," I say. "You could have just said that without all the fancy bullshit."

She raises her eyebrows.

"'I'm a Witch.' See? That's all you have to say. Simple."

Her face settles into a frown.

I look to Nevers. Laying my hand conspiratorially on his forearm I tell him, "I'm only joking, I hope you understand, when I call her a witch. She has absolutely no supernatural powers at all, I can assure you of that." Turning to her I say, "I, on the other hand..."

By this time Nevers has removed his arm from my touch. I take the occasion to readjust my seat, closer to him so that we're both on one side of the table and Priscilla is relegated to the other, alone.

Meanwhile, the Witch's expression has changed again. Following her fresh smile behind me I catch sight of a gaunt, blonde boy crossing the room toward us. "Tomothy," Priscilla announces brightly when the boy takes the seat at her side. His face lights up, smiling at me, saying, "Hello." I give him the finger before returning my attention to Nevers.

"She's a huckster. You know that, right, Nevers? That's why I've come here," I say. I take a deep breath and tell him, "I wasn't gonna help you, but I can't sit by and watch you get grifted by these two carnies."

"I am no huckster. No carny," she says.

"You know how I know you're a fraud? You named this poor, pale whelp Tomothy. Anyone with a snail's depth of intuition could foresee the abuse a child named Tomothy would suffer at the hands of his peers."

"Tomothy is not my son. Tomothy is my apprentice," she says proudly. Turning to him affectionately, laying a hand on his shoulder, she says, "But in many ways he is my teacher."

"Gross. She's humping the child. She's a pervert and a carny."

"I am not 'humping' him. He is a very talented clairvoyant."

"Really?" I say. Turning to him, I ask, "Tell me what I'm thinking right now, Tomothy." When he looks away to Priscilla, I say, "I was thinking Tomothy is the dumbest fucking name I've ever heard." I feel badly, when the boy flinches and turns red. But, I push the guilt away; this is war. He's standing in the way of my goddamned money. He's got his goddamned hand on it.

"If you came here to have fun at our expense, perhaps you should simply leave," Priscilla says.

"I'm not leaving."

"Then I will," she says, looking to Nevers, but making no move to stand.

“Enough,” Nevers says. He doesn’t say it particularly loudly. But everyone goes quiet. Looking at me, he says, “Why are you here, Mr. Cook? I did understand that you weren’t interested in the job, didn’t I?”

“I told you... I heard that this con artist had taken you in and that...”

“Nobody’s taken me anywhere. And if you’re going to waste my time with a bunch of bullshit, you can see yourself out. Or, I can call the management to see you out.”

Lowering my voice, I lean in. “I’m in trouble. I’m going to lose my family home: my ancestral home, my birthright. I’ll do anything you need. I’ll find the ghost, Josephine. And you know I’m the only one who can... But, I need your help.”

He leans away, appraising me up and down. “How did you do it last time? How do I know you can do it again?”

Rather than answer, I say, “These two won’t find your daughter.”

“Will you? Can you? That’s the question, Mr. Cook.”

“Davis...” the woman starts to say, but he silences her with his palm.

And here is the juncture; the great fork in the path of my life. No is the answer I’ve always given; the answer I’m comfortable with. But, it is yes that I need. Yes is the bridge forward. Yes is the answer to my problems. The word just won’t leave me. Honest, before I can think of a clever way to avoid it, I tell him, “I don’t know.”

“Davis,” the Witch says. “This man is obviously troubled. He’s been in and out of jail. And we’re making such progress here...”

“It’s been slow,” he says. “Very slow.”

“Yes. I know that you’ve felt that way, but we’re working on a strategy...”

“Nope,” he says. His chair scrapes the floor as he stands. Looking down over us all, passing his judgement around, he says, “You said an important word when you said ‘competition,’ Priscilla. I’ve made up my mind and I won’t hear anymore about it, from either of you. This meeting is over. You’re now engaged in a competition. The individual or team who raises my daughter is the one who’ll be awarded payment.”

“Davis—I beg you to rethink this.”

Over Priscilla’s protest, I volunteer, “I think you’re making a hell of a good call on this one, Nevers. A hell of a good call. That’s a shrewd businessman right there. Shrewd. Businessman.”

The look he gives me is inscrutable. Reaching into the breast of his coat, he pulls free an envelope and tosses it down on the table before me. It could be anything in there, but I know (every crime movie I’ve ever seen, tells me) it’s a stack of cash. The only mystery being: how deep. “Welcome to the competition,” he says and turns and walks away.

Priscilla huffs grandly in his absence. “You’ve done it now.”

“Ruined your mark?”

“Ruined any chance that man has of finding peace.”

“Well, you can just call it a day, then.”

After Tomothy has helped her up, she says, “I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction.