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Always on the Clock

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Patrick Font
University of North Texas
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2012

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

Always on the Clock is a partial collection of stories centering around the working lives of men and women in Houston, Texas, that explores failed notions of the American Dream. Houston, my hometown, is not perfect by any means, but, given its cultural diversity, I do find it to be the perfect backdrop for the struggles my characters face as they yearn for better versions of themselves, however unattainable their desires may be. This is all to say that *Always on the Clock* is a satire of American obsessions and culture—work and upward mobility, public education, sex and relationships, parenting, etc. Much in the same way Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* created a lens to view racial inequality via satire and parody, it is my hope that *Always on the Clock* creates a lens for readers to view the shortcomings of America in the twenty-first century, as I believe by doing so I can help break the bootstrap myth that has been handed down to us from generations past. It is also my hope that these stories will eventually reach a readership of people who aren't necessarily writers, but a readership of people who, for whatever reason, don't regularly read. I'm well aware that, as writers, our competition is not just other writers, but also other forms of media, whether that's television, film, social-media, or what have you. So, yes, I am a writer of literary fiction, but I am also a writer that understands the limitations of writing that prioritizes literary aesthetics over entertainment, humor, and relatability. Most of all, it is the voice of Houston and of its many people that I am attempting to capture in my work.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people that have believed in me (and put up with me) over the years and, in one way or the other, helped me get these and other stories into shape. I told myself I wouldn't pretend that this was an Oscars acceptance speech, but . . . I'd like to thank the following professors with all my heart: Padma Viswanathan for rereading these stories countless times and seeing something in the craziness I call "Just Like Honey," and, of course, for not letting me give up on it. Toni Jensen for encouraging me to pursue "All B's and One C," the first story I wrote after not writing one for nearly nine months. Davis McCombs, who was there for me when life stopped making sense. Jane Blunschi for being so, so kind. Geoff Brock for teaching me how to edit a magazine. John Walch for his edits on "Lone Star Revisited," which didn't make it in here, but no big deal. John Duval, a true medieval comic identity, who I could listen to lecture for hours on end. Geoffrey Davis for giving me a hug when I lost one of my best friends. Ellen Gilchrist, who made me a more resilient writer (and taught me the importance of weather—always the weather). Janet McClaskey, my first creative writing instructor. Amos Magliocco, who encouraged me to be a writer and taught me how to give a reading. And, of course, I'd like to thank my friends and cohort: the poets—Josh Luckenbach, Zach Hester, Collin Callahan, and Jacob Lindberg—and my fellow fiction writers, who pushed me to step it up—Joy Clark, Zach Schwab, Josh Idaszak, Caroline Beimford, Megan Downey, Kirsty Bleyl, Ben Whisman, Suzanne Monroe, and Brendan Beseth. Most of all, my family, who I love so much—Bonnie Font, Marcela and Pedro Font, Robert and Jason Font, Tía Graciela, Nanny, Uncle Mike, Jairo Freyre, Mike Rhodes, and Benjamin Rodriguez. And, lastly, Rome Hernández Morgan for reading so many of my stories over the years.

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All B's and One C

Before starting the movie, Mr. Whatever talks about who knows what. There's ten of us in his class—Language Arts for chinless mouth-breathers who failed eighth grade—and we're all trying hard to look smart in these stupid khaki pants and blue polo shirts.

This is year two of me being in summer school, meaning I should be going on to tenth grade, but instead of sunburnt afternoons at the community pool and park-bench blunts by the basketball court, I'm sitting in a classroom pumped with the steady hum of AC alongside fourteen-year-old pendejos who don't realize they need deodorant in their lives.

I used to be one of them, but now I know things. One thing I know is this: teachers get paid phat during summer school, but it doesn't show performance-wise or in the stained slacks Mr. Whatever wears. He's already shown us *The Outsiders* twice. I'm not complaining. I actually kind of dig it. Just makes me wonder where my future tax dollars are going, and I say this only because it's funny to me how I think these things my mom used to say even though she's long gone.

Just minutes ago, María, the one who sits behind me, not María Alejandra or María Elisa—the two Marías who I've never really met—requested *The Outsiders* again, but today we got a different agenda, and, on the board, the TEKS tell us what to do: *Today, I will use prior knowledge and experiences to understand meanings in English.*

Which means: Today, we will watch *West Side Story*. Once, I caught it on TMC, and I want to tell María it's basically *The Outsiders* but with some fake ass Puerto Ricans who can sing, but I'm not looking to start anything unless I got to. Mr. Whatever finally shuts up about Shakespeare and hits play. The credits roll.

I check my phone and find four texts from María, something I told her not to ever do in class, but she doesn't listen because she's too busy telling people her name's Mary and wearing secondhand Patagonia sweaters in the middle of a motherfucking Houston summer. I call her María, even though she hates it, because she is and should be proud of it. Her texts tell me nothing other than she's desperate.

hey

u

got

the shit?

There're reasons why we're all here. Like María, she doesn't even know how to include an entire sentence in one goddamn text, which bugs me because I got two part-time jobs and pay for my T-Mobile, and I ain't on no unlimited plan either. That's just it. We're on different plans. I'm limited to one dad and no mom, and María's got unlimited plans out the ass—an upgraded divorce package, including mom and stepdad, dad and stepmom, stay-at-home grandmas in both homes, not to mention her older brother and little sister.

ur person come thru?

need a g

of bud

Put a madre. I turn around in my desk and give her a look, and she gives *me* a look that says, *Huh?* So I go, “Shut the fuck up.”

And she's about to say something, I can just tell by the twitch in her eye, exaggerated by the fake eyelashes she wears today, but Mr. Whatever hits pause and stands right next to me, tells

me to stand up, which I do, but I don't listen to what he's got to say because I already know where he wants me to go, which is where I eventually go, but before I do, I'm all, "Way to go, *María*."

She gets up from her desk and tries to slap me, but she's slow and I grab her hand, twirl her around, begin dancing with her, and sing, "María! I've just met a girl named María!"

I move my legs like I've seen my uncles do at family parties, the same parties where my mom used to pass out on the couch with Celia Cruz blaring in the background, my tías shaking their heads and muttering secrets under their strawberry daiquiri breaths.

The class cracks the hell up. Even Mr. Whatever's trying hard not to smile. María, too, who gets all into it with me, moving those wide, wide hips of hers, because she knows she loves me even though she doesn't really know it yet.

Others stand and dance, too, while some throw papers and pencils aimlessly like it's the last day of school in a movie. Mr. Whatever raises a textbook to eye level and lets go. It claps against the floor.

We all shut up.

#

Assistant Principal Fuck-Face calls out my name. It's all routine: life, school, you name it.

I stand and walk by Miss, my old language arts teacher, who's making copies, and who's really not that old at all—she's actually kind of young—and I imagine blowing her a kiss, which she'd jot down, sexy poet that she is, in the black notebook she carries around with her everywhere she goes, but instead, I just wave, and she waves back, concerned that I'm here.

"Joey," she whispers, stopping me before I go in, "just play along. Act like you're on his side. That's what we all do."

Whether or not this is true, it's nice to know she knows what it's like to put up with his shit, and I'm like, "O.K., Miss. I will. I appreciate you."

Nothing's changed about Assistant Principal Fuck-Face's office since the last time I sat here last month—stacks of papers still halfway to the ceiling, walls still shit brown, and the motivational poster, still telling him what to do: *Today, I will be a leader.*

Which means: Today, I will expel your ass.

Fuck-Face goes, "Listen, Joey, you know what we have in common?"

What he says is rhetorical, so I sit back and try to listen, but I can't get over how tight his shirt is, one size too small at least, and stare at his man titties because they make the panther mascot along his chest seem as though it's leaping out toward me.

"What we have in common is we both want you to go on to ninth grade."

I go, "Ain't that the truth. You know what I realized today?"

"What's that?"

"I'm getting way too old for this shit."

"Well," he says, sitting up straight. "I don't agree with the way you put it, but I agree with what you're saying." He clicks his pen, which almost syncs up with the second-hand tick from the clock on the wall. "So what are you doing here then, Mr. Diaz?"

I think about what Miss said. I think what he wants to hear I already know, so I'm like, "I messed up, sir. Seriously."

"Want some advice? Man to man?" I lean in because I can tell he's trying hard to level with me. There's something calm and reasonable in his voice that tells me he feels sorry for me, and I guess I do, too. "Keep a low profile. There's two days left, right? Today and tomorrow? That's all, and from what I hear, you're passing your classes. Correct?"

“Yeah. Yes, sir.”

He nods and goes, “Don’t let people provoke you. Just keep your cool,” which is the most real he’s been in all the years I’ve known him, and I’m all like, “You’re right. You’re so right,” and I rise and hold out my hand to shake his, thinking we’re done here, but, as always, he’s got more to say, and starts clicking his pen again.

“But, Joey,” he says, “I will hold you back if you hold anyone else back from getting out of here. Understood?”

He’s talking to me like *I’m* the gatekeeper, but we both know he’s got me by the balls, so I nod. “Yes, sir.”

“I don’t want to see you in here anymore.”

“Won’t happen again.”

“Now head to lunch.”

#

María texts, *meet me by the dumpster*, so the cafeteria I skip for now. The trash in the dumpster smells no different than what they feed us inside, yet still I’m hungry. When María walks outside holding a bathroom pass, I can tell she’s already forgiven me by the way she tucks her bottom lip under her two front teeth.

“Too fucking hot out here.” She pulls her hair into a ponytail.

“You’re the one that wanted to meet outside,” I tell her. “Let’s make this quick.”

“So what’d he say?”

A custodian throws out flattened cardboard and sees us, but she doesn’t get paid enough to say shit. Rolls her eyes and goes on her way is all.

“Well,” I say all serious like, “he says I got to stop messing around with bitches like you.”

“Fucking Joey. You’re stupid.” She wants to laugh, but holds it in. “So later after school, we still good?” She leans against the dumpster trying to play it cool, then realizes what she’s leaned against is actually the dumpster, and disgusted, wipes her hands off on her khakis.

I go, “Yeah, girl, but you got to quit hitting me up in class. You’ll get us both caught. That all you wanted to talk about out here or what?”

“My bad. But, hey,” she says, looking off at the sky in search of the right words, “I’m short on cash. Pay you other ways?”

She puts her hand in my pocket, reaching for it, but I take her hand out. She’s shocked, as if I told her she’d have to take eighth grade all over again, and steps back.

“O.K.,” I tell her, “But not right now. I got an appetite. Need energy for my studies. Trying to get into college, shit like that. Know what I’m saying?”

She’s all, “You’re stupid, Joey,” and thinks I’m joking, but maybe I’m not. I don’t know.

“See ya.”

“See ya.”

She walks off, and, on the dumpster, I read something I wrote two years ago, just a week after my mom packed a bag and left, the sharpie ink almost faded away: *your mom, my mom, everyone’s mom’s a stupid fucking bitch*. But looking back, I see now that I was the stupid fucking bitch for wasting my time writing stupid shit like that, but, at the time, I just felt I had to.

I take out my phone and listen to an old voicemail she left last month.

“Joey, m’hijo. I love you so much, but. . . .” I hang up.

#

In the cafeteria, I stand in line and shuffle forward in sneakers that squeak against the floor. Flat-screen TVs mounted on the white and blue walls scroll school news that nobody, not even the

teachers, have ever read, and I can't figure out why they'd pay for them when we barely got any books worth a damn to read in class, and I only say this because I already burned through all the good ones they got here on campus, and they weren't even that fucking good to begin with.

The grandmotherly lunch lady, Mrs. Gonzalez, hooks me up with extra chicken nuggets, and I put my hands together flat like I'm praying and say, "Thank you, Mrs. G," and pay her forty cents. María and Tony sit together and wave me over. I can smell his cologne over the smell of the cafeteria food from over twenty feet away. He thinks it lets him off the hook from taking showers each day, but both María and I know it doesn't. We shouldn't give him a hard time, though. Dude's got a learning disability or something, which makes me feel guilty for just being me, but I don't know why, so I sit by myself three tables away and push around some fries.

"Yo," Tony says to me, almost yelling. "Why you sitting by yourself?"

But I just shrug. They haven't learned yet that sometimes people need some space, some quiet. The cafeteria is anything but that, though. Kids laugh and yell and talk in English and Spanish, and teachers watch us from their table, where they, every other minute or so, yell at such and such student to stop doing what they're doing, now or else.

Victor Villarreal walks in with his class. He sees me and I see him. I'm sitting in his usual spot, but he walks past me and waits in line, his pants sagging yet belted to his legs. He won't say shit to me because, two months ago, I beat his ass for saying that I was acting white. The white boy standing next to him, Matthew, who does his hair just like Victor in typical follower fashion, number one on the sides faded to a three on top, well, I beat his ass for calling me a wetback. What did Victor, and the others who stood by in the school gym watching my fist land against his face, learn from any of this? They learned I'll beat anyone's ass who questions who I am until they realize they're a goddamn nobody like every other motherfucker I know.

Miss watches me from where all the teachers sit. It always surprises me she doesn't look beatdown from putting up with so many assholes like me. The other teachers, the way they slouch and sigh, remind me of my dad at McDonalds two weeks before school ended last month, where I told him I failed eighth grade again this year, though I didn't use those exact words. Just told him I had to tell him something bad.

"O.K.," he said, chewing fries, a Quarter Pounder in the other hand. "What's up?"

That day, like all days, my dad's skin was dark from working construction, his eyes tired from working nights as a custodian, but, despite all this work, despite me only seeing him a few hours a day most days, he keeps patient with me, even when I told him, "I fucked up, Dad."

"How so?"

"I failed." He looked, just looked. "Spanish."

"Spanish? You speak Spanish," he said, reminding me.

"I know, but that's not all. Failed other things, too."

"Fuck, Joey."

"I know, I know."

"It'll be O.K.," he told me. "Things happen for a reason."

I wanted to tell him that I felt sick with shame or guilt, or I don't know, but what I do know is that if I had said anything, he would've told me to turn the page, which is what he always tells me to do when I talk about Mom. "Turn the page, Joey. That's all you got to do," but sometimes, I want to explain, I can't stop thinking about the pages I've already turned.

Miss waves me over. I throw away what's left of my lunch, grab my backpack, and walk over to her. The other teachers pay no attention to me, almost as if I don't exist, which makes

sense, seeing how that's exactly the way I look at them. Miss reaches into her bag and hands me a book. It smells brand new like she just bought it.

"This book," she says, "I think you'll like it. Might make you laugh."

Already I'm in love with the title. "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," I say, laughing under my breath. "Dude's got to have a lot of balls naming his book that."

Miss laughs. "Maybe you can write something, too, sometime. Maybe it'd be fun for you."

"Like what? A book? Shit. I don't know. I'm just trying to get the fuck out of eighth grade."

The teachers sitting next to Miss finally look at me when I say shit like "shit" and "fuck," but I don't give a fuck. I don't know why everyone around here's always pretending like they're not alive, like they don't actually feel things.

"Joey," she says, almost whispering, almost like I'm in trouble, "just because you've had it rough doesn't mean you can't do something worth a damn someday."

I flip through the pages, listening to her, then look left and right to see if anyone's watching, and put the book in my backpack. "Yeah, you right, Miss. Thanks. I'll read it and give it back to you."

"Don't worry," she says. "You can keep it."

Assistant Principal Fuck-Face calls for my class to line up next to the door, and I watch María and Tony stand and toss their trash.

"That's what's up. You be good, Miss."

She waves and says, "Bye, Joey."

I go to class and try my best to stay awake. The teachers and students talk too much about things that don't matter. I keep my mouth shut and find it fascinating how little my classmates actually know, and, for a second, I'm almost jealous of their stupidity, but then I decide I'm not.

#

My dad isn't off yet when I get back home, so I walk into his room and open his drawer and steal less than an eighth of the ounce he bought last night from Tío Mike. I separate a nug from the eighth and find a baggie in the kitchen to put it in. I text María.

got the stuff. wanna come over? got work at 5

I open the fridge, but there ain't shit in here but beer, milk, and some eggs. I ought to text María again and tell her to bring me something to eat from her place, because every time I'm over there, their fridge is stocked like they're ready for a hurricane, but I don't bother. I just pop open one of my dad's beers, and drinking, like always, gets me thinking. I know I need to listen to Fuck-Face and keep my motherfucking mouth shut. I mean, I hate that bald fucker, but I know he's right. And, I don't know, maybe I *should* write something like Miss was saying. How hard could that shit be? Motherfuckers do it all the time. I take out the book she gave me, and, when I open it up, the receipt slips out. Next to the credit card transaction, I see that her last name has changed since she was my teacher years back, like she got married or something. Good for her. She's too fine not to be getting some.

b there in 30

I don't text her back. I just take out my homework and get to it. The math is easy. I've done it before—I mean, the exact worksheet, which has been xeroxed who knows how many times—and I do it fast, finish the beer, and, yeah, open another.

Back in my dad's room, I step into his closet. Some of my mom's stuff still hangs here—dresses, jeans, a couple of shirts. I'm not too sure why he hasn't thrown away all her shit or at least donated it to Goodwill. We both know she's not coming back. I put my nose against the sleeve of

a blouse, trying to remember the last time, or any time, she wore it, but the knocking at the front door interrupts any chance of memory.

I open the door and María removes her earbuds, the treble of some rock song filling the space between us. “Let’s get high,” she says.

Lately, all she wants to do is get high and listen to music, or get high and play her brother’s guitar, which is basically the same thing, but not nearly as fun for me because she’s still learning where to put her fingers and fucking up every other chord. “Can’t,” I tell her.

“What you mean you can’t?”

“Got work. Homework, too.”

María steps back outside to look at the number of my apartment hung crooked on the door. She comes back in. “Uh, is Joey home? Or do I got the wrong apartment?”

I wave her into my room. We sit on my bed. I take out the baggie and hand it to her.

She goes, “You sure you don’t want to smoke?”

I go, “Yeah. I’m good.”

She stands and stares at me for a while, and I think she’s going to say something, but she doesn’t. Instead, she unbuttons her khakis and slides them down to her ankles. Takes off her shirt, too. I know it, she knows, everyone knows it—guys like looking at her, even some girls—but sitting there, watching her, I know it’s all wrong, and I’m like, “Mary—”

“Joey, you can call me María.”

“O.K.,” I say. “Look, María, put your clothes back on.”

But she’s like, “I told you I ain’t got the money.”

“I know, I know. But this ain’t a good idea. You know what happened last time.”

She looks down and blushes, but I don't know if she knows how lucky we got. "Then what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing," I tell her. "Just don't worry about it. You don't owe me anything."

She puts her clothes back on, stuffs the baggie in her pocket. She sits next to me, turns her head to the door. "You want me to leave?"

"Nah."

"You think I'm ugly?"

I laugh. "Girl, you know you're not," which gets her smiling.

"Then what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," I say, because how the hell do you tell someone you don't want to get them pregnant and end up fucked the rest of your life?

Which means: I hold her hand, and she goes, "Oh my god, Joey. You're holding my hand."

#

The pupusa food truck I work at is white and blue like our school colors and fits just me and Mr. Ortiz. Our sign on the truck has an unnecessary space between the second P and the second U, so some customers like to call us PUP U.S.A., which gets me every time.

Mr. Ortiz is my dad's best friend's dad. I work the register, sometimes do prep, and he pays me minimum wage under the table, plus tips if we get any. When I walk into the food truck, he doesn't say anything, just pats me on the shoulder like a dad or something. His black and gray hair is cut short, and, except for his mustache, he's clean shaven.

"School good?" he says in English, but thick with accent.

"Yeah. Tomorrow's the last day."

"Vas a pasar?"

“Yes, sir. All B’s I think.”

“B’s are good.”

Tonight, we’re unusually busy for a Thursday. Cars and people from off the street come and go. After things calm down a bit, a car pulls in, a man and a woman. At first, I can’t make out their faces, but when they walk under the streetlamp, I notice that the woman—skinny and pale with tiny bruises covering her forearms—is my mom. I don’t know why seeing her the way she looks still surprises me, all fucked up from who knows what, but it does. The man she’s with is stupid fucking white trash, a mullet and cowboy boots kind of dude, and I’m embarrassed seeing her with him. I want to tell her she’s too good for that dumbass, or maybe she’s not, but mostly I just want her to leave for coming back here even though I told her not to the last time she showed up and started talking to me like I’m a kid.

“You just don’t get it, do you?”

“Why won’t you talk to me, Joey? I miss you.”

“Bullshit.”

“You sound just like your dad,” she says, and maybe she’s right, but I got no patience, even though I want to tell her that I miss her, too, because I really do, but I can’t help but tell her what’s really on my mind. “You can’t sometimes act like you’re my mom, and other times act like you don’t have a son. That shit ain’t right. Just leave,” I tell her. “Now.” My voice cracks. I’ve got nothing else to say.

They leave, and Mr. Ortiz asks me why I acted the way I did, and I tell him, “Sometimes I wish some of the family I still had were actually dead.”

“Today,” he tells me, “you will go home early.” The way I look at him is the only way I know to ask if I still have a job. Without words. Without letting myself cry. “Tomorrow I see you.”

I take off my apron and walk down Hammerly, headlights and humidity heavy on my face.

#

In the morning, I lie in bed and listen to neighbors load their trucks and vans with tools and kids. They pull out of the lot, head to work, some to school. After I hear my dad leave, I get up and smoke a blunt on the porch, thinking it'll erase my mom, but the weed doesn't help, and now I'm too stoned to go to class, and I know I'm too stoned because, when I leave and walk through the park and step onto campus, everyone glows. Maybe it's just the sun, or maybe they glow because it's the last day of summer school and a motherfucker deserves to glow on a day like today. Tony texted me yesterday saying he wants a gram after school, so I bagged a nug and wedged it in my sock. It presses against my ankle each step I take toward the front of the school. It's only 8:00 a.m. and already eighty-five outside and all the teachers sweat hard as they monitor us as we enter through the gate, walk through the courtyard, and head to class. Guess you could say they're glowing, too, but mostly they look out of shape.

In class, I sit next to Tony and María, and they nod. I nod back. Coach Such-and-Such walks the aisles, passing back graded quizzes, and when he stands next to me, he inspects me, then focuses on my eyes. I used eye drops earlier, but still. It's like I can see through his eyes and see how glassy mine look. It's like I can see exactly what will happen in the next half-hour of my life, and I want so much to be somewhere far away from here.

"Go to the principal's office," he says.

"What'd I do?"

He looks at me like I should know what he's thinking. "You smell like a hippie."

Tony looks away not to get involved, even though that motherfucker's involved whether he likes it or not, and María's eyes widen because she knows I'm fucked. I'm not going to argue

with Coach because there's no point, so I stand up to leave. I don't know why, but before I walk out, I look at the board and quickly read the TEK: *Today, I will examine all sides of scientific evidence of scientific explanations, so as to encourage critical thinking.*

Which means: Today, I will get rid of this motherfucking evidence stuffed in my sock.

I walk the halls and turn into the bathroom. In the stall, I stand on the toilet and push up on the white ceiling tiles, stash the bud, and step back down, but still something's off.

Coach was right. I reek. I soap my hands, tap the faucet, which only runs for seven seconds at a time, and wash them. It doesn't help. I wash them again, but still the smell. I sniff my shirt, and it smells like laundry. It's just my fingers. I walk back into the stall. Pull down my khakis and my underwear, too. What I do I don't want to do, but I do it. I stick my finger up my ass, first the index, then the thumb—one at a time, of course—and get the fuck out of here.

I head over to the main office, where the secretary, who these days doesn't bother asking me for specific details, picks up her phone and calls Assistant Principal Fuck-Face, but he doesn't answer. "You know the drill," she says, which means I'll sit and wait for him to show.

Two minutes later, he comes in carrying reports. "Oh God, what is it this time?"

"Coach Such-and-Such says I smell like bud."

"Wait—who?"

"Coach."

"And do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Smell like marijuana, Joey."

"Nah."

"Because it wouldn't be the first time."

“I know, I know. But I’m clean. Haven’t smoked in months.”

He’s doubtful.

“O.K., weeks.”

He gets on his walkie-talkie and radios Officer Rodriguez. O-Rod comes in seconds later—six-foot-something and dressed in all black—and says nothing. It’s all procedural for him.

“Listen, O-Rod. I don’t got anything on me,” I tell him.

“Just doing my job, Mr. Diaz.” He pats me down from chest to crotch to thighs and tells me to take off my shoes. He finds nothing.

“I know, O. I just want you to know I’m not trying to disrespect you.”

“You check his fingers yet?” O-Rod asks. Fuck-Face shakes his head.

He grabs my hand. Holds my fingers near his nose. Steps back and squints.

Fuck-Face is like, “What? What’s wrong?”

“That ain’t marijuana.”

“Then what? What is it?” he asks, then takes a whiff for himself, and says, “Good god, Joey. Wash your hands, son.”

I’m trying not to smile, but in doing so, it must look like I got something to say, because they seem to be waiting for me to speak, but I do what Assistant Principal Fuck-Face told me to do in his office yesterday, and keep my motherfucking mouth shut.

“Get back to class,” he says, and class is where I go.

#

The end of the day announcements come on, and our permanent sub, whose name I can’t remember, passes out report cards, but I don’t know, I thought I’d be more excited than I am, like

I'd celebrate somehow or text my dad to tell him the news, but I don't bother. I just stay quiet. Wait for the bell. Get up when I'm supposed to go.

Outside, María and Tony wait for me. She shows me her report card, but I already knew by the look on her face that she passed. I show her mine, too. She grabs it and smiles, and Victor comes from behind and snatches it away from her.

"All B's and one C?" he says. "Big fucking deal." There're teachers nearby, but their backs turned to us give me permission to slap his stupid face. A couple students hear and turn around. Nurse Villarreal, Victor's mom, walks up to us, but she's looking at him, not me. "He slapped me," he tells her.

"You probably deserved it," she says. She walks toward the parking lot without waiting on him. "C'mon, Victor. Let's go."

He crumples my report card and throws it at me, then follows her to their car. I want to get the final word in, tell him he's a such a fucking idiot, but all I can do is laugh.

María and I turn to Tony. He doesn't tell us whether he passed or not, just says, "Yo, can I still buy the bud off you?"

For a second, I think about going back and getting it, but then I decide I never want to step foot in that school again. María's like, "Bro, you really going to ask him that question right now?"

He thinks for a second, then goes, "Shit. My bad. I wasn't thinking. Hit me up later if you want to play video games or some basketball."

I tell him, "Word."

He walks off in a different direction than us, and, half a mile later, we pass Spring Woods, the high school we'll be going to in August. The link-fence bordering the baseball field shifts in the wind. The school looks like juvie. It's just a bunch of bricks and small rectangular windows.

María takes off her navy polo, now sporting the *Ramones* t-shirt she steals from her older brother from time to time, and I'm like, "Just to let you know, no one knows who the *Ramones* are, and I'm just saying this now because I don't want you getting your feelings hurt next year in school."

She says, "Sometimes you're so smart, but right now, Joey, you have no idea know what you're fucking talking about." Maybe she's right. I don't know. I just smile and let it go.

The bell from Spring Woods rings. Within seconds, several students walk outside looking too old to be there. Some head to the parking lot. Others wait for the bus. We keep up the pace, Gessner beside us filling with traffic. On the sidewalk, a mother pushes a stroller in our direction and wipes sweat from her forehead. The man she's with is all pissed off, face flushed and breathing fast, like she just told him he's not the father of that kid.

I look away, and María and I talk about things that really don't matter. We stop at an intersection and wait for the light. She stands there, the sun bright against her face, smiling at me like she's my mother or something, like I did something worth a damn today, or maybe she's smiling because she knows I love her, even if I don't really know it yet.

The Santa Service

I clocked out, ending my eight-hour Santa Claus shift at the mall, and outside the low sun filled the parking lot, reflecting off the hoods of cars entering and exiting in the name of Christmas spirit. Trying to remember where I'd parked my motorcycle, I walked past rows and rows of SUVs, trucks, and cars. Something not quite winter rushed through the air—a warm, humid wind that more closely resembled a stubborn summer—when, right in front of my chrome handlebars, a little girl in a red dress hurled herself to the ground, tears wetting her fat cheeks, and shrieked.

Her mom and dad begged her to calm down, to stop screaming, saying that they'd give her anything she wanted if only she'd stop, practically down on their knees praying. I was on my way to deposit my paycheck before the bank closed, and they were blocking me from leaving. Off in the distance, all lanes on I-10 were slowing to a crawl with rush hour traffic, and this, I knew, meant I wouldn't be able to hit the bar tonight. But this was a good thing. I needed to save money for things that actually mattered—like going on dates and buying new wheels for my Harley, leather boots and a jacket, the kind of things that would make my ex-girlfriend, Nance, jealous. We stuck with each other for nearly ten years, but she left me for my former business partner, Trip, and, if there's one thing I've learned in life, revenge is best served sexy.

But, like I was saying, that little girl, she was just standing there in my way. Kids these days don't even respect Santa Claus, and that's what got me talking. "Excuse me," I said. She looked up at me, along with her parents. "But little girls who cry and pout go straight to the naughty list and get lumps of coal in their stocking."

She wiped tears away with her sleeve, stood and hugged my leg quickly, then let go.

“O.K., Santy. I’m sorry. Please don’t change the list,” she said, still crying, but in a scared way now. She turned around and grabbed her dad’s hand, and before they headed toward the mall, her mom collected herself and approached me.

“Wow,” she said. “You know, that was great. Do you have a business card? You could make a killing doing this.” I didn’t know what she was suggesting, and I think she could tell by the look on my face. “I mean, kids this time of year tend to go nuts—too much stimulation. You could really help some parents out. You know, a freelance Santa.”

Did the Santa outfit alone imply that I needed the extra cash? Whatever the case, her idea was brilliant, and I told her, “That’s brilliant.” I took out my wallet and grabbed one of the bent out of shape business cards from my old remodeling company that fell through. Trip and Nance, they gutted me like a Texas redfish, called each of my clients and said that I was overcharging them, which wasn’t true, only slightly. I even had to sell the ’58 Harley FL that I inherited from my dad just to stay afloat. It was the one thing he specifically told me not to sell, ever, under any circumstances. “Do you have a pen?”

She reached in her purse and handed me one. “If you ask me, it’s an untapped market.”

This lady, she must’ve been an entrepreneur, and I say this not only because of what she said, but also because she wore a tailored business suit and hair tightly pulled back, and the pen she lent me, a Montblanc so polished it reflected my fake white beard and rouged cheeks, felt like something you’d use to sign a contract. I scratched out my old number and wrote my new one above it. Who knows, I thought, maybe she’d want to fulfill some Santa Claus fantasy of her own.

“Well, thanks,” I said, handing her the business card and scratching my itchy love handles—the synthetic material of the suit was what I hated most about the job, especially in Houston, where, I’m sure, even indoors most Santas sit uncomfortably in malls with sweaty balls.

“Merry Christmas!” she said.

“Actually,” I told her, “I’m Jewish,” which, of course, was a lie. I was just so goddamn tired of hearing people say Merry Christmas a hundred times a day.

“A Jew Santa?” she asked, laughing as she joined her family.

I jumped on my motorcycle, revved the engine, then waved at the family as I rode off, the little girl smiling as though she had just witnessed a miracle.

#

A week later, I got my first call during my lunch break. I sat in the food court, where adults worked alongside teenagers behind the counters, and children, walking past me holding their parents’ hands, turned their heads to watch me eat cold leftover beans, likely questioning everything they’d ever been told about Santa Claus.

The woman on the phone, Karen, did most of the talking. She said she heard about me from her friend, the woman I met in the mall parking lot, and said her house was out in River Oaks, that she’d leave the front door unlocked for me. “If you could, swing by around four in the afternoon. They’re worst when they get home from school.”

Her house—Spanish-tile roof, tennis court in the backyard, plus a swimming pool with a slide—was the kind of house that, without a doubt, sold for over a million, but probably only cost a couple hundred thousand to build. She and I hadn’t talked money over the phone, not that I had a rate in mind, but given the look of her house and neighborhood, I was thinking two hundred.

I parked my motorcycle down on the next street over to avoid any suspicion and put on my Santa hat and beard. Walking into a stranger’s house without knocking wasn’t something I was comfortable with, but she left a post-it on the door: *Come on in, Santa!*

Inside, the foyer and living room were decked out with oversized stockings, a twelve-foot tree, multi-colored lights running along the crown molding, two nativity scenes, wreaths woven with gold ribbon. It looked as if she had paid Clark Griswold from *Christmas Vacation* to be her interior decorator. Off in the kitchen, I heard two boys and a girl squabble over something, then Karen's voice broke through their whining. "That's enough," she said. "Go to your room."

"You go to your room," the girl said, laughing along with the boys. The boys mimicked what the girl had said, and me, I began to think that I was unprepared psychologically speaking.

I didn't know what to say to let them know that I was there, and because overhearing them started to feel creepy, I said, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" repeatedly until they stopped arguing.

"What was that?" one of the boys asked.

"I don't know," the other spoke up, then I stepped into the kitchen.

In the breakfast nook, one boy stood on a chair at the table, the girl played with her iPhone, and Karen sipped from a glass of white wine, helping the other boy build a gingerbread house with dotted M&Ms along the iced windowpanes.

"It's Santa!" said the boys. They were identical twins, no older than five, dressed in private school uniforms. The girl, she was a bit older, maybe twelve or so. She rolled her eyes at me and returned to her iPhone. I wanted to roll my eyes at Karen. How naive was she to think that my presence would intimidate a girl her daughter's age?

"Well, look who it is," said Karen.

"Who are you?" asked the girl.

I imagined saying, "I'm Santa Claus, you idiot," but there was money on the line. Instead, I ignored her, crouched down on one knee, and spoke directly to the boys. "I couldn't help but notice a couple disrespectful kids as I flew over your house."

“You could hear us from that high in the sky?” said one of the boys. “Whoa.”

“I hear everything. I see everything. I’m Santa Claus,” I said, now eyeing the girl. She was a lost cause. I hadn’t scripted anything out, so I stuck with lyrics from “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” which seemed fitting for my unexpected arrival. “Do you want to be naughty, or do you want to be nice?” I asked the boys.

“Nice,” the boys said, one after the other.

“Good,” I said. “Know what nice boys say to their mothers when they’ve been naughty?” They shrugged, looking over at their mom for a hint. “Nice boys apologize.”

“Sorry, Mom,” they said, then stood and side-hugged her before they started playing with M&Ms on the table.

“If you’re Santa Claus,” the girl asked, “then how come you’re not white?”

“His beard is white,” argued one of the boys.

“He’s just tan,” said the other.

“Now, now,” Karen said, “let’s not be rude, Margaret. You three run along to your rooms and get packed. Your father’s picking you up for the weekend any minute now.”

Thankfully they left the room. Whether or not I was successful was beyond me. Regardless, Karen asked how much she owed me, and I told her two hundred. She accepted this without hesitation, and that day, the commodification of Christmas crossed a threshold—this was beyond Black Friday, beyond those fifty percent off sales the day after Christmas—but I didn’t give a shit. With the Bikes, Blues, and BBQ festival coming up in a few months in Arkansas, I needed all the money and luck I could get. Without a doubt, Trip and Nance would be there just like every year, and, standing there in Karen’s kitchen, I could just picture the look on their stupid, conniving faces as I rolled up on my motorcycle with a sexy date, someone along the lines of Sandy from *Grease*,

done-up hair, leather jacket, and red lipstick, looking a hundred times cooler than Nance could ever imagine being. Something like that would tear her Rizzo-looking ass apart.

Karen stood and walked over to her purse, her hips swaying beneath the silk folds of her dress. She took out a pen and her checkbook, but accidentally dropped them on the floor. When she bent over, I imagined myself unwrapping her like a Christmas present, then having her tie my hands behind my back with my pleather Santa belt. Maybe this would help me forget about Nance. Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe I'd stand there naked in Karen's bedroom, steeped in a pathetic state of depression, and she'd spank me like I was a big baby, the way she probably once spanked her own children but was now, for whatever reason, unwilling to do so. Karen picked up her pen and checkbook, then turned around and caught me staring. "I should've warned you about Margaret. She can be a real pain in the—well, you know how kids can be. Once they turn eleven, you might as well ship them off to boarding school," she said, making a face like maybe she said the wrong thing. "You have any kids?"

"No," I told her. "Mrs. Claus and I, we never got around to it."

I know I shouldn't have, but I kept checking her out: appraised her ass, her breasts, her hips, settling on a number to encompass it all. Considering her age, she was a solid nine. But, in doing so, I realized I had let the conversation fall into an awkward silence that made it sound like not having kids was a personal tragedy, which, of course, wasn't. I never wanted kids. Neither did Nance, though this might have had more to do with me than her own feelings.

"Would you like to sit? Have a glance of wine?"

I said, "O.K.," not to be rude. "That'd be great."

She poured me a glass, sat down, and slipped off her shoes. "Here you go," she said, placing her hand on my forearm. This caught me off guard, and soon I found myself nodding

sympathetically and agreeing with her like I was her boyfriend, but I didn't mind. Like I said, she was attractive, and I was single again. I tried to refocus and listen to her—that's what Nance was always hankering for—but I couldn't. Memories of Nance hammered at my thoughts. "Listen to me," she'd say, and like a fool I'd repeat back to her what she said to prove that, yes, I heard her. "No," she'd say, "*listen.*" I cheated on Nance more times than I can remember. I suppose she suspected all along. And Trip, he definitely knew, because, like an idiot, I bragged to him about these women every chance I got.

And there Karen was. Still talking. When I lost the thread of the conversation and thought I couldn't nod any longer, I downed the rest of my wine and cleared my throat. "So, uh—"

"Right, the money. Well, to whom should I make the check out? Old Saint Nick? Sorry," she said. "I couldn't help myself."

Holding that check in my hand, I felt proud, but almost instantly disbelief took its place. Was this actually happening? Was it really this easy? For a moment there, I wanted to hand the check back, tell her that this was all too weird, but then I told myself not to be a dumbass and thanked her. She gave me the kind of look that said, *Call me sometime*, and I stood there knowing what I needed to say, but I choked, overthinking it all.

Out of politeness, I took off my Santa hat and said, "Goodbye."

"Put it back on," she said. "Hurry." She glanced over my shoulder. "They might see you."

#

More phone calls from helpless parents trickled in. Christmas day was just a week away, and I was busier than ever. At first, I passed out business cards in the parking lot at the mall, but this wasn't as successful as I had imagined, so I went over to the Signature Kroger's off Echo Lane, where the wealthiest and sexiest mothers in Houston shopped for groceries.

It was kind of nuts how candidly these women would speak to me and give me their attention and, eventually, their number, but I guess it made sense, seeing how their husbands, when they *were* around, often stood by paying little attention to them, their eyes fixed on their phones, while their kids yelled things like “penis” and “boogers,” testing to see how much they could get away with. Now, look, I’m not trying to say that these women all wanted to fuck me, but what I am trying to say is that, after they’d invite me over to their home to discipline their children, I was hoping they’d discipline me while their husbands were off at the golf course or who knows where.

But fantasy aside, it was official: these parents were outsourcing me as some sort of surrogate parent. Sometimes they’d leave the room, and I’d get stuck with their kids, a glass of milk, and a plate full of chocolate chip cookies, all of which I ate, because I basically had to. I was a start-up and these parents wrote the best reviews on my Google business site. Besides someone giving me two stars for not being fat enough, the comments were enthusiastically boring. But there were perks. Sometimes parents wanted to take pictures with me, which, of course, I charged a little extra for. And sometimes some of these mothers sat on my lap while they posed for the camera their husbands held, my hand placed on the small of their backs, their thighs firmly pressed against my thighs. Never would I have encouraged Nance to sit on some guy’s lap, that’s for damn sure, but I didn’t question them.

One of the Santa’s helpers at the mall, Chad, wanted to team up with me after I mentioned all this during our lunch break, saying he could add some real “pizzazz” to the operation, but I wasn’t looking to share the profits or the glory. Seeing children at their worst make up with their parents after all was said and done made me feel something, something I wasn’t too sure how to put into words. Maybe I was tapping into something paternal.

“Not interested,” I told Chad.

“Your loss,” he said, the bells jingling on his green boots as he walked away.

A week before Christmas, I had a gig lined up that was unconventional to say the least. The client’s name was Gordon, and he called me while I stood on the roof of a house, not doing anything Santa Claus related, just nailing shingles after replacing the ridge cap on a two-story home in Memorial. The roof radiated heat from the sun directly overhead, and trees, motionless in the windless afternoon, stretched on for miles.

Over the phone, Gordon said, “They’re such good boys, but lately they’ve been off track. I think if you came you could really make a difference.”

This, and everything else he said at first, sounded normal, but then he mentioned that he wanted me to climb through a window in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve and sneak into the house while everyone was asleep. “To startle them. But I don’t want you to scare the crap out of them or anything. Talk some sense into them is all,” he said, convincing himself that this was somehow ethical parenting. “And then we’ll all wake up and open presents.”

I wanted to ask him if he had talked this over with his wife, curious to know what her thoughts were on this, but interrogating him seemed out of my jurisdiction. I admit it all seemed perverse, yet attractive in its potential profitability. The holidays would soon end, and I needed to capitalize on this Santa Clausing gig while the Santa Clausing was still good.

“It’s a bit unorthodox,” I told him, “but I’m a professional. I’ll make it work.”

I half-listened to him talk through the logistics of my visit, offering the occasional “Uh-huh” and “Yup” until he asked, “How much do you charge?”

“For a deluxe visit like this? Four hundred.”

“Wow,” he said. “Well, my neighbor, Margie, said you’re fantastic.”

“Oh,” I said, “I just do the best that I can.”

#

It was the night before Christmas, humid, not a cloud in the sky.

I decided I'd hit the bar before heading over to Gordon's. A beer would jolly me up and add a natural blush to my cheeks, or at least this was my thinking, but when I stepped into The Blue Lagoon, I wasn't the only man wearing a Santa suit. Chad sat at the bar wearing one, too. He even wore the black boots. That fuck. The hell did he think he was he doing? He was a Santa's helper for Christ's sake, and the first thing a Santa's helper needs to learn is that he is not Santa.

The bar that night hosted the usual regulars, tasteless middle-aged guys like Chad and their chain-smoking girlfriends, and, as always, the smell of Pine-Sol masking stale beer. I walked up to the bar where he sat, ordered a pint, gripped his shoulder a little too hard, and smiled the fakest smile I could manage.

"Goddamn," he said. "You've got a death grip on you."

As I eased up on his shoulder, I asked, "What's with the outfit, Chad?"

"You know," he said, "I got to thinking about your whole Santa Service biz and how you're not going to let me in on it, so I decided I'd do the same."

"The same?"

"Yeah," he said. "The same. You know, like my own Santa Service."

"I don't think that's a good idea, man."

"Neither was cheating on Nance, but you did, right?"

Ricky, the bartender, overheard Chad, knew it was a shitty thing for him to say, and slowly placed a pint in front of me, seeing how I'd react. I didn't say a thing, just downed the beer and acted like everything was cool. But at this point I wasn't thinking, this much I knew for sure, and, when Ricky turned away to wait on a new customer, my fist landed against Chad's face.

“Dammmn!” someone said. “You gonna take that shit?”

All eyes were on us. Chad fired back. Sent me to the floor with a dull ringing in my head. Turned out he had some prior wrestling experience, and him choke-holding me with his leg wrapped around my torso proved fancy. The customers loved it. They yelled “Fuck yeah!” and “Kick Santa’s ass, Santa!” and applauded as I blacked out, then booed when Ricky broke us apart.

When my vision returned, I stood and threw my empty pint glass in Chad’s direction, but the glass didn’t shatter when it missed—it just bounced off the side of a booth and landed in front of a woman’s cowboy boot, a laugh escaping from between her thin lips. I picked up my Santa hat from off the floor and put it back on, wiped blood from my nose, and paced around talking shit to Chad, or at least I thought I was, but then realized I wasn’t saying anything at all. I was just staring at the back booth, where Nance and I used to argue hours on end, where once I believed things would always stay that way—the two of us together, imperfect as we were.

Ricky pressed his hand against my chest, blocking me from Chad. “You’re banned for a week,” he said. “How many times do I got to tell you? Get the fuck out of here.”

This Santa thing, it was all I had. I was scared that if I lost it, if someone took it away from me, then who knows what? When the tears came, everyone saw. I walked outside to the parking lot, too embarrassed to look back, and rode off.

When I got to Gordon’s, there were signs telling me not to go through with it. First off, he failed to mention the fence I’d have to jump. Nor did he tell me about the Doberman waiting, barking, drooling. Luckily, it was a big softy who licked my palm. Not only this, but my jaw still ached—my neck, too—and I wasn’t drunk enough to deal with what would soon happen.

A ladder leaned against a bedroom window on the second story and a handwritten note was taped to it: *Hope you're not afraid of ladders!* Thank God he didn't have a chimney. I should've called it quits, but, of course, I climbed up that shaky ladder.

I crouched through the unlocked window, but no little boys were in sight. The bedroom was empty except for a full-sized bed, a rug, and an armoire. Taped to the doorknob I found another note: *Go out the door, take a left, and the third door on the right is their room.*

In the hallway, the hardwoods creaked with each step I took. A nightlight softly lit family photos. One in particular caught my attention—a photo of two boys, big boys, suited up in football uniforms. The only photos of small children I found looked dated.

Slowly, I opened their bedroom door. The walls were postered with sports cars, supermodels wearing scant bikinis, and one of Michael Jordan suspended in mid-air. Two teenagers, maybe only a year or two apart in age, lay sprawled out on parallel twin beds. They were the size of men. Their chests expanded and contracted with each breath, and their faces, brushed with wispy facial hair and blemished with pimples nearly ready to pop, shined with moonlight.

Ready to write this one off, I turned around and tiptoed toward the door to make my way back to the ladder, but then I stepped awkwardly on a shoe, twisted my ankle, and braced my fall against the edge of a dresser. Either it was the sound of things falling or the fact that I said, “Fuck,” under my breath, but, right as I stood, one of them sat up wide-eyed and confused.

I backed out of the bedroom, and, at the door, whispered, “Santa is real,” hoping he'd fall back to sleep in a state of dreamlike bewilderment, but then, before I knew what was going on, he charged at me from behind in his underwear, tackled me, and, out of instinct, I swung my fist. The crack of cartilage surprised us both because—well, because this was Santa Claus hitting him, and because, holy shit, I thought, I assaulted a high schooler. I stepped back. Gave him some space.

Gordon ran upstairs wearing pajamas and a white t-shirt. “What the hell happened?”

“This pervert fucker broke into our house and punched my nose.”

“Language,” Gordon said, turning on the hall light. “Wait—you punched my son?”

“Yes,” I said, standing up, “on accident after your son tackled me, who, by the way, is not a boy, Gordon.”

“You know this guy, dad?”

“Josh, go downstairs and put an icepack on it.”

Josh’s hand pooled blood dripping from his nose as he walked toward his mom, now standing at the top of the stairs with her palm against her forehead. From where I stood, her thigh was exposed through the slip of her nightgown. She caught me staring too long and adjusted herself. I looked away, somewhat ashamed.

She faced Josh. “Let me see.”

The other boy stuck his head out the bedroom door. Light from his room filled the hallway, and, as my eyes adjusted, Gordon’s boys looked more like him—more like men—and Gordon, he looked more and more like a father who was beginning to realize it for the first time.

“Get back in your room, Billy. I’m calling the cops,” Gordon said.

“Cops? You invited me here. Let’s just call this one a wash,” I said, wanting to leave as soon as possible. “This never should’ve happened seeing how your kids are not even kids.”

“Yes, they are,” Gordon insisted. “They’re my kids.” He looked dazed for a moment, like he was the one who got punched in the face. “Get out of my house. Now.”

I returned to the window I originally climbed in through, stepped down the ladder, and rode off. A cool air rushed against my face for the first time all year. Winter had finally arrived. The

sky above Houston, typically muddled with smog, opened and stars flickered, and I cruised down Memorial Drive as if something was pulling me forward on a sleigh.

#

The next day was the 25th and I closed shop. It was a solid run money wise, but I couldn't parent these kids any better than their parents, and I sure as hell didn't want to parent any parents, but, who knows, I thought, maybe next year I'd change my mind.

Winter passed quick, as it always did in Houston, so much so I doubted if it had even happened at all. The spring brought much needed work, and soon I swung back into my old rhythm. By the end of summer, I got so busy—mostly building kitchen cabinets and patio decks—that, when I found my Santa suit in my closet one night, its presence startled me, as though it were another me that left it there.

I had jobs lined up, but the money was shit. At least between the mall and Santa gigs I bagged over the holidays, I had enough saved to go to Bikes, Blues, and BBQ at the end of September, but not enough for the new wheels, jacket, and boots I wanted, and still I didn't have a date. There was no way I was going without one either.

After a few beers at The Blue Lagoon one night, I took out my phone and scrolled through my contacts. There was no one to call. Either I had burned through every woman saved on my phone, or they had burned through me. Then I scrolled past the K's and saw Karen's number from my first Santa visit. It was a long shot.

The phone rang a few times, and then Karen answered. "Hello, Santa."

I got right to the point. "Quick question. Want to go on a date?"

"A date?" she asked.

"That's right. A date with Santa Claus," I told her, "but minus the outfit."

“No outfit? Deal breaker. Kidding, of course. What do you have in mind?”

“This might sound crazy, but a road trip on my motorcycle up to Arkansas. There’s this festival called Bikes, Blues, and BBQ happening in three weeks.”

A silence dropped over the phone. I knew she’d say no.

“How about we go on a few dates in town first before making a trip like that. After all, I only met you once. Who knows what kind of guy you are under that Santa suit?”

And so we did, go on a few dates, that is. First to a Texans game, where we had a hell of a time eating hot dogs and drinking beer, then to a car show, where we spent hours walking around and sitting in trucks, sedans, and sports cars. Karen talked about the brats she calls her kids, her job as a family lawyer, and even told me some funny stories about the bad dates she had been on, but I was distracted by a woman handing out brochures for cars most people couldn’t afford, not because of how attractive she was, but because she looked just like Nance. She had the same straight-cut bangs and freckles speckled on her face, somewhat hidden beneath her makeup, but there if you looked closely, like stars in the polluted Houston sky.

“C’mon,” Karen said. “Checking out other women while you’re on a date?”

“What? Her? She’s got nothing on you,” I said, then Karen gave me a look like she wanted me to kiss her, so I did.

We opened our eyes, and she said, “You taste the way motor oil smells.”

I told her, “That’s got to be one of the sexiest things a woman’s ever said to me,” and, in that moment, I felt a connection with her. I think she felt it, too. But, even so, as we walked a way, I turned around to look at that woman one more time.

When I dropped Karen off, we made out outside of her front door, her skin smelling like the interior of a new car, and she invited me in. Walking upstairs to her bedroom, I knew I needed

to keep things smooth-going with her to make sure she got to Bikes, Blues, and BBQ, and somehow have Nance see us together, but, as these thoughts crept into my mind, I started overthinking.

“The kids are at their father’s,” she said, taking off her earrings in front of her vanity, then her boots, leggings, and blouse. “So don’t feel as though you need to be so quiet.” Karen looked even better naked than I’d imagined the day I first met her, better than any of the women I’d slept with when I was cheating on Nance, but she wasn’t Nance. “What are you waiting for, Santa?”

As I stood there taking off my clothes, I couldn’t stop thinking about the past, about Nance and Trip, how those pieces of shit used to call me their best friend. Even after Karen put on the condom and we got started, her wrapping her legs around me and saying, “Oh, Santa! Oh, Santa!” I couldn’t shake these thoughts. It was pathetic.

“Are you O.K.?” she asked. “You look . . . distracted.”

“It’s just been a while,” I told her, but what was I supposed to say? That I still wasn’t over my ex? That I couldn’t stop thinking of her?

This went on for a good ten minutes, and let’s just say it wasn’t my best effort. After I finished, Karen said, “Next time you should bring your Santa suit. Who knows, might be fun,” which, of course, broke some of the tension and made us laugh.

I told her I would, and she turned on the TV and put on CNN, which made me reconsider if she was still a solid nine. After some hard thinking, I decided she was now an eight. Somehow, I fell asleep to that nonsense almost immediately, but, when I woke up in the middle of the night to pee, I called Nance in Karen’s bathroom, even though she told me never to call again. When she answered, she said, “Hello,” sounding half-asleep.

I hung up because, really, I had nothing to say. I just wanted to hear her voice. What was weird, though, was that she sounded nothing like I had remembered, like maybe I had never really listened to her at all, the way she was always wanting me to listen.

#

Karen and I headed to Dallas, where we stayed overnight before making our way up to Fayetteville. With time to kill, she suggested we check out the Dallas Museum of Art, and I suggested that we didn't. She laughed, promised that we'd get dinner and a couple beers afterward, and I dragged my feet past artwork I could've made with a thirty-dollar gallon of paint, daydreaming of Nance, of cold Budweisers later that night, of the Santa suit I packed.

"You call that art?" I asked.

"Har-har. Get over yourself," she said. "You big baby."

Nance would've never talked to me like this, scared, I'm sure, of how I'd react, but I couldn't get enough of it coming from Karen's mouth. The way she put me in my place made me feel different, like I was changing in some way, or right there on the cusp of it, or maybe, I thought, I was falling in love, with an art-loving liberal no less.

After we left the museum and checked into the hotel, we walked into our room, and she wasted no time, unzipping my jeans and kicking off her boots.

"Did you bring it?" she asked.

I reached into my duffel bag and took out the Santa suit. She raised her eyebrows, her anticipation growing alongside my fear of another poor performance.

"Be right back." I changed in the bathroom, strapped the pleather belt around my waist, even put on the Santa makeup that I brought along, but, standing there in front of the mirror, I knew this wasn't going to change a thing, and, after admitting to myself that this plot for revenge

was just a sign that I was still in love with Nance, I felt guilty for using Karen, for not being honest with her. I knew I needed to come clean, but confessing something like this wasn't something I'd ever done. How do you do it? Do you just come out and tell the truth, left defeated and vulnerable, without any trace of a lie?

When I came out of the bathroom, I found Karen half-naked on the bed, wearing white lingerie, a red negligée, and a Santa hat, looking like a sexy Mrs. Claus. "Listen, Karen."

"Oh, no," she said. "Is it too much? Because I can just take it all off and we can go about it the old-fashioned way."

"No, no, it's not that. You look great," I told her. "I mean, you look really fucking great, but I got to tell you something." Karen sat up in the bed, and I sat beside her. "Look, I think you're amazing, really funny, too, and your sexual creativity, it's super impressive, but me calling you up a couple weeks ago, asking you to come on this trip, was. . . ."

"Was what?"

"Was a way of me getting back at my ex."

"You naughty, naughty Santa," she said, laughing at herself. "Look, I appreciate your honesty, but I'm not trying to fucking marry you—been there, done that—so no need to feel guilty or anything. Anyway, the first person anyone sleeps with after a breakup feels that way."

Maybe she had a point, but still, I felt like I needed to lay it all out. "But I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't over her. You deserve better than me. I'm not a good man."

"Shut up. You're not *that* bad," she said, waiting for me to laugh, but I just didn't have it in me. "Plus, most people who say they're over their ex are lying to themselves."

“But I *am* bad,” I told her, my voice starting to shake. “You just don’t know, Karen. I ran around on Nance god knows how many times. I don’t want to be that guy anymore. It’s so exhausting being that guy. And I—I have no idea what I’m doing with my life.”

Saying all of this out loud, I don’t know what got into me, but, before I knew it, my head was on her lap, my face pressed against her warm thighs, and I began crying like I hadn’t cried since I was a child, thinking I’d never stop. Karen sat there speechless for a while, stroking my hair and taking it all in. “It’s O.K., big guy. Just let it all out. You got to breathe. Just breathe.”

For a while, we just lay in bed, and, after I finally calmed down, she told me about her ex-husband, how he was fucking their maid like he was a walking cliché, and, suddenly, we were talking like we were friends, or maybe, I thought, this was how couples talked when they weren’t trying to tear each other apart.

“Let’s order room service,” she said, picking up the hotel phone, “and how about a bottle of wine?”

I nodded, wiped snot from my nose. She placed the order, and, with my head still on her lap, I thought, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be. Thirty minutes later, we ate cheeseburgers and fries, drank that bottle of wine, then made love in our Santa outfits, Karen’s eyes locked on mine, my thoughts on her alone.

After I finished, feeling useless as I watched her finish on her own, she put on CNN and turned up the volume, and I just laughed. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

But I just shook my head, kept my mouth shut, and drank more wine, accepting that this was just one of her things. Hell, no one’s perfect, especially not me.

In the morning, I told her maybe we should just head back to Houston, but she said, “Are you kidding me? I’m going to this Bikes, Blues, and BBQ with or without you.”

We checked out of the hotel and jumped on I-30, eventually taking the scenic route through the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas. Just before nightfall, we drove through the Boston Mountains on I-49, where the trees were beginning to change color, the last hour of sunlight peering through their half-naked branches.

During the first night of the festival, we walked the main street through crowds of black leather, bikers going from one bar to the next, and all of Fayetteville rumbled with the push and pull of torque, exhaust and cigarette smoke thickening the air. We did all the usual things: drank too much, ate too much, and drove up and down those endless hills. The next day, Karen felt like she wasn't fitting in, so she bought herself tight black jeans and wore too much hairspray in the best possible way. That night, as we waited in line to buy a funnel cake, Trip and Nance slowly rode by on his hog. She sat behind him, holding onto his waist. He didn't see us, but Nance turned and faced me, her curls fluttering in the wind. She smiled, as though maybe she was happy to see me, then looked straight ahead over Trip's shoulder. But did she see Karen? Did she see how sexy she looked? Did jealousy hit her, even for a second? I knew it didn't matter, but still.

“Is that her?” Karen asked. “Is that Nance?”

“Yup. That's her,” I said, watching them ride off until they blended in with all the other motorcycles, a blur of taillights and headlights rushing past us in each direction. “But there ain't nothing better than being here with you tonight.”

Karen smiled, and I held her hand to let her know I meant every word.

#

It's been two years since my freelance days, but right around the time the construction biz dwindles down to nothing, and November nights grow long and dull, interested parents call.

It's hard to turn down these gigs given the stupid money some parents are willing to pay, but I do, even though the economy is lukewarm, and I struggle to find consistent work. I tell them no and they offer me more, sometimes up to five hundred dollars.

But I never tell them the entire truth: That there's nothing I can do to make things right. That they're the ones who need to sort out their lives.

Often after failing to convince me, they put their wives or husbands on the phone, hoping their persuasive tactics will talk me into saying yes. The typical "Name your price, Santa" dialogue ensues, and every now and then their voices take on unexpected, desperate tones. Last night a woman confessed, near tears, "I just don't know what to do anymore."

I said, "You got to breathe. Just breathe," and, after she exhaled, I hung up.

But I can still be found most December nights sitting on a large, green chair in the mall with children on my knee, asking them what they want. It's the week before Christmas, and you can hear it in their pleas. They tell me about the latest video games or limited-edition Barbie dolls, while a photographer takes our picture next to candy canes the size of front-porch columns.

Tonight, Karen's next in line with her two boys, Jacob and Brandon. I stand and give her a hug, breaking standard Santa protocol, and the boys sit with me and start reading off their lists, not realizing I'm the same guy that's dating their mom, even though I see them every other weekend or so. They're not bad kids. They've actually kind of grown on me, even Margaret, Karen's teenager. They just live in their own world is all, but I suppose we all do.

"Are we still on for tonight?" Karen asks.

"Sounds good," I say. "Should I . . . dress as is?" and she just winks.

Machine-made snow falls between us, and the boys keep listing off presents, struggling to read their own handwriting, but I've stopped listening because I'm distracted by the line of children

and parents that grows, snaking around the indoor Starbucks, blending with the line of people eager to buy a five-dollar coffee. There's only so long a pile of empty presents and a twenty-foot Christmas tree can distract all those toddlers wobbling like drunks.

Karen, too, notices the line and says, "C'mon, boys, let's go."

"But I didn't finish reading my list," Brandon says.

"Well, Santa is very wise," she tells him. "He knows if you got everything you wanted, you wouldn't grow up to be a very interesting person."

This sounds nothing like the Karen I met a couple years ago, but it's the most honest thing I've heard a parent say to their child since gearing up in this suit. Maybe I had something to do with this. Or maybe it was in her all along. Brandon looks up at me, as does Jacob, and I just shrug.

"Listen to your mom, kid. Moms are always right."

They wave goodbye and walk away, passing through a crowd of shoppers, and I turn to the next child and parent waiting in line, counting the hours before I can clock out, rev my motorcycle, and head on over to Karen's, where the Christmas spirit always thrives.

Bikini Coffee

Right along that busy strip of Fondren near Richmond, where the Tropicana strip club, Piney Point Elementary, and Taco Cabana all thrive, we work espresso machines in swimsuits from a pink and white food truck with *Bikini Coffee* stenciled over a woman's hour-glass figure. The tips we make are stupid good. Laila says they're almost as good as when she was a stripper, and I believe every word she says.

Through the little window, a customer checks Laila out as she pours cold brew over ice. She squirts two pumps of vanilla and watches some sci-fi show on her iPad as she stirs, gunfire and sex and mutiny every other scene. The customer adjusts his crotch one too many times. "Phil thinks I look like Pamela Anderson," Laila says, nodding at the customer. She wears her red lifeguard's swimsuit today, steps around in flip-flops, even has a lifeguard's whistle around her neck. She's creative like that.

"It's not even up for debate," he says.

Laila has short, brown hair highlighted with streaks of accidental-orange. Her butt's bigger than mine, and she has no breasts. "I can see it," I say.

"You're too funny," Laila says to me, then looks out the little window. "By the way, the Patrick is waiting in his car."

"The Patrick?" Phil asks.

I hate how carefully he listens. Laila says customers can't know our code: Patricks are businessmen who show off a lot. That's most of them. I'm partial to Bobs. Laila says Bobs are stupid, almost as if they don't realize what we're wearing, and easy to ignore. Then you got your Daniels—nervous types that look down at their shoes—Antonios—persistent guys that ask us out

on dates—not to mention Rachels—women that stumble in on accident and tip us, I think, in a show of pity. The list goes on. I’m still learning the drinks, the terminology, what I’m doing with my life.

I ask, “Which one?”

“Girl, you know which one,” she says. “The one who thinks you’re his mother and therapist and future ex-wife all wrapped in one.”

Phil looks over his shoulder, and Laila and I look out the little window. The Patrick’s black BMW idles in the parking lot. I can barely see his face because his car windows are tinted too dark, but she’s right. There’s a UT sticker on the bumper. It’s him. These Patricks, they wear wedding rings, pay with corporate credit cards, and stare too long. I mean, I get it. That’s the whole point, but they watch us do everything—grind coffee beans, froth milk, sweep the floor, wipe the counters, pick our noses. Sometimes I just stare back.

“Want me to have a talk with him?” Phil asks.

“No, thanks,” she tells him. “That’ll be four-fifty.”

He pays and tips and waves goodbye. He’ll be back tomorrow, most likely, or the next day. The Patrick steps out of his car wearing a suit and tie and hair slicked back.

“What should I say?” I ask Laila.

“Just tell him you have a boyfriend with a big dick,” she says. This is exactly why I want to be her friend, but she already has so many.

He walks our way and winks at me. “Hey, dollface,” he says, and I fake smile because I’m paid to. “Listen, I’ll have the usual.”

“O.K.,” I say. “Americano. No room for cream.”

“You know me so well,” he says.

Laila rolls her eyes, then brews espresso for his drink.

“Uh-huh,” I say. I take his credit card and run it.

He makes no effort at eye contact. “So I got this meeting today, super important meeting, and right before I leave the house this morning, my wife, well, I won’t even get into it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“See, she thinks I’m spending too much time and money on this new startup. I told you about my startup, right? It’s going to be outrageous.”

“Uh-huh.”

He takes out a ten-dollar bill to put in the tip jar, but before he does, Laila hands him his drink. “Once you finally get your startup started up,” she says, “you should tell us more about it. Have a good day, darling.”

He blows into the lid of his coffee and steam rises in front of his face. “Will do,” he says, unsure whether he was humiliated or not, but he’s a Patrick, too distracted by our bodies and his ego to listen to intuition or the words we say. He drops the ten-dollar bill into the tip jar, walks back to his BMW, and drives off.

“See, that’s how you train a customer,” she says. “Don’t take any of their shit.”

“You could’ve cost us ten dollars.”

“The day I cost us ten dollars,” she says, “I’ll pay you ten dollars. Plus, I didn’t save up all my money from the Tropicana to buy this place and *not* be able to say what I want, when I want.”

She has a point, and I listen, trying to learn all I can. At three o’clock, just like every day, we close and clean, spray and wipe down the espresso machines and counters. We take out the trash and smoke cigarettes outside, and Laila asks, “Can you cover Kristin’s shift on Friday?”

I tell her, “Sure,” even though it’s my day off, because I know she’s having trouble finding dependable girls. Right now, Laila and I work Monday through Thursday. Kristin works with Laila on Fridays and Saturdays, but I don’t work with Kristin—only met her twice—and I’m glad I don’t. Everything she says sounds like a question.

We go inside. I sweep while Laila counts the money and our tips, her glittered nails sparkling as she fingers each bill. She has a pocket-sized notebook. Jots down each dollar she makes with a purple gel pen. Mutters numbers to herself in Spanish. She’ll send money back home to Puerto Rico at the end of the month. “A shit day,” she says, handing me my cut. I nod. She’s not wrong, but she’s not right.

Before I clock out, my roommate, Jo, texts me.

got phenomenal news!! happy hour margaritas? i'll tell you all about it

where?

guadalajara 4:30ish

I put on shorts and a baseball tee and hit the road. It’s only a quarter till 4:00 but traffic keeps me shifting between second and third the whole way there. I turn off Bunker Hill and find a parking spot wedged between two SUVs.

Inside Guadalajara, the hostess is nowhere to be found, so a waiter seats us at the one table next to a window where sunlight is guaranteed to blind us the entire time. We put on sunglasses as if on cue. Sip through straws. Eat chips and salsa.

Jo tells me that she’s leaving me, though that’s not exactly what she says. “I’m getting married,” she says. She positions her hand in various angles to show off the ring and talks about marriage like it’s a new diet she’s on. “It’s really so simple. I want to optimize our time together. It’s all about growth, you know? And dedication. A wholesome balance. I feel like I haven’t eaten

all day.” I really don’t even know what she’s saying anymore, but I try so hard to listen. “With him traveling and all, we only see each other three times a week. Does that make sense?”

I lick the salt off the rim of my glass. “Uh-huh.”

According to her, all women can find a man if they keep patient, believe in God’s will, that sort of thing. I question everything she says because she’s prettier than me, skinnier than me, wears more expensive clothes than me, makes me look somewhat out of shape, like someone who played softball in high school but no longer works out, but mostly I question her because she’s stupid, I think, though in an amusing sort of way.

“You’re upset,” she says.

“No, no,” I say. “I’m just thinking.”

I’ve had four roommates in the last four years: Lisa, Bobbi, Graciela, and Jo. They’ve all wound up hitched before the end of our lease. I’m bad luck like that, as if my presence alone propels these women into the arms of single men. All I want is a roommate. Someone to pay half the bills. That’s all.

A mariachi trio approaches our table. They strum and sing and smile, and I take out my purse and wallet and hand the singer a ten. “Keep the songs coming,” I tell him. “We’re celebrating here.” Then I ask Jo, “How well do you even know this guy?” But either she isn’t listening or she can’t hear me.

“They’re really great, this band. But hey,” she says, “I’ll help you find a roommate. I just hate to leave you alone in that house with all those bills.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “It’ll be a blessing in disguise.” This is the sort of empty phrase she understands, and maybe it will quiet her up a minute to give me a chance to process, and, by

process, I mean order another margarita, but, by the way she furrows her eyebrows, I know I came off sounding sarcastic or petty or something, and where the fuck is this waiter anyway?

“Oh, by the way,” she says. “I’m not going to be able to watch that movie with you tonight. What’s it called again? The one you wanted to watch?”

“Pumping Iron,” I tell her.

“Yeah, Pumping Iron,” she says slowly. “I’m staying at Ted’s tonight.”

That’s the sort of man she’s marrying. A man named Ted. Big and stupid, a real Patrick, not a regular per se, but he stops in from time to time. Jo has no idea. I’d never tell her. She’s the jealous type. One day she got worked up over Ted talking to me about the Astros. The conversation lasted two minutes. I hardly said a word. But still, instead of counting the seconds Ted spent eyeing my breasts, she should’ve told him that he had no idea what he was talking about. It kills him that she knows more about baseball than he does.

“Your loss,” I say.

She flags down our waiter and asks for the check before I have a chance to order another. She insists on paying. She feels sorry for me. I let her.

I go home. With only one streetlight working, our neighborhood is dark, filled with parked cars up and down the block. The place we rent is just a converted bungalow-duplex that, I’m sure, was once charming before most of its yellow paint peeled from off the siding, definitely before our neighbor arranged living room furniture on their side of the porch, but I love its ugliness, the way the grass grows in patches, the creak of uneven hardwood floors beneath my feet. In my room, I drink a six-dollar bottle of wine out of a mason jar and post a Craigslist ad, leaning back against a pile of clean clothes on my bed. I’ll be smarter this time. I’ll conduct interviews. Review prospective roommates’ Twitter accounts. Make sure they’re not Republican or write things like

#blessed or anything that would #annoythefuckoutofme. I shut down my laptop. The house is empty. I roll a joint. Smoke half of it. I play music loud. Sing out of tune. I watch *Pumping Iron* alone. Arnold trolls Lou and I can't stop laughing. I eye their biceps, quads, traps, all of it. I want muscles like them, only little versions that'll still fit into the clothes I already own. Something manageable, I guess. I think about walking to H-E-B and buying another bottle of wine. Instead, I masturbate and wait for sleep.

In the morning, I have zero messages, zero views. I put on the white one-piece and look in the mirror. My nipples show through. I need the money. "I'm not ashamed," I say out loud to no one but myself. "I chose this line of work. I'm in control."

I put on the same shorts and shirt as I had on yesterday and leave. Of course there's traffic, but I take backroads—Westview to Bunker Hill to Memorial Drive—that send me through ritzy parts of town where I imagine Jo and Ted one day living, and, as I drive past these neighborhoods shaded with oaks and pines and sweetgums, their leaves now autumnal and beginning to fall, I try daydreaming about living someplace where nothing or no one ever bothers me, but I can't because I doubt such a place even exists.

I make it on time. Laila's blue Mazda Miata is parked out front. I clock in. We nod at each other, and I pour myself a coffee. Laila wears the same thing as yesterday. She still doesn't look like Pamela Anderson.

"You're really banking on this look," I tell her.

"Stayed out late last night. You know how it goes," she says. She reaches in her purse, takes out a pack of cigarettes, then, realizing it's empty, tosses it in the trash. "Hey, I'm going to the gas station. You need anything?"

I shake my head. She throws on a white sundress over her swimsuit and leaves. There're no customers. From out the little window, the street drones with the passing of cars. It's overcast and humid and fuck this Houston fall for being so goddamn hot, because even in this outfit, if you can call it one, I sweat. I stick my head out the window and watch pigeons inch up and down the parking lot. A car pulls in. The pigeons don't give a shit and barely move. I want to be just like them. Two young women step out. The wind picks up and their oversized t-shirts parachute over their athletic shorts. Sorority girls, I'm sure. They hold clipboards and pens. One's a redhead. The other's a brunette. Ponytails and no makeup.

"Hi," they say, almost in unison, dragging the *i* into a long, drawn-out *e*.

"What can I get you?" I ask.

"Can we ask a few questions?" the redhead says. "For a research essay."

"Sure, O.K., but what can I get you?"

"Oh," the brunette says, "we're not ordering anything."

"Yeah, we just ate smoothies."

"Ate?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Ask away," I tell them.

They look at their clipboards and glance at a long list of questions printed double-spaced.

"It's about your job," the redhead says. "Your career."

"This isn't my career."

"Well," she says, "we just want to know why you objectify your body the way you do?"

"Objectify?" I ask.

They double-check their clipboards. “Yeah. That’s exactly what we mean. Are you aware of what you’re doing?”

“Uh-huh. Oh yeah,” I say. “Big time. I’m paying my bills. What do you do to pay yours?”

Laila steps in and squints when she spots them. “Oh, hell no,” she says. “I told you bitches not to come back here.”

They roll their eyes. Give us looks. We hate them even more, I guarantee it. They walk back to their car. I want to laugh and tell them that their lives, just like their clothes, are complete bullshit, not to mention the essay they’re working on. They’ll make a C and complain about it, without a doubt, then pay someone just as dumb as they are to rewrite it for them.

“God,” Laila says, watching them reverse and turn onto Fondren. “Those Staceys drive me nuts. No offense, Stace.”

“None taken.” She means no harm. She could say things far worse, and I’d just shrug.

Today’s a bust. I know it already. Nothing adds up, especially not the tips. I check my phone and find there’s an email. The subject is *hello future roomy (!?)*, and I instantly delete it. Seven customers later, I check my email again, and there’s another: *Roommate Inquiry*. I open it up and read the message. Sydni, the inquirer, can write a sentence, so she’s got that going for her, which is a start. “I’m going to step out,” I tell Laila, “and make a phone call.”

“O.K.,” she says.

Outside, I light a cigarette and call her. She doesn’t answer. I leave a message, tell her to swing by around six if she’s available, that I’ll text her the address.

At the end of our shift, Laila counts the money and tips, writes down her numbers, hands me my share. Right as I’m about to leave, she says, “Want to go grab a drink?”

I can see it now, the two of us hanging out together for the first time: we'd go out for happy hour margaritas, just like Jo and I, only Laila would actually get me and let me add extra salt to the chips, and we'd talk and laugh until the waiters start putting chairs on the tables and tell us that we have to leave.

"I'd love to, but I can't," I tell her. "I might be interviewing someone tonight. New roommate. We'll see."

"Sounds terrible. Good luck with that," she says.

I leave and buy two bottles of wine, a pint of rocky-road ice cream, and dairy pills from a CVS. I text Sydni the address, then pay the cashier and try to think of questions to ask Sydni, but I've got nothing.

At home, Jo sits hunched over on the couch and packs DVDs into a box. She's already taken down her macramé from the living room walls, which, except for a clock that runs slow, are now bare and awfully off-white. It appears she's leaving sooner than she'd told me.

"Don't worry," she says. "I'll pay my half of next month's rent, too."

"Thanks," I say. "So guess what? Someone responded to my post on Craigslist. They're swinging by soon."

"That's phenomenal," she says. "Oh, hey, do you want any of these DVDs?" She points to a stack on the coffee table. Most of the titles can be found on the Hallmark Channel, I'm sure. She's a sucker for romance or anything with Keanu Reeves. Every movie she puts on, I predict the ending within the first twenty minutes. I know every twist and turn. It's all predictable, the way things happen.

"I'll take them all," I say.

"Really? Wow," she says. "I'm surprised."

“Why not branch out a little?” I say.

“See, that’s what I’m always telling you,” she says.

My phone vibrates. It’s a text from Sydni.

Running a little late. Be there soon!

“Want a glass of wine?” I ask Jo.

“Sounds phenomenal,” she says. Phenomenal is her new favorite word, but sometimes she says it in the wrong context, like last month when she said, “I just got off of the phone with Ted. He has a phenomenal rash.” I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing and stopped listening.

I open the wine—a twist off—and pour us each a generous amount. I hand Jo a glass. I ask her, “If you were interviewing a new roommate, what kind of questions would you ask them?”

“Hmm,” Jo says. “What’s your favorite toilet paper?”

This makes us laugh, so I take out a pencil and, on the back of an unpaid bill, jot down what she said. Together we write a list of ridiculous questions—*How would you describe your cleaning philosophy? How many plants have you killed in the past year? Do you take out the lint before or after using the dryer? Will your friends come over often? If so, how often? Which Mean Girl are you?*—until I start to wish she wouldn’t leave. I want to ask her to stay, but I know I never would. Instead, I think of other Jo-isms and write them down.

I check Sydni’s Twitter, but it’s been inactive for years. I google her name. Turns out she runs marathons. On LinkedIn, I learn she’s a nurse at Houston Children’s, does community service, volunteers for all sorts of shit. She’s too good for me, and now I’m thinking I’m the one who should worry about the interview questions that she’ll ask *me*. I grab a broom and sweep the front entry and pick up all my dirty glasses and coffee mugs and place them in the sink and scratch dried

up egg yolk from a frying pan with my nails. Jo walks into the kitchen and says, “Are you O.K.?” It doesn’t look like you’re breathing.”

“I think she might be the one,” I tell her.

“Wait—who are you talking about?”

“Sydni, the girl coming over. I looked her up. Impressive. More so than me, that’s for sure.”

“I’m sure she’s got nothing on you,” she says. “Look at you.”

I see myself in the small mirror above the sink. This doesn’t help. I look like a burnt-out lifeguard, wearing yesterday’s shirt over my bathing suit, sunglasses resting on my head, wisps of hair jutting left and right. Something about the way I look makes me realize I forgot to take my medicine yesterday and today. So I do. The pill begins to dissolve on my tongue before I take a sip of water, and I almost gag. Mostly I want to quit thinking all together, but the pills only help so much. “I’m gonna get stoned,” I tell Jo. “Want to join me?”

“O.K.,” she says.

“Really?”

“Why not? I’m always telling you to branch out. Maybe I’m the one who should.”

In the backyard, I roll a joint on the patio table. We sit on lawn chairs. Twirl our wine like it actually makes a difference, like we actually know anything at all about wine. Flies cloud the air above the grass. Mosquitoes swirl around our legs. Jo sprays Off all over herself, which makes her sneeze and cough. I light the joint and pass it to her. She takes a hit, and we go back and forth.

“Do you hear something?” she says.

“Nah-uh.”

“There it is again,” she says.

“I don’t hear anything,” I tell her.

“Sounds like bells or something.”

“Hmm. I think you’re paranoid.”

“I think you’re right. Here,” she says, handing me the joint. “I’m done with this.”

It’s too small to bother, so I let it go out in the ashtray. We sit there and watch the clouds give way. The sky brightens. I close my eyes, think about work and bills and maybe living alone, then open them when I hear the back gate open. Sydney walks toward us. She looks the same as she looked in her LinkedIn picture—shoulder-length hair, dimpled chin, perfect posture—except she wears blue scrubs.

“Hello?” she says. “I tried the front door. Hope you don’t mind I came through the back.”

“Sydney?” I ask.

“Yeah!” she says. She extends her hand, and we both stand and shake hers.

“Have a seat,” I tell her. “Want a glass of wine?”

“No, thank you. I don’t . . . drink,” she says, and already I want her to leave. She has “Type A” written across her forehead, and it is so bringing me down, but I know I need to make an effort.

“Is that pot I smell?”

“Yes, it is,” Jo says, now beyond stoned. “Yes. It. Is.”

“You want to take a look inside?” I ask. “The photos online don’t do it justice.”

It looks as though Sydney is about to say, “Sure,” or maybe this is what I hope she’ll say to, at the very least, make things less awkward, but then she tells us, “This isn’t going to work out.”

I can’t help but laugh and say, “O.K.,” in a way that lets her know I think she’s being stupid. “Why’s that?”

“I just can’t live with someone who smokes and drinks, especially on a weekday,” she says, shaking her head all self-righteously, her bottom lip tucked beneath her upper. “No offense.”

Neither Jo nor I say goodbye. We just sit back down. Sydni gets the hint, and we watch her leave. I take a sip of wine and let it pool on top of my tongue. Jo and I look at each other and crack up, and I laugh so hard that the wine I hadn't swallowed shoots up my nose.

"That happened so fast. Like this," Jo says, snapping her fingers.

"I know, right?"

"Like, who the fuck does she think she is?"

We laugh more, and I ask, "Want another glass of wine?"

"No," she says, mimicking Sydni, a bit snooty and over-the-top, "I don't drink more than one glass of wine on a weekday."

We laugh harder. I top off both our glasses. We drink more and talk about things that don't matter. It feels like we're friends, sitting here right now, but I can't tell.

"I'm so hungry," Jo says. "I'm ordering a pizza. Will you eat some of it? I'm buying."

"Sure, but you paid for my drink last night. Let me get this one."

"No, no, no. I got it. It's the least I can do."

We go into the living room, and she orders the pizza and continues packing, and I sit with her on the couch and check my email, but there's nothing to speak of, so I spend twenty minutes looking for one-bedroom apartments online. Everything's too expensive or too far from work. Maybe I can sell some things. Maybe I'll need a second job.

The doorbell rings, and Jo answers it. It's the pizza girl. Jo signs the credit card receipt and says, "Hey, know anyone looking for a roommate?" The pizza girl shakes her head, and the two of us laugh. "Doesn't hurt to ask, right?"

"O.K.," the pizza girl says. "I'm going to leave now."

Jo, holding the pizza box, closes the door with her foot. "What's with people?"

“Don’t even get me started.”

She puts the pizza on the table and opens a packet of parmesan cheese with her teeth. Her eyes are bloodshot, and she can’t stop smiling. I grab us plates and paper towels from the kitchen, then sit with her at the table in the living room and eat. She chews with her mouth open, looking at me like she’s got something to say. “So what’s new at Bikini Coffee?” she asks. “Does Laila still have a bunch of stupid names for all the customers?”

“Oh yeah. But I’m loving the names now. Makes it feel like we’re playing a game, like we’re not even at work.”

“Any of those Patricks give you problems lately? Or are those the Bobs? Or are they Teds? Ha! I shouldn’t have said that out loud.” We both laugh, and I grab the bottle of wine, now almost empty, and pour the rest in her glass. “Keep it going, keep it going. Oh no, it’s all gone!” she says, and then her eyes widen as though she’s had a brilliant idea. “I say we buy another bottle.”

“I already did. It’s in the kitchen,” I tell her.

“You’re a genius, Stace. A genius!” She takes another bite of pizza. “Oh my God, so back to what we were talking about, I was meaning to tell you that I told Ted about all the names y’all use, but he didn’t even laugh. He just got all quiet. Sometimes I think he has no sense of humor.”

“Probably because he comes to Bikini Coffee from time to time.”

Jo’s smile disappears. “What?”

“Ted. Your Ted. He—”

“Look, I already know you don’t like him,” she says. I laugh out of awkwardness, and she looks at me like I disgust her, and suddenly I suspect I always have. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Would you rather me not have?” I ask.

“Yes. I don’t know. Maybe. Why are you smiling? What do you think is going to happen? That I’m going to decide not to move in with him and stay here with you?”

“No. That’s not . . . I just wanted to tell you. I thought you might think it was funny. We were laughing. Let’s just go back to doing that.”

Jo takes her plate to her bedroom. I open the second bottle of wine and do the same. A few minutes later, I hear her grab her keys and leave. I don’t hear her drive away, so I peek through the blinds. She’s crying in her car. I know I should go out there and tell her I’m sorry, but I don’t feel sorry because I don’t have anything to be sorry about. I don’t feel anything is what it is.

She comes back inside and goes to her room. I stay in bed the rest of the night and check my emails and watch the entire first season of that sci-fi show Laila’s been watching at work and fall asleep. I wake up hungover at 7:00 a.m., still dressed from yesterday’s shift, and remember that it’s Friday, that I work for Kristin today. I don’t bother changing.

Before work, I sell Jo’s box of DVDs at Half-Priced Books for seventeen dollars and twenty-three cents and buy two chocolate croissants and a juice at a nearby café. I ask the barista if they’re hiring, and she ducks below the counter and hands me an application.

“You don’t want to work here,” she says, still holding onto the application as I grab it, then lets go. I look at her, and she looks at me, and I don’t know what to say, but then I see that her tip jar is empty, so I hand the application back to her. “You made the right decision,” she tells me.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

When I pull up to Bikini Coffee, there's a line of men dressed in black suits, white shirts, and black ties as if they're on their way to a funeral. I walk by them and say, "I'm sorry for your loss," but none of them laugh. They just stare at my legs.

I clock in and take orders and run credit cards and steam milk and pour coffee beans into the grinder and break a sweat. By the time one o'clock rolls around, the Patrick—you know which one—shows up looking like he fell asleep in his suit: tie loosened, unshaven, fermented liquor seeping from his pours. Or maybe it's me that smells.

I lean against the counter, my face and hands catching sunlight from the little window. He says nothing to me, then pets my arm. I pull away quickly. "I have a boyfriend," I say. "He's got a really big dick." I hold my hands up one foot apart from each other. "It's almost too big."

"O.K.," he says. He's steps back. "I'll have my regular."

"No, you won't," I tell him. "Fuck off and go to Starbucks."

Laila has her hand over her mouth, and, for a second, I think she'll fire me, but now I see she's smiling, and I'm smiling, too, and the customer, he's definitely not smiling. His face reddens. He looks like a man who just got called out because that's exactly what he is.

"Cunts," he says. "The both of you." He unzips his pants right in front of us and pisses on the food truck, his foreskin dark and shriveled between his pink fingers.

"What the fuck?" Laila says, reaching for her phone on the counter. He stumbles off and peels out before she has the chance to dial 911.

"Don't worry. I'll clean it up," I say.

Laila says nothing at first, just shakes her head and sighs, so I grab gloves, Clorox, and a handful of rags. "You just cost us ten dollars," she says. "But you've got balls. You should be proud of yourself, Stace."

No one's ever told me this before, and, suddenly, I think I am. "Thanks."

The sky darkens and a light rain taps against the metal roof. Laila checks the time on her phone. "I say let's close early and get drinks. What do you think?"

"Sounds phenomenal."

I take out the trash and wipe piss off the side of Bikini Coffee. The awning covers me from the rain. I hear Laila count money inside, whispering numbers as she drops coins into the drawer. She closes the little window and changes her clothes. When I come back inside, I do the same.

Run for Your Life!

EXT. MEMORIAL PARK. Typical Houston morning, disgustingly hot and humid, even at 7:00 a.m. Reminds RICHARD (mid-30s) of the Mombasa coast. Reminds him of his favorite sports movies, movies like *Bad News Bears*, *White Men Can Jump*, and *Caddyshack*, which, of course, isn't technically a sports movie—seeing how golf isn't really a sport—but neither is this.

BARBRA (early-60s) shoots video on her phone of Richard doing jumping jacks. As she circles around him, she ZOOMS IN on his gut, his neon Adidas jogging shorts falling down, ass crack now exposed, then ZOOMS OUT. “Honey,” she says, “your ass is hanging out.”

“I thought something was off.” Richard stops. Pulls up his pants. Keeps at it.

They're waiting for JEREMEY (late-20s) alongside the track, where the real-deal runners living in this city put in all their miles. Jeremy doesn't know it yet, but he and Richard are going to act out a few scenes from the *Run for Your Life!* script, a comedy that Richard is auditioning for. His agent, LITTLE SCOTTY (age unknown), sent it to him last week. What Richard knows about his role: his name's RICK (late-30s) and he's a running coach, a damn good one. Trained Kenyan runners over in Nairobi for ten years. Never married, no kids, never had time. A coach is an artist, and he's married to the art of running. This is a line of dialogue from the script. (Not even the best one. Just wait.)

UNNECESSARY VOICE-OVER VOICED BY RICK: “Society is breeding a new kind of running coach. It's also breeding a new kind of actor. Meet Rick/Richard. He does the job nobody wants him to do.”

SUPER: *Run for your Life!*

Barbra checks the time on her watch. “This Jeremey guy’s running late.” She turns the camera on herself. Makes sure her blonde hair, stiff with hair spray, still looks good. “I look fantastic for my age. Or maybe it’s just the lighting. What do you think?”

CLOSE ON RICK’S FACE, BUT NOT TOO CLOSE. Richard stops and looks at her. “I’m not going to answer that question, Mom.”

“By the way, what are your thoughts on dinner tonight? How does flounder sound?”

“Not right now, Barb. Trying to stay focused here.”

“You’re right.” Barbra PANS on nearby runners. “See those runners over there? The ones warming up and stretching on the wooden deck? Go over there. Study them. Learn all you can.”

Richard nods. Channels his inner Rick. He walks over to them and says, “Hey,” but they ignore him, so Rick listens to them chat, watching them swat mosquitoes at their ankles, the sunrise filtering through the pines. He catches on to their lingo—“pronation,” “shin-splints,” “cadence,” “compression socks”—and mimics their stretches, attempts to touch his toes, grunting, then stops because Rick knows Richard looks stupid, then adjusts the sweatband on his forehead. The runners take off and run past him, some striking heel to toe against gravel and dirt, others landing mid-foot. Their form is all wrong. They could learn a thing or two from Rick.

Barbra walks up to Richard. “What’d they say?”

“Nothing really.”

“That’s not believable.”

“It’s true, Barb.”

“I’m sure it is, Richard. It’s just the way you said it. It’s not convincing. Your delivery’s no good. Yesterday, you sounded like a badass, like Sylvester Stallone in *Cobra*.”

“I thought I was going for Chris Farley in *Beverly Hills Ninja*.”

“A blend of the of two is what we decided.”

“Oh, that’s right. What do I sound like right now?”

“You sound like an out-of-work actor.”

STILL FRAME. SILENCE. She’s right. He does, and, when it comes down to it, he is. Richard needs this role. If he doesn’t get it, he might just quit. There’s only so long a thirty-four-year-old man can go on chasing his dream of becoming an actor while living in his mother’s spare bedroom. It’s just not, or shouldn’t be, acceptable, and the thought of drinking more of her cheap chardonnay out of wine glasses painted with tiny red hearts makes him sick. Deep down, he knows she’ll ruin him if he stays at her place any longer, her calling him an “artist” and “genius” all the time the way that she does, asking him to perform Margaret Pollitt’s monologue from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at family birthday parties, telling her friends over the phone how she can’t understand why casting directors would pass him up at auditions. Richard and his sisters have told her to stop, to at least tone it down, but Barbra can’t help herself. Richard’s considered firing her and hiring a new manager, but they’ve been together from the start, and she’s what keeps him going. Plus, when Little Scotty called last week and told him about *Run for Your Life!*, Barbra told Richard to do it right this time. Step it up. Go all out.

FLASHBACK. “Your career,” she’d told him, the two of them drinking wine at her kitchen table, “depends on it. Your sense of self-worth, too. Not to mention your sex life, which we won’t even go into.” He knew she was right, so he nodded, agreeing with her because he was buzzed from the wine and from the idea of playing Rick, and decided not to fire her, that she was the best manager that money could buy because—well, because she’s free, and, now that she’s retired, she can dedicate more time to him than any other manager could. That day, Richard got two weeks of shifts covered at True Food, where he works nights as a waiter, got into character, and studied his

ass off, which is to say Barbra picked up an issue of *Runners World* and told Richard to read up on old techniques packaged in new ways, not to mention all the reviews of the latest running shoes, then sat him down in front of her computer and made him watch YouTube videos of the Olympics from years past, but these runners ran so fast that, to understand their form, she, not knowing how to use her computer that well, told him to slow down playback speed to half-speed, then quarter-speed, but then told him to speed it all up again because she can't get over how much technology has advanced in her lifetime. But even after all that, even after Barbra had him run in circles both literally and metaphorically, maybe even metaphysically, they both knew none of this was cutting it, so she took him shopping for new clothes. In each scene, Rick wears all Adidas, a too-tight tank top, and a coach whistle around his neck. END OF FLASHBACK.

Now, suited up at the park, it's clear: Richard's got the raw talent it takes to transform anyone, himself included. But this ain't no *Rocky* movie. This is life. Or, well, a movie, hopefully, but still, it's Richard's life, or, actually, it's sort of Rick's.

"Where the hell's Jeremy at?" Barbra stops recording. Richard just shrugs. "Let's run through your lines," she says. "We need to make sure you've picked up on all of Rick's subtleties."

Richard reaches into her purse, takes out the script, and walks back to her.

"Wait, wait, wait," she says. "Where's your limp, Richard? Remember? His limp? From Rick's knee surgery years back. Find the line."

"Oh, shit, you're right." Richard flips through the script.

"Line, Richard."

"Don't call me, Richard," he tells her. "Call me Rick."

"Fantastic." Barbra hits record. "Whenever you're ready, Rick."

“This is what happens when you run so hard,” Rick says, his voice growing deeper with each word. “This is what happens when you’re an all-American athlete.”

“Loving it,” she says. “O.K. What are some of Rick’s favorite words and phrases?”

“Metabolism, bonus reps, let’s get back out there and do it again!” Rick nods slowly and squints into the camera like James Dean while ’80S ROCK MUSIC PLAYS through Barbra’s phone. “Yeah,” he says to himself. “Oh, yeah.” People on the track look twice his way. Rick hands a business card to WHITE WOMAN #1 jogging by, a flimsy strip of paper with *Rick’s Running Services* printed along with his number. “You’ll thank me later,” he tells her.

But White Woman #1 hands it back to him and says, “No, thanks,” and runs off.

Barbra, throwing her hands up, yells, “Your loss, bitch!”

“Wow, Mom.” Richard turns to Barbra. “That’s a line from the script, right?”

“Yeah, how’d it sound?”

“Pretty good,” Richard says. “I’m impressed.”

“You should be.”

A man approaches. Points in Richard’s direction. His face is lean. His shoulders set back. It’s got to be Jeremy. He wears all Adidas just like Rick, as though the costume designer got a hold of him and coordinated their outfits. Everything’s falling into place.

Yesterday, Barbra had Richard post a Craigslist ad. INSERT – BARBRA’S COMPUTER SCREEN: *Want to get faster? Stronger? Better-looking even? With ten years of experience professionally training Kenyan runners, I got what it takes to transform you. Only \$50 per hour. Call or email Rick’s Running Services now!* BACK TO SCENE.

Jeremy’s the one who called. Richard knows how this makes him look—like someone who’s completely lost his mind—and he’s fully aware of the line he’s crossing, but he put some

real thought into it and decided that he's not conning Jeremy per se, seeing how, when the time comes, Rick won't accept his money. It's just that Richard needs the practice. He needs this part.

Jeremy says, "Rick?"

"The one and only," Rick says. They shake hands. Richard keeps in mind his favorite lines, lowering his voice to sound as intense as possible. "It must be great for you to meet me."

Jeremy laughs. Rick doesn't. He's all business. Calm.

"You're late," Barbra tells Jeremy.

QUICK PAN TO JEREMEY: Jeremy eyes her down. "And you are?"

"Call me Barb."

UNNECESSARY VOICE-OVER VOICED BY BARBRA: "Society is breeding a new kind of mom. Meet Barb. She's retired and no longer takes shit from cocky young men."

Jeremy looks confused, but no one cares about Jeremy. He'll get killed off soon.

Richard knows he needs to mend this—uh, what even is this?—power dynamic. "She's filming a documentary about me. *The Rise and Fall and Return of Rick*. That cool with you?"

"Sure, I guess."

"I'm eccentric," Barbra tells Jeremy. "So expect the unexpected."

"I can see."

Barbra continues filming, looks up from her phone, and scoffs at Jeremy.

Rick ignores her. "Let's see what we're working with."

Barbra records a CLOSE UP of Jeremy's body on her phone. He's in better shape than Richard—in better shape than most—like someone who already runs and eats right. Richard's a bit concerned about this, about the believability of it all, but sticks with the script.

“You’re going to need to put in a lot of work,” Rick says, “that much I know for sure, but I think you’ve got promise. The truth is we got miles to run, sweat to sweat. Are you ready physically but also mentally? Do you want your legs and lungs to hurt so much that you might need to go to the hospital, that you might pass out on the track, waiting for somebody—anybody—to answer your cries?”

Jeremy ignores Rick, then glances at Barbra, who’s now even closer than before. “Could you give us a little space?”

Barbra steps back one inch. “Better?”

Jeremy rolls his eyes. Rick shakes his head. Barbra smiles. Richard thinks about Act One, Scene Four. Rick gets back to it. “Let me ask you a question, Jeremy: do you like running?”

Jeremy nods, shrugs, thinks about it. “Yeah, sure.”

Rick waits two seconds for dramatic effect “But do you *love* running?”

Richard, having delivered this line with just the right amount of arrogance, intensity, and, depending on audiences, sexuality, feels as though he’s finally tapped into what makes Rick truly Rick. QUICK FLASHBACK. Over the phone last week, Little Scotty told Richard that *Run for your Life!* won’t be an Oscar contending screenplay, but, as far as Richard’s concerned, this is an Oscar-worthy performance, which goes without saying. This is what Richard meant when he told Little Scotty to tell the casting director to tell the director that he’s right for this role, that no one other than him could ever pull Rick off. END OF QUICK FLASHBACK.

“You’re hesitating,” Rick tells Jeremy.

Barbra nods. “He really is.”

Rick gives her a look. Jeremy doesn’t. He looks off. Says nothing. The sun continues to rise over the tree line, casting sunlight onto their faces, and they look so cinematic right now that

Richard almost forgets he's Richard. "I don't know if you're ready to start training for this marathon," Rick says. "You should know up front that this isn't going to be a brisk walk in the park. This is going to be like chewing rocks from off the track. It may seem impossible, but it's not."

"I'm pretty sure it's not possible," Jeremy says.

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's just that, you know, rocks—"

"You're right. I can do better." Richard quickly workshops his line because clearly the screenwriters don't know their pencils from their ass.

REVISED SCRIPT PAGES. Barbra stops recording, gives Richard a look like, What the hell are you doing? but Rick gestures for her to keep rolling, so she does.

"Maybe you think this is going to be like a Nike commercial," Rick says, "but it's not, Jeremy. It's going to be like an infomercial. Like it'll last forever. Like you'll never reach the twenty-six miles it takes to reach the finish line. Like—" Richard stops himself from getting too carried away. He's out of breath, his pulse strong against his neck. This dialogue is too perfect not to be in the script. Maybe he can finagle a script consultant credit. "It's O.K. if you weren't born ready," Richard continues improvising, leveling with him now. "Only a few of us are." END OF REVISED SCRIPT PAGES.

"Listen," Jeremy says. "I *am* ready. I want to do this. I need to. And—I don't know—if you say you're as good as you are, I think you can help. I guess I was just kind of, you know, skeptical by this whole thing you got going on."

"What thing?"

“You know, you’re just so. . . .” Jeremy trails off, his mouth still open, as though he’s hesitant to say the wrong thing, as though he can’t even begin to describe Rick, then smiles. “You.”

In his own voice, Richard says, “Thanks,” flattered now because he knows the ridiculousness of Rick is coming through, but then Richard flips the switch and drops his voice again. “If you’re having doubts,” he tells Jeremy, “let me reassure you: I’m better than how good I say I am. You haven’t even seen half my cards. But if you want to get better, I need to know what’s driving you. So tell me, Jeremy, what’s your deal? What’s your motivation?”

Barbra ZOOMS IN on Jeremy’s face. He runs his fingers through his hair, his forehead tense as though he’s working through something, something he can’t explain yet, or maybe Jeremy doesn’t think anyone, not even Rick—his world-class running coach—would ever understand, or—who knows—maybe it’s just Barbra’s wobbly cinematography.

“My mom,” Jeremy tells him, “died from breast cancer last year and . . .”

Rick waits for him to continue, but Jeremy acts like he forgot his line, but, of course, he didn’t, because he doesn’t even know he has lines, which he does, not that they’re any good. Rick can’t help himself. Rick goes all in. “And? So?” But having pushed the insensitivity of Rick to uncharted territory, Richard knows he’s indulged too much.

“Jesus, Rick,” Barbra tells him. “That’s no way to treat an extra. Take two. Action!”

Richard cues melodramatic tears. “Sorry. That was totally uncalled for.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jeremy places a hand on Richard’s shoulder. “All I’m saying is that she was a runner, like you.” Who knows what’s got into Jeremy, but, after saying this, he tears up, too, and, with the two of them crying, it’s clear this scene has really got out of hand, but Rick, knowing this moment is key toward their mentor/protégé bond, lets the moment linger. BEAT. . . . ONE MORE BEAT. . . . “And,” Jeremy says, “I want to run this marathon for her

because, look, I know it sounds silly or unrealistic, but I want to run this marathon in her honor, for what she fought through. I just got to do this.”

Either Jeremy’s truly committed or he’s one damn good actor, because, the way Richard sees it, it doesn’t take a director to realize Jeremy’s dialogue is first-take material.

Rick gives him a high-five, captured by Barbra in SLOW MOTION. “There’s nothing silly about that at all. This is your call to adventure. It’s up to you to cross the threshold. I’m ninety-three-point-five percent sure you’re ready. Let’s get you warmed up. See where that Becks Prime is at? Right next to the driving range?” He points at the restaurant, a stucco building tucked in between the track and driving range a hundred yards away.

Jeremy looks over. “Uh-huh.”

“Jog there and back.”

“Sure, sure.”

“And, hey, while you’re at it, see when they open. I’m starving,” Richard says, but really he just wants to rehearse Act Two, Scene Two, in which Rick orders too much food and SEBASTIAN (mid-20s), also known as SEA BASS—the role Jeremy’s filling in for—questions whether Rick still has what it takes to be a top-tier running coach despite being out of shape. It’s not a bad scene, but Richard’s hang-up with it is that it’s written as though Sea Bass is the protagonist (he is), which baffles Richard seeing how obvious it is that Rick’s emotional arc is central to the movie.

Jeremy nods. He jogs down the track, his arms pumping back and forth, his back straight as can be. Barbra, looking like an overzealous soccer mom, stops filming. “Rick, that was . . .”

“Pretty good, right?”

“. . . the best performance from you I’ve ever seen . . .”

Richard's happy. Richard's proud. Rick karate-chops the air.

". . . but we need to kill off this Jeremy guy. What an asshole, right?"

"He's not that bad, Barb."

"Not that bad? Are you kidding me? Let's cut him and cast me as Sea Bass."

"I don't know if you'd make a good Sea Bass."

"You're out of your mind. Hell, I could even be Rick."

Rick laughs. "Sure, you could." Richard's phone rings. He reaches for it, looks at the screen. "It's Little Scotty."

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

Rick answers. "Rick's Running Services. Ready to push the limits of your athleticism?"

"Ha! You're good," Little Scotty says. "You're . . . really good. Making progress?"

"So much. Something special's happening here right now. I can just feel it."

Barbra gets close to Richard and speaks into the phone. "Hi, Little Scotty! Richard, put me on speaker phone."

"No, Mom. Sorry, Little. Barb says, 'Hi.'"

"Put me on speaker phone," Little Scotty tells him. "I want to hear from Barb, too."

Richard sighs. He does. "You're on."

"Hi, Barb! Listen, you two, I got good news: Just had lunch with Alan Sherman, the casting director. Says he wants Richard to come in for auditions sometime soon. The time and date are TBA. Any chance you can fly out on short notice if need be?"

"No can do," Rick says. "This is peak running season. Plus, I'm busy with a client at the moment."

"Ha! You're killing me. So listen, it'll likely happen soon."

“*Soon* won’t work with my training schedule,” Rick says.

Barbra shakes her head, then nudges Rick on the shoulder. “He’s kidding, Little. That’s great news. Send us the details and we’ll be there.”

“Sounds good, Barb. And, Richard, love your dedication to character. I think your moment’s finally coming. I’ll keep the two of you posted.”

“Bye, Little Scotty!” Barbra says.

“Bye, Barb! Bye, Rich—”

Rick hangs up. Richard giggles. Rick karate-kicks the air.

Barbra looks at Rick. “Why do you have to be so weird about me talking to Little Scotty?”

“I don’t know, Mom. You talk to him like you’ve got a crush on him or something. It grosses me out. Let’s keep it professional.”

“Get over yourself, Richard. I’m single and I’ll flirt with whomever I want.” They turn around. Jeremy jogs back. “O.K.,” she says, taking out her phone. “Let’s keep rehearsing. We can’t let this one slip away. I’m going to film his gait, and then we’ll play it back for him.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Barbra films an EXTREMELY LONG SHOT of Jeremy running toward them, which uncontrollably AUTO-ADJUSTS as Jeremy slows his pace.

“Jeremy,” Rick says, waving him over, “let’s check out some footage.” Barbra hands Rick the phone. He REWINDS the footage, the three of them huddle around him, looking at the screen, and hits play. “See how you’re leaning forward as you run? It’s messing with your gait. Not only that, but you’re overpronating. These things can cause stupid injuries.” Richard learned this from an article in *Runners World*. “I learned this back in Nairobi.”

“Man,” Jeremy says. “I’m glad I found you.”

“You should be,” Barbra says.

“By the way,” Rick asks, “what time do they open?”

“They’re already open.”

“Fuck, yeah. This is what we do: order breakfast, then resume training.”

“I’m not trying to overstep, Rick,” Jeremy says, “but isn’t it bad to run on a full stomach?”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“It’s just been my experience, you know, from running.”

“Sometimes you’ve got to ignore what your body’s telling you. Plus, intuition is overrated. You need fuel, Jeremy. You need to tap into the raw energy dormant inside of you. C’mon.”

Barbra nods. “You ought to listen to him. He’s a big deal.”

Rick, without warning, sprints toward the restaurant, leaving Jeremy and Barbra behind, the two of them watching him kick up dirt from the track. Rick looks back. “Try to keep up, Jeremy,” he shouts. “If you can.”

INT. BECKS PRIME. MOMENTS LATER. Rick pants and sweats, palms against knees, a good burn radiating through his legs. The place is dead. The FOUR OLD WHITE MEN sitting at a table wearing golf clothes and drinking coffee only make the place seem more dead. Barbra, Rick, and Jeremy read the menu on the wall. The CASHIER smiles at them like an extra with an eager, forgettable face. “Good morning. Will this be for here or to go?”

“For here,” Rick says. “I’ll have the bacon cheeseburger with extra mayo, and a chili cheese dog. No onion. And, uh, four bottles of water.”

The cashier nods at Jeremy. “And for you, sir?”

“I’ll have the Queen of Hearts Salad and a bottle of water.”

“Just one?” Rick asks. “Going to be a hot one.”

“I can refill it,” Jeremy says, but Rick gives him his concerned, fatherly face, something Richard learned years back when he took acting classes at HCC. “I’ll have a Gatorade, too.”

“Barb,” Rick says, “you want anything?”

“No, thanks. I brought my flask.”

“Scotch?” Rick asks.

“You know it.”

“Nice.”

As they wait for their drinks, Jeremy stretches his quads, leaning against the wall, and listens to Rick still trying to catch his breath. “So,” Jeremy says, “don’t take this the wrong way, but, uh, do you still do a lot of running?”

Jeremy’s too good. A part of Richard wants to show him the script to get him more involved, tell him that, truth is, he’s putting on a few pounds for the role, that it’s nothing he can’t work off later, not that he’s worried about it, because, if he’s being honest with himself, he’ll never be known for having a Hollywood physique. That’s not his brand. He’ll be known for hard laughs. Period. But Richard decides against it. Jeremy’s performance is already so natural.

Barbra stares at Jeremy. “Do you know who the hell you’re talking to?”

“Jesus, lady, what’s your problem?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Settle down, you two,” Rick says, then faces Jeremy. “So, sure, I’m a bit . . . overweight. No one’s denying that. And it’s true these days I train less and basically eat whatever I want. But this isn’t about me. This is about you. You’re the one that answered my ad. You’re the one who’s competing in a few months.”

“Good point,” Jeremy says.

“Of course, it’s a good point,” Barbra says, shaking her head.

Rick looks up at the TV, which plays *Don Cowboy*, a movie that could've been Richard's breakout performance. It's basically *Goodfellas* meets *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* meets *Garden State*, and perhaps the first western mob rom-com ever made. Richard would've played DON COWBOY (late-20s), the son of a famous mobster who, tired of living a stressful mob life, decides to live out his dream of being a cowboy out in Montana. This is where he meets ROSE-MARIE (early-30s). She's his everything. Right now's the scene when Don Cowboy realizes that what he actually wants—more than Rose-Marie's love—is the approval of his father. But it's too late. His dad, THE DON (mid-60s), has been poisoned by a rival mob. Now he must return to New York to avenge his father's death, bringing with him cowboy boots and a Chevy truck full of guns. For an entire week, Richard pretended to be Don Cowboy, content with his cowboy way of life, but he didn't get the part. Instead, the casting director offered him the role of LACKEY, a waiter with barely three lines, but he turned it down because he already plays the role of a semi-competent waiter in real life.

“What's on?” Jeremy asks.

Richard ignores the question. The scene cuts to commercial. He looks at the cashier. “Can we get this to go instead?” He can't watch any more of it. It'll bring up too many memories, and everyone knows acting is a marathon, not a sprint.

They leave before the end of the commercial break and eat outside, where Rick watches runners run by, dramatically eating his cheeseburger, his lips slathered in mayo, and Barbra, breaking out her flask, prepares for the next scene.

EXT. MEMORIAL PARK. LATER. (BUT NOT THAT MUCH LATER. JUST SLIGHTLY LATER. LIKE TEN MINUTES OR SO.). The second act of *Run for Your Life!* begins with a montage, so, after they throw away their trash, Barbra plays Van Halen's “Running with

the Devil” through her phone and records more video, trying her best to recreate the one in the script. MONTAGE: Jeremy sprints, runs backwards, planks, bear crawls, drinks Gatorade that spills dramatically off of his chin, staining his white shirt a shade of Cool Blue, then keeps running. Rick yells at him. Blows his whistle. Jeremy stops. Hunches over. Wheezes. Sweat drips from his face. Barbra shoots an EXTREME CLOSE UP. Jeremy waves her away. The music cuts out. END OF MONTAGE.

Rick blows his whistle at Barbra. She stops recording. Jeremy sits on the ground. His face flush, eyes somewhat bloodshot. He leans back, his hands pressing against the grass, his face facing the cloudless sky. Rick stands near Jeremy. “You O.K.?”

“Yeah, just need some water.”

This conflict isn’t in the script, so Richard improvises. “Bet you wish you bought four bottles of water like me, huh?” He takes one from his backpack. “Here. This one’s on me.”

“Thanks.” Jeremy pours water over his hair. He looks terrible.

Barbra says, “You look terrible.” They stare each other down. “You pushed him too far, Rick.” Rick knows she’s right, but Richard’s phone rings. Barbra ZOOMS IN on Richard’s phone.

INSERT – RICHARD’S PHONE: *Little Scotty*. BACK TO SCENE.

“Put Little on speaker phone,” Barbra tells him. “I want to hear his voice.”

Rick ignores her. Steps aside. “Ricks Running Services,” he says, less enthusiastic than before. “Ready to run for your life?”

“Richard, my man, you get my emails?”

“Not yet. Been training all morning.”

“So things were looking good,” he tells Richard, “but now it turns out there’s been some changes to the script.”

“What kind of changes are we talking about?”

“It’s a real shit show. First, they want to send you in for auditions. They emailed me the address, which I forwarded to you and Barb an hour ago, but five minutes ago, and this is where it gets ugly, they called me up saying that the auditions are off the table.”

“What do you mean ‘off the table?’” Richard says.

Barbra looks over to see if everything is O.K., but, no, things are not O.K., Richard’s face now pale in the caustic sunlight.

“Well, for one, they’re selecting people who better fit the part. You know, someone who looks like they might be from Kenya. Someone more fit, too.”

“Wait—from Kenya? Like a black person? And more fit? I don’t get it. I thought this was supposed to be a comedy. What happened to the irony of it all?” Richard isn’t breathing. He sits down with Jeremy on the ground. “I thought they were looking for someone out of shape, someone to deliver the laughs.” Richard sounds pathetic. Richard sounds like—well—Richard.

“What the hell is going on?” Barbra says. “Speaker phone, Richard.”

Richard puts Little Scotty on speaker. “That’s just the thing. They were. But there’s been a rewrite. It’s a full-blown drama now. It’s a whole different movie. There’s no more Rick. It’s now KENO (late-40s).”

“Are you serious, Little Scotty!?” Barbra asks.

“I know, Barb. It’s super unfortunate.”

Who knows, if the producers were here to see Richard’s performance this morning, maybe they’d see the potential in Rick—this Rick—not the new Rick, who’s not Rick at all—but they’re not. “Shit,” Richard says, then sighs, exhaling the last strands of Rick.

“I know. That’s Hollywood for you. We’ll land you something soon. Well, hey, I’m walking into a meeting with Alan. The three of us will talk soon.”

Richard hangs up. “I hate to say it,” Barbra tells him, “but you might need to get rid of Little, which is tough for me to admit, given the sexual tension between him and I.” Richard says nothing. He paces along the track. Gets in the way of runners jogging by. Barbra follows behind. “Everything’s fine, Rick.”

“Look, Barb, just call me Richard.”

Poor Richard. He’s just another actor out of work, a mediocre waiter at best. He’s reached the inmost cave. It is dark.

“What was that all about?” Jeremy asks.

“Oh, fuck off, Jeremy,” Barbra tells him, now buzzed from the scotch. “God, it feels good to finally say that out loud.”

“No, fuck you, Barb! You got in the way all morning with your stupid documentary that no one’s ever going to watch.”

Richard’s squints. Richard pants. Rick karate-chops Jeremy, knocking him to the ground. “No one talks to Barb that way! Get the fuck out of here!” Runners running by stare at Rick. “What’re you looking at?” They look away and keep running.

Jeremy quickly stands and sprints, leaving Richard and Barbra behind.

Barbra laughs. “Look at that idiot run for his life!” She looks at Richard, but he’s not smiling. “Stop being so mopey, Richard. It’s not the end of the world.”

“I know, Mom, but, still, I really wanted this one. Now there’s nothing we can do.”

“I doubt *that*.”

Richard and Barb think on it. Runners run past them as they stand in the middle of the track. Richard knows his life isn't meant to be a sad movie, but, whether he likes it or not, that's exactly what it's become. Or maybe his life *is* supposed to be a sad movie. Maybe he just hasn't realized it yet. He kicks dirt from off the track. The wind picks up. The dirt blows into his mouth. He spits. "I'm done."

"What do you mean?" Barbra asks.

"This whole acting thing. I'm done with it. It's stupid. I've wasted so many years on such a stupid dream. Look at me. I mean, really, look at me. I look ridiculous."

She looks at his outfit and shrugs. "That's just the character you're playing."

"But I basically conned a man today," he says.

"Well, honey," she tells him, "that was my idea. Don't go taking all the credit for that. Plus, if anyone should be ashamed, it should be me, but I'm not. And neither should you. Don't give up so easily, dammit."

"Let's go home," he says, walking toward the parking lot.

Barbra follows him, but Rick—or Richard—or, who knows, it's hard to tell at this point—he needs space, so she trails behind on the track, checking her email on her phone. Little Scotty CC'd her, just like he always does, the time and location for the audition. She stops walking, realizing something—something big. "Richard, I've got an idea!"

"No, Barb. No more ideas."

"Just hear me out," she says. He slumps his shoulders. Turns around. Meets back up with her. He's pouting. "Stop pouting," she tells him. "It's so easy. Listen, we'll go to Hollywood. We'll talk to the casting director or the producer or anyone we can get ahold of and talk some sense into them, show them they're making a mistake, show them what they're missing out on. Hell, we'll

show them the videos I recorded. These videos, Richard, are something else. This is basically a movie!”

It’s true. She’s right. They are. A poorly shot movie, but a movie, nonetheless. And even though Richard feels that feeling he’s felt so many times before, that one suffocating the part out of him, what she says, as crazy as it sounds, makes sense. And what difference would it make? It’s not like he has a reputation to uphold. He’s got nothing, which is almost better than having something. (But, of course, it’s not.) Besides, he loves committing himself to unrealistic, arbitrary dreams. If not that, then what else is there to live for?

“O.K.,” Richard tells her, “Let’s do it.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah!” Rick says. He gives her a high five. He reaches for the unknown, the impossible, because he is Rick—he is reborn—and this scene, this role, will never fade to black, because he knows what he needs to do. It’s so simple it’s stupid. Something you’d only see in a movie. He’ll show them why Rick, *this* Rick, is the only Rick.

But then the scene *does* FADE TO BLACK because most scenes do, because it’s nighttime, because they’re driving west on I-10 in Barbra’s car, and, other than the headlights from oncoming eighteen-wheelers and cars and trucks that grow less frequent as the night slowly becomes morning, there’re very few lights on the freeway, it’s just Rick and Barb and the stars and the slow passing of clouds like tumbleweeds in a spaghetti western.

SUPER: *Just outside of El Paso*

Richard refills the tank, and Barbra stays in the car, talking in her sleep. “No, no, no,” she mumbles. “He’s an *actor*. Not a flounder.”

SERIES OF QUICK SHOTS: Richard locks the car. Barbra snores. Richard takes a piss. Richard squeegees splattered bugs from off the windshield. Barbra drools. BACK TO SCENE.

It is here, near the edge of nowhere Texas, tired and restless, where Richard feels like killing off Rick again and turning back, but Rick tells Richard that he's come too far, and Richard knows that Rick is right. Rick's not such a bad coach, after all. Richard gets back into the car and drives west through the deserts of New Mexico, the sunrise in his rearview mirror more arresting than anything any cinematographer could ever capture: the night DISSOLVES to purple, until a warm, orange-tinged blue overcomes the horizon. Rick reaches into the glovebox and puts on Barbra's bulky, old lady sunglasses, the kind that Hollywood stars sometimes hide behind. Richard yawns. The road looks like a scene from a movie he hasn't seen in years, slightly OUT OF FOCUS and speeding by. He closes his eyes and tries to think of the name of the movie, but all he sees is a scene of himself and Barbra driving back home from somewhere when he was a kid, her telling him that he can do anything he puts his mind to, yet watching this scene unfold now as an adult, Richard realizes that her dialogue proves flat and unrealistic. But none of that matters right now because the car convulses. Richard opens his eyes. Barbra wakes up, too. He's veering over the rumble strip on the shoulder of the freeway.

Barbra says, "Oh, shit," and grabs the steering wheel, but, when she does, Richard hits the brakes, and the car one-eighties on the freeway. It happens so fast they don't even have time to yell. They come to a complete stop, facing the wrong way. The car behind them stops, too. The man in the car gives Rick a thumbs up. Richard waves, accelerates, turns the car around, and takes a breath. "You O.K., Barb?"

"You almost gave me a heart attack," she tells him.

"Sorry. I'll be more careful."

“It’s O.K.,” she says. “I was just having this nightmare about . . . about flounder of all things, which, now that I’m thinking about it, makes me realize I should’ve taken the flounder out of the freezer to defrost because . . .”

PREVIOUSLY OMITTED SCENES NOW INCLUDED IN THE DIRECTOR’S CUT OF *RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!* Richard wants to say something like, “You’ve got to stop it with the flounder, Barb,” but he doesn’t say anything because, the thing is, they almost just died. He already knows he needs to quit letting her cook for him every night. He needs to stop telling himself lies. He’s too old to be chasing his dreams. Most likely, he *will* come back without the part and Barbra will broil flounder stuffed with shrimp, served with rice and salad and remoulade, like she does almost every Friday night, and Richard will remind her how he feels about flounder, that there’re way too many bones to pick through, and she’ll say that he loves flounder, that he always has ever since he was a kid, and that it’s the best local fish to eat according to something she heard on the news, and Richard will cave and eat it, too tired and hungry to argue with her, and there at dinner, the table set with fine china and dimly lit candles with CLASSIC ROCK PLAYING as they eat, she’ll talk about Richard’s sisters, tell him that he should call them more often, and the next day he will, and he’ll ask how things are going with the two of them, and, like always, they’ll invite him over for dinner and treat him like the baby brother that he is, but he’ll try to end the call before they extend the invitation or before that part of the conversation when you have to talk about yourself and work, and, after hanging up, he’ll update his resume in a state of guilt and defeat and apply for a new job—a real, full-time job with benefits—and move out before he completely loses his mind, but Richard, having taken too long of a BEAT, now looks over to see that Barbra’s fallen back to sleep. END OF PREVIOUSLY OMITTED SCENES.

What else is there to say? Not even the best screenwriter or director could fill the twenty-two-hour drive it takes from Houston to LA—there’s only so few ways to draw it up, and, after so long, those boring stretches of land all look the same. JUMP CUT.

SUPER: *Los Angeles, 4:05 P.M.*

Richard’s stuck in bumper-to-bumper just like Marcello Mastroianni in Fellini’s *8 ½*, only nothing here is black and white. The LA traffic moves sixty frames per second in Technicolor, meaning there’s a shitload of cars in all different colors surrounding Richard, suffocating him, or maybe it’s the smog preventing him from breathing well.

On her phone, Barbra double checks the address of where the auditions were to take place. The car behind Richard honks—the car behind that one, too—and Barbra rolls down her window and yells, “Go fuck yourself!”

She and Richard laugh. He accelerates. Barbra turns on SIRI (ageless), and Siri tells Richard where to go, taking the route that avoids freeways the rest of the way there, sending them through parts of LA that are familiar to Richard from countless movies and TV shows. He keeps driving, hits traffic, and, an hour later, after hitting traffic two more times, they arrive at a black and white, modern-looking building.

INT. OFFICE. CONTINUOUS. An office bright with fluorescence. WHITE WOMAN #2, wearing black jeans and a black blouse, stands in front of a standing desk, skeptically eyeing Rick and Barbra through clear-rimmed glasses. “How may I help you?”

It hadn’t occurred to Richard that he’d need to prepare something to say at this precise moment, the moment in which White Woman #2 would ask him questions as to who he is or what he’s doing here, and to think that Rick could’ve been rehearsing this speech in the car, the very words that will change minds, yet somehow failed to bother, well, it really shows that Richard

doesn't have what it takes, but this type of thinking isn't going to do Rick any good, so Richard decides to keep it simple, which is to say he clears his throat and lets his manager talk.

"Yes," Barbra says, "we're here to see Alan Sherman."

"Alan's already seen his last client for the day."

"Will he be in tomorrow?" Barbra asks.

"It's very unlikely," White Woman #2 says. "Tomorrow's Saturday. The weekend?"

"Yes, I'm aware of the concept of weekends," Barbra tells her.

Right as Barbra and White Woman #2 stare each other down like two characters in a movie about to breakdance fight—DREAM SEQUENCE, in which Barbra and White Woman #2 breakdance on top of flattened cardboard, while '80S HIP-HOP PLAYS in the background. BACK TO SCENE—Richard sees a man walk out from an office. It's him—ALAN SHERMAN (early-40s), the casting director himself—and Richard knows it's him because he and Barbra looked him up on IMDB: slick-backed hair and looking like he hasn't eaten carbs in years. Richard's Rick instincts tell him that Alan's a runner, while Richard's Richard instincts tell him to stop overthinking it. This is the chance to say something, anything. They see each other.

Alan does a double take. "Hey, buddy, where do I know you from? Wait—don't tell me." He snaps his fingers. "You auditioned for *Run for your Life!*, right?"

"We were invited to, yes," Richard says, knowing Rick needs to show up quick, but standing there, Richard struggles to seize the moment, or call it nerves, or call it whatever, but just don't call it bad acting, because it's not—it's *terrible* acting—except it's not acting at all, or is it? "Just drove in from Houston, but—"

"—but, unfortunately," Barbra cuts in, "right as we pulled up, Richard's agent, Little Scotty, called and told us the auditions were called off. So here we are."

“And you are?” Alan says to Barbra.

“Barbra Kay Burroughs.” She shakes his hand. “Richard’s manager.”

“Oh, I see. And the two of you drove? From Houston?” he says.

Barbra and Richard nod.

“Well, shit, what can I say? We narrowed down our top choices, Richard here being one of them, made calls to agents and actors to come in for auditions, then, out nowhere, the producers pulled a rewrite out of their asses. Commissioned it behind our backs. Producers—am I right? I should know. I’m married to one.” He laughs at himself, and Richard laughs, too, not because Richard thinks what Alan says is funny, but because he wants to be in on the laughs. “You know, I’m from Houston myself. Born and raised.”

“You don’t sound like you’re from Houston,” Barbra says.

“Excuse me?”

“The way you say Houston. The way you pronounce the H,” she says, channeling her inner Barb. “I’m just not buying it. The H is silent.”

“The H is silent?”

“No, it’s not, Barb.” Richard gives her a look. What the hell is she doing? She’s fucking this up. He faces Alan. “It’s not. She’s just joking, Alan.”

Alan nervously laughs. “So, Richard, I’ve just got to ask about the outfit. It’s Rick’s outfit, right?”

All eyes are on Richard—on Rick—to perform, to show this Alan what he’s all about. Rick nods. Puckers his lips. Makes a stupid face. Drops his voice. “Oh, yeah. It’s me. The Rick,” he says, but then coughs from lowering his voice.

“You O.K.? Can I get you something to drink?”

Rick nods, still coughing. It's not going well, this whole thing. His voice hurts. Maybe he strained his vocal cords from being Rick too long. Maybe it's just allergies. There's no telling.

"Angela," Alan says, "get this man a bottle of water." ANGELA, also known as White Woman #2, stands and walks to the small refrigerator on the other side of the room, where Alan already stands, but then the phone rings. "Don't worry," Alan tells her, opening the refrigerator. "I'll get it for him. But I'm not here, O.K.?"

To Richard, Barbra whispers, "Don't worry. No big deal. Keep at it."

"It's Little Scotty," Angela tells him.

"Tell him I'll call him back," he says.

"No, no, no," Barbra says. "Tell him Barb's in town." Angela hesitates. "Just do it, Angela."

Begrudgingly, Angela does. "He says he'll call you."

Barbra smiles. "Perfect."

Alan hands both of them Perriers. "By the way, you have a reel, Richard? Something recent?"

"He does," Barbra says. "On my phone. Something we recorded yesterday."

"Got five? I'd like to see it, you know, seeing how you two came all this way. Plus, us *Youstonians*," he says, emphasizing the silent H, "got to stick together, am I right, Barbra?"

Richard can tell Barbra wants to say something and channel Barb, so he places a hand on her shoulder. Barbra lets it go. Rolls her eyes.

"You see, my pal, Jim Roddy—you two know Jim? Roddy Productions? No? Doesn't matter. Well, he and his partners are holding auditions for a new project soon, a script I just got ahold of, a comedy. Slapstick, but cerebral. Follow me to my office?"

Rick says, “Let do this,” and, in the hallway, he and Barbra walk past framed movie posters hung on the wall, comedies Richard grew up watching and rewatching when he was a teenager, the kind of movies that made him want to become an actor in the first place. “Wow,” Richard says. “You helped make *Dick Wad*?”

They stop and look at the poster: DICK, a zany doctor played by Jim Carrey, goofs off during surgery as he removes his patient’s heart, the love interest played by Cameron Diaz. There’s no telling how many times Richard’s seen it.

“You bet your ass I did,” Alan says. “Best comedy ever made.”

Richard, knowing this is his moment, does his best Jim Carrey, rewinds the last ten seconds in the hallway in SLOW MOTION, saying what he just said in REVERSE.

Alan laughs. “Nice. Haven’t seen anyone do that since the ’90s.”

“You’re welcome,” Rick says, then takes a sip of Perrier, smacking his lips.

In Alan’s office, the three of them recline in Italian leather chairs, and Richard knows they’re Italian leather because Alan just made a point of saying, “That’s Italian leather you’re sitting on, Richard. Go ahead. Touch it. Enjoy it,” which he and Barbra do. “So let’s see this reel.”

Barbra takes out her phone, finds a scene with Rick and Jeremy, then hands him the phone. “Get ready to be amazed,” she tells him, sounding just like Rick.

Alan hits play. The footage is shaky at best, JUMP CUTTING back and forth between numerous CLOSE UPS of Rick and Jeremy’s face, sometimes their shoes, sometimes just the track. “Maybe you think this is going to be like a Nike commercial. But it’s not, Jeremy. It’s going to be like an infomercial. Like it’ll last forever. . . .”

Alan’s face turns red. Has he stopped breathing? Hard to say. Maybe Richard needs to give him CPR—or maybe Rick’s more qualified—but then Alan lets out a high-pitched laugh, cocaine-

fast and manic. “Wow,” Alan says. “Wow!” He stops the video, gives Barbra her phone back. “This is great. Except Jeremey. He’s terrible.”

“I told you, Richard,” Barbra says. “Don’t worry, Alan. We killed him off.”

“Nice,” Alan says. “So, Richard, what work have you done recently?”

“To be honest, I haven’t done any.”

“No movies? No TV?”

“Just commercials. Still waiting for my big break.”

Alan shakes his head. “Well, hate to break it to you, but you might need to fire Little Scotty. You’re better than how good he says you are.”

“That’s what I was just telling him yesterday,” Barbra says.

“O.K., I’ll cut the bullshit.” Alan stands abruptly. “I like you two. The whole mother-and-son thing you got going on. It’s cute.” Alan opens his briefcase. “Here. Take this and read it.” He pulls out a script. Slides it across his desk.

Richard holds it. Reads the title. INSERT – *The Happy Man*, written by two screenwriters no one’s ever heard of. BACK TO SCENE.

Alan says, “The Happy Man,” in a way that makes Richard think he’ll add, “Coming soon to a theater near you!” but, unfortunately, he doesn’t. “I’ll admit it’s a stupid fucking title, but whatever. So, look, I can’t make any promises, but I tell you what, shoot me an email with this video of yours, Barb, and I’ll put in a good word. Here.” He reaches in his wallet, pulls out his business card, one for each of them. “This has my number on it. Email, too. Don’t be shy, but don’t blow up my phone either. Read the script and call me tomorrow morning. I want to know what you think about the character Happy. I’m telling you, you . . . you are Happy. I can see it right

now.” He motions with his hands, envisioning something amazing. Richard can see it, too. “Happy,” Alan says, almost whispering.

Richard doesn’t know what to say. He considers being more Rick, then considers maybe being more Richard—more genuine, sensitive, indecisive—show this Alan who he really is. “Fucking shit,” Richard says. “You’re making my day, my year, my life.”

“Don’t go blowing me just yet.” Alan’s phone rings. “I got to take this,” he says, shaking their hands. “But I’m serious. Read the script and let me know.” CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT. Richard thinks he must be dreaming. Either that or he’s dead. Maybe he’s always been dead or dreaming, like poorly written movies that reveal this sort of thing at the end, pissing off every critic without fail, yet somehow impressing every teenager in the world. But he’s not dead. He’s very much awake and alive—maybe more alive than ever—and Richard knows for a fact that he’s alive because he sees his reflection in the paintjob of Barbra’s car, still wearing the Adidas jogging shorts and tank top, still dressed as Rick, which he’s sick of, seeing how he prefers to wear his Karate Gi every chance he gets. (It’s true.)

INTERIOR. BARBRA’S CAR. She blasts the AC and says, “Let’s look at the script,” and the two of them begin reading it. “What matters more than anything right now,” Barbra tells him, “is learning this new role: Your name’s HAPPY (late-30s), and you’re a self-employed yoga instructor and one with the universe, with nature, with everything spiritual or otherwise divine.”

In act one, Happy studies over in the Himalayan mountains, where he hikes through valleys searching for inner peace and finds it inside of a Pepsi can floating down a river, just like the DALAI LAMA (mid-80s) predicted he would. Real nice guy, the Lama. On page ten, after Happy meets his wife, MARGOT (she won’t reveal her age), at the Tsuglakhang Temple, he moves back to the States with her. Who would’ve thought he’d be married with a kid on the way? Things are

going well for Happy—and Richard—but not Rick—there is no more Rick—because Richard—and Happy—have broken themselves from this illusion called life, their egos now released, and, having achieved pure enlightenment, they’ve become the happiest men in the world. But that’s just it, that’s the kicker. Happy’s so happy, so at peace with all that surrounds him, that everyone he knows—even his friend, the Dalai Lama—Margot, too—begins hating him.

“Richard, if you get this part, you know what you’ve got to do, right?”

“What’s that, Mom?” he asks, still reading the script.

“You’ve got to move out here to LA.”

Richard stops reading because—well, it’s now hit him—he might have to finally move out of Barbra’s spare bedroom, and she’ll no longer make him flounder, and maybe he actually does like flounder, or, at the very least, the idea of her making it for him. Maybe she’ll no longer be his manager. Maybe he can’t do this whole acting thing without her. And maybe she’s the only reason he’s even made it this far, which really isn’t that far at all, but still, it’s something. He sets the script beside him and lets out a sigh. Happy doesn’t look happy, and this confuses Barbra.

“Aren’t you happy?” she asks, channeling her inner mom. “What’s wrong?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Richard tells her. “I am. But I’d miss you.”

Barbra’s phone rings. “Hold that thought, honey. It’s Little Scotty. Hi, Little, got plans tonight? We’re in town. That’s right. Yeah, well, I say the two of us get a drink and call it a date.”

Richard shakes his head. Richard laughs. Richard now knows his life is not a sad movie—well, it could turn out to be one—maybe tomorrow or the next day—but it’s not today, which, of course, is perfectly O.K. He keeps reading, listening to Barbra flirt with Little over the phone. He smiles, looks over, and sees Barb smiling, too, their lives just like a movie. FADE TO BLACK.

Just Like Honey

On the sidewalks, dog shit and idiotic picket signs – after the protesters leave the streets, the last of the maple leaves fall onto other fallen maple leaves that have already begun to rot, and, when you turn sixteen—on a day like today—a tear arrives in the corner of your eye because you realize nothing ever stays the same, that everything decays from the moment it is conceived—your parent’s marriage, your sister’s personality, the girl you used to be—and, despite the inhaler you keep at your windowsill, where you sit and watch life die, you find it hard to breathe.

If you’re bored, write an email or look out your window – you’ll see purpled skies, of course, and people living on every corner of every imaginable street in Houston. It is not delightful to watch rain fall onto people walking past your bedroom window when you know, without any uncertainty, that, if they’re not wearing the right rain coat and hat, the acidity of the rain will burn the hair right off their body—that is, if they have any hair left.

But it is delightful to be as uncertain as snow. A metaphor, I’ve learned, can mean anything to anyone, except it can only mean one thing to you, the writer, which, of course, is *me*—which means I, too, am the *you*. This thought, among so many others, gives me a headache. But, most of all, it is the stupidity of people that gives me headaches. You’d think because your father is a professor of history at Rice University, and your mother works over at NASA, that they wouldn’t be such idiots, but then again, I must be an idiot to think that anyone could not be an idiot.

Today’s a day so ugly that you can’t do anything but sit at your windowsill and admire the thickening of smog in the sky, the fat mosquitoes swarming by, a beautiful woman holding hands with an ugly man. I want to know where they’re going. I want to know what they’re saying. I want to open my window and ask, “Where’re you going with that dreadful looking man?”

When you do open your bedroom window, even though you've been instructed not to by your parents because your asthma flares up from all the pollution, the wind stops completely and you wish you cared enough to say what you wanted to say, but really you just wish you could hear what *they* have say, if they're in the midst of telling each other together-forever-bullshit-kind-of-lies, but all you can hear is yourself wheezing, and this, too, is undelightful.

Even though I don't know that lady's email address, and, of course, never will, I write her one anyway, asking if she finds it easy to hold his hand, or if it's all for show, and, if it is, if she's an aspiring actress like me.

Because your ego is raw and wild – you tell your parents that you need a ride to CVS so you can buy yourself a new journal because your old journal is overfilled with feelings, but they don't care about your feelings; they, like every other idiot you know—yourself included—only care about their own, and you know this to be true because it has become apparent to you that no one ever listens to anyone unless they want something.

As your parents finish breakfast at your father's kitchen table, your mother, who keeps her eyes fixed on her phone, her face cast in a perpetual glow, says, “You'll have to wait until this afternoon, Honey.”

It should go without saying that I hate her for naming me Honey, and each time she says my name, it gives me a headache; it should also go without saying that this, too, gives me one more reason to act out in a physical way, but it is much more pleasurable to hurt her with words.

“If you don't like my feelings,” I say, “feelings, I might add, that *you* are responsible for, then either fuck off or take me.”

So, naturally, she rolls her eyes. I, too, roll my eyes, and she looks as though she doesn't know where I picked it up from, this personality of mine. There're many things I picked up from

her, like her full lips, though hers, unlike mine, make her look attractive, whereas mine don't. I've got a unibrow like Dad, which throws off all my beauty because, even if I pluck it, which I do, it's still noticeable. I can't stand it. I also can't stand how Mom dresses too sexy to be working with computers, the way her skirts always seem one inch too high, but maybe everyone working at NASA is sexy; I wouldn't know because she's never taken me to her job, so there's no telling what it's like over there, except for what I learned from seeing *Apollo 13*, which doesn't count.

"Take her, would you?" she asks him, but, really, she's telling him, because, if she doesn't, she knows I'll write her another email. It is only March, but this year alone, I've written her eleven—one each week—but recently I learned she's flagged my emails as spam after she told me I was being abusive toward *her*—ha!—which, of course, means my emails were a big hit. She's under the impression that I'm unaware of her work email, but she's wrong. I'm just holding out for the day when I write her the most beautiful, heartbreaking email of my life.

She finds me to be nothing less than undelightful. But, unlike her, I know who I am, and I don't have any tolerance for her immaturity, the way she thinks this is the right time in her life, when she's thirty-nine, to explore her sexuality and sleep around with women.

I do, however, tolerate seasonal allergies, the blooming of Bradford Pears, their white petals as beautiful and disgusting as my parents living situation, who, it should be noted, are legally married for another five months until their divorce is finalized. They—*we*—live in separate homes right next door to each other. That's right. Let that one sink in. This, Mom told me, allows me and my ten-year-old sister, Tilly, to see both of them equally, but I find this arrangement embarrassing, and Tilly, she finds it confusing.

On our drive to CVS, I watch protesters march the streets. They look so stupid—their chants, their cries, the poorly executed handwriting on their signs—that it just makes me laugh.

Dad asks, “What’s so funny?”

At first, I think the question’s rhetorical, but now I see he’s waiting for my reply, so I look at him, thinking of what to say. He looks the way history professors look in movies—oxford shirt; unnecessary wool sweater; boring tie; that sort of clichéd thing—except he has muscular arms, which really doesn’t make any sense seeing how all he does is sit in his office and read books, but I imagine that, when no one’s looking, he does bicep curls with the heavy anthologies he assigns his students.

“Isn’t everything, Dad?”

I know what these protesters want—we all do—but I don’t care. And why should I? No one cares what I want. No one cares what I don’t like. I’ll tell you what I don’t like. I especially don’t like it when, after returning from CVS, I find out that we’re out of coffee, even though Mom, the last person who made a pot, could’ve told us to pick some up while we were out.

Hateful things – when, the night before last, your father bails your neighbor—The Stinky Man—out of jail again, even though he still hasn’t paid Dad back for the last time he was caught stumbling down Memorial Drive; when The Stinky Man, who’s unemployed and lives on inherited money, knocks on your front door uninvited, drinks all your father’s beers, and your parents leave the room to put Tilly to bed, he touches your thighs with his filthy hands; when you want to scream but, because you’re wheezing, can’t manage any words; the look in his stupid, drunk eyes when he hesitates to stop; the smell of his touch that lingers on your skin.

You also hate when, days later, Tilly tells you that you’re not normal, and then you have to explain to Tilly that there is no such thing as normal, but she just doesn’t get it, even though she’s way beyond normal; the way she climbs on the sofa like she’s our dog, Billy, who only understands Spanish; the fact that Tilly and Billy rhyme; Tilly’s uncanny ability to memorize every

lyric to every song she's ever heard; nights when she can't fall asleep and crashes in my bed; the way she sleeps in her school uniform because she, as she puts it, "values her education"; the way Tilly's prettier than me, even though we look almost alike, because she's not mean.

But what I hate most of all today is that, when I begin writing an email to my mother, the one detailing everything The Stinky Man did to me, I can't figure out which words to use.

Sad things – After Dad, unrenowned history professor on the lookout for new findings, recounts all the ingredients he used the last time he made lasagna, stating his thesis along the way—"I contend it's too salty"—as if any of us actually care, as if anyone actually uses the word "contend" in real life, Mom, who still hasn't started dating women yet, even though it's been a year now since she told Tilly and me that this is why she's leaving Dad, tells us that she'll need to undergo a parathyroid surgery next month.

Tilly doesn't know what this means, and neither do I, but I do know it should make me feel sad, but it just doesn't, so I start thinking of things that actually do. . . . Isn't it sad when the AC doesn't cut it in July, and you have to keep an ice pack on your forehead to keep cool? It is also sad when your parents continue holding hands after they've separated, and you're the only one who seems to understand that they will soon begin to hate each other. And, of course, it is sad when Mom asks Dad to take care of her after the surgery and he quickly agrees. He's just like Billy, who sits when we say, "Sentate," without any second thought. I also find it sad when Dad sneaks over to Mom's in the middle of the night, when, I'm sure, he thinks Tilly and I are asleep and imagining nothing of it.

One week before her surgery, I caught the two of them spooning in his bed, fully clothed. Nothing was said to me about what I had seen. When you crack open the shell of a pecan you find in the backyard in late August only to realize neither half is edible, that is who they are.

But what's most sad is that I still haven't finished writing that email to Mom. Talking to her about it, or anything else for that matter, in person is out of the question.

Times of the week – Mondays are best when, after your mother takes a call and leaves the kitchen, whispering like actresses whisper in movies when they're having an affair, you sneak three tablespoons of sugar into your coffee instead of one, which is typically all she'll allow because she thinks you might get fat, even though she still hasn't noticed you've lost twenty-one pounds since the day The Stinky Man came over and touched you.

On Tuesday, you wake up at 4:00 a.m. and imagine your parents fucking next door at your mother's, the kind of sex that would somehow make things go back to the way things once were, but then you have to remind yourself that all prayers are said in vain, so you cry into your pillow until Tilly hears you from her bedroom, wakes up, and sleeps beside you, her plaid skirt itching against your knee.

Wednesdays, of course, are the day of the week that everyone despises, but Wednesday is the best day to fake sick, stay home from school, and walk around the house naked like you're the one who pays the mortgage on it. After you get dressed, you continue revising the email about The Stinky Man and decide you'll send it to Mom after her surgery.

As an aspiring actress, I spend Thursdays pretending that it is actually Friday. On Thursday, Dad says the History Channel is full of shit, which it is, so he lets me watch anything I want, even though he knows all I watch are reruns of *30 Rock* because, it should go without saying, Tina Fey is the best comedic actress and screenwriter of all time.

On Fridays, I don't care to eat anything but pizza or ice cream, which also means I only eat pizza or ice cream on Thursdays, which is something my parents still haven't figured out, nor do I think they ever will, because they're not as clever as the diplomas on their office walls imply.

And isn't it lovely on Saturday, when your parents leave you to babysit Tilly, and you're the one responsible for making her dinner, but then she refuses to look at the tomato soup you made because it reminds her of the blood that she found in her underwear tonight? Even though Mom's explained to her what it all means, Tilly thinks she's dying. I tell her that it happens to me every month or so, and that she's going to live, but she says, "I'd rather not." I like her best when she's honest like this, but, of course, our parents discourage our honest thoughts.

If I were to say which is the best day, I'd say it's certainly not Sunday.

Hours during the day of the surgery – Sunday at 7:00 a.m. is a terrible time to arrive at a hospital if you can't stand to hear your father and mother complain about the lack of parking, overcrowding, and all the protesters dressed in red gathered on the streets.

I like the way they look in red, as opposed to before they coordinated their outfits. It's all so unnecessarily dramatic. I love that sort of thing. I want to roll down my window and say, "Heeeyyy—looking good!" but Dad has engaged the child-lock on the back windows so Tilly can't yell, "Honk," at people walking by, but I think they should just let her be who she wants to be, though I'm pretty sure they're scared she's turning into me.

It's 8:00 a.m. when Mom puts on a yellow gown. Tilly holds her hand as the nurse asks Mom questions about her bowel movements, which I explain to Tilly, whispering in her ear, that this means shitting. Tilly laughs so hard that, for a split second, not a sound comes from out of her, as though I've muted her with a remote control, which, of course, is something I often fantasize, but only when she repeats stupid things she's heard her friends and teachers say.

Around 9:00 a.m., you hear more than one nurse ask whether or not your father is your mother's husband, and each time she says, "Yes," you can't help but think of her as a liar, even though you know they're still technically married.

At 10:00 a.m., Tilly gives Mom a kiss on the forehead and says goodbye, and, as I look at Mom under the fluorescent lights, I'm convinced now I look just like her: her sharp jawline and hateful, deep-set eyes; the way her ears wave when she smiles, as if they're politicians on TV making promises left and right. I used to look like Dad until I grew breasts and my hips sort of filled in, and it was around this time that my eyes, once as hazel as his, turned mud brown, which, of course, is not the most delightful color of eyes.

Sometime after 11:00 a.m., as we wait in the hospital, a beautiful woman sitting next to us flirts with Dad, but Dad is too oblivious or distracted or stupid—or d) all of the above—to realize it. I imagine the two of them relentlessly fucking each other the way men and women do in the pornos I found on Mom's laptop last week, who, it turns out, not only hasn't changed her computer's password in years, allowing me to see all the unopened emails I've sent her, all the stupid fucking cat videos The Stinky Man has texted her, and all the straight porn she still watches—all of which confuses me—not the sex, but *her*—besides that, besides me only looking through all of her stuff to keep close with her on my own terms, what confuses me more than anything is that she doesn't know how to use private browsing, even though she works with computers for a living, which makes you think that NASA needs to do a better job with their hiring process, especially if they're sending idiots into space; I wrote her boss an email, some months ago, asking if he could send her to space—and simply leave her there—but I never received a reply. Maybe sleeping with another woman would allow Dad—and Mom—to finally move on. Maybe this would help him from stop crying at night, because, when he weeps in what I believe is E minor, it makes me weep in what I believe is A sharp, but it should be noted that my piano lessons were inconclusive, so, regarding pitch, it's unclear if what I'm writing in this very sentence is factually true, though, emotionally, I'm pretty sure it is.

Shortly after 12:00 a.m., I fall asleep and then wake up to discover it is 2:00 p.m., and, at this time, Dad tells me and Tilly that Mom is still in surgery. When a little girl walks around the hospital with burn scars all over her face and makes eye contact with you, you think you should feel like you shouldn't be alive because some people—*most* people—have to suffer so much more than you, and this is something that should sadden you, and that maybe you should put in the section before last, but, lately, you find it difficult to experience empathy for anyone but Tilly, Billy, and sometimes Dad.

Thirty minutes after you see this girl, Dad gets a call from a nurse telling him that Mom is all done with her surgery, but when, another thirty minutes later, as your stomach hollows with hunger, the surgeon tells Dad otherwise, that they believe your mother has an extra parathyroid hidden somewhere unknown in her body, that, preventively, they removed her thyroid, and that she'll need to take hormone pills for the rest of her life and have a second surgery soon—maybe tonight; maybe tomorrow; maybe next month—only time will tell.

This, I should note, doesn't make me bat an eye, yet it does prompt me to write an email asking the surgeon if they plan on removing her heart, unless, that is, it's already gone, which I suspect it is. Regardless, this is when you realize that 3:00 p.m., approximately halfway between lunch and dinner, is a terrible time to hear doctors speak, especially when the surgeon uses the word "vexing" more than once, which is like hearing your mother say, "I'm sorry," again after she's already apologized approximately twenty-seven times and never meant it once.

Beautiful things – the smell of your father's shaving cream that lingers in your mother's hospital room after he kisses you and Tilly goodnight.

Listening to your family snore in the same room, shuttering in and out of sleep.

Your mother's electrified compression socks, interrupting your dreams.

The nurse who comes in to check your mother's vitals and, before leaving, places a blanket over you, waking you up one minute before your alarm is accidentally set to go off at 6:00 a.m.

Windows of all kinds; the ghostly reflection of yourself in the glass; the swirling of smog over the Houston skyline; the paling of sky before sunrise; the saturations of a red, orange, and pink horizon. When your mother says, "It's beautiful," and you agree; for the briefest moment, you think you still love her but, of course, don't want to admit it.

When Tina Fey's manager finally responds to your email from six months ago, saying that Tina found your email to be "rather charming," but informs you that—no—she's not looking to hire actresses for any upcoming projects at the moment.

After the surgeon's assistant, who is too handsome not to be an aspiring actor, tells your family that it's finally O.K. to go home, he reveals a smile as he leaves; the thought of his hairy forearms as you fall asleep.

The next morning, when you intentionally take the last of the coffee before your mother, whose neck is now sutured, swollen, and bruised, has a chance to pour herself a cup.

And, most of all, honesty.

Disgusting things – one week after the surgery, while your father still takes care of your mother—cooking her breakfast, lunch, and dinner; cleaning her kitchen that she never cleans; throwing out everything in her refrigerator because everything's covered in pink and white mold; running to the pharmacy to pick up her hormone pills and Tylenol 3; washing her clothes and sheets; holding her hand, her ring finger still somehow pale from where her wedding ring used to be—your mother tells your father that she's sleeping with another man—The Stinky Man—the man who your father bailed out of jail twice this year; the man who overdosed from shooting

heroin into his big toe; the same man who breathed into your ear as his hand inched up your shorts, whose skin peels from off his face for no reasonable reason; a man, not a woman.

Who does Mom think she is, telling Dad and Tilly and me that she's going to move next door, telling everyone we know—family, friends, and neighbors—that she's leaving Dad so she can start seeing women—because she always felt like she needed to—because she felt her life became a “lie”—only to, a year later, turn around and fuck another man—The Stinky Man? Does she not realize that, by doing so, she's ending a twenty-year-long friendship with Dad, not to mention a sixteen-year-long friendship with me? And who even is this Stinky Man? Oh, I'll tell you who he is, but I won't tell you his name. He doesn't deserve one, and, frankly, he doesn't deserve to live, because with people like him living, who needs people living at all; the reveal is killing me, these thoughts on the page—admitting this—killing me; I won't; I can't; *I shan't tell my aunt about the ants nor the debutantes*. It's O.K. if you can't admit it. It's O.K. to pretend you're Hayley Mills as Susan or Sharon, though you can't remember which, but you do realize, Honey, that he's just like your mother's addict father—your grandfather who never comes around anymore—a topic I explored in one of my previous journals, though I'm afraid I've exhausted his potential as a non-fictional character—that is, until now. So let me spell it out for you—for *me*—your mother's up to some real Freudian shit; unbeknownst to her, yet so obvious to me, she's inadvertently trying to save her father in some fucked up sexual way because she never figured out how to save him, and, even though, I, too, am trying to save my own father, that's beside the point, because this is about her being too selfish to admit she's done anything wrong, too delusional to realize she needs therapy—years of therapy—decades—a life time of therapy—as do I—to sort through what she's done to our family. Or maybe what's going on here is that she's so pumped up

on hormone pills that she's too horny to think straight, like a sixteen-year-old, confused by everything life throws her way.

Before sending the email to your mother, the one you've been revising now for months, you look it over one more time only to realize you forgot to mention Tilly, so you do.

Do you think it is safe for Tilly to be around him? Do you think he won't do the same to her? Do you want her to be as depressed and traumatized as me? Will you disregard this email like the last dozen I sent, unopened or deleted or forgotten in your spam inbox? I want to know if you still have any respect for your children, given that you no longer respect Dad or yourself. I want you to know that this is not a lie or a scheme, that this isn't me playing a part. I want you to know that you are a coward, a cheat, a confused woman at best. I hope you have the decency to send a reply. –H

You finally send it to her, but you're disgusted with yourself for not sending it sooner. You know it won't change a thing. You just know it. You hate your mother more than anyone you've ever hated before. You never want to see or speak with her again. You decide you'll shun her every time she tries to touch you. Never sleep over at her place again. Throw away all the photos of you and her at your father's. And, yes, continue to make her uncomfortable with your words.

You tell Tilly after school that you're boycotting your mother, and then you roll your eyes at Tilly when you have to explain to her what it means to boycott something, after which she says she's boycotting *you*, but, because she's just a ten-year-old kid with a reading disability, she says "boycocking," and you, to stop yourself from laughing, bite the side of your tongue and bleed.

Seen things – Our mother walking home at 7:30 a.m. two days in a row from The Stinky Man's house, who lives just one block away, as Tilly and I wait for the school bus.

On the first day, Tilly doesn't notice, nor do I bring it to her attention, but Tilly sees that I can't breathe. I sit down on the grass and take out my inhaler, and Tilly strokes my hair as I catch my breath. She asks, "Are you O.K.?"

And I tell her, "No, Tilly, I am not O.K."

"Oh, Honey," she says, "I wish I could make you happy."

On the second day, Tilly sees Mom and waves, but I don't. She still hasn't acknowledged my email in any sort of way. Mom waves back, but I know the wave is not intended for me.

Thoughts of the recent past tear past me, and I cannot think reasonably, so I pluck leaves from a yaupon holly in our neighbor's yard, rip them into tiny pieces, and let them go, imagining that each piece represents each thought I can't let go, but there are not enough leaves to account for them all; Tilly and I watch the tiny pieces blow away, and she tries to pick them all up and give them back to me, but I tell her, "I don't want them," so she puts them all in her pocket. "Tilly," I say, trying not to cry, "don't tell Dad that you saw Mom this morning."

"Why not?"

"Just don't"

"But why not, Honey? Just tell me why."

Because Tilly doesn't know that Mom's sleeping with The Stinky Man, I don't know what to say, so I slap Tilly's face like I'm an actress in a movie, which I immediately regret, and the two of us cry, and she, her face now reddened, runs inside and tells Dad everything I did and everything I told her not to say.

Your mother's reply – You hit your head against the wall, not because she didn't proof her writing and wrote only fifty-six words, but because she thinks you're making it all up.

Honey, I am so sorry your hurting right now. Divorce is hard. For me, too, it is. But I just don't know what to believe from you anymore. Your Uncle Stephen would never do the things you say. Tilly will be just fine. I'm worried about you. I hope one day we can be friends again. —Your mother

You forward the email to your father, and, forty minutes later, he comes home from work early and says, “Honey, do you want to talk?” and you say, “No, I just want that man to die.”

Dad calls the police to file a report, and, when the two officers, a man and a woman, sit down with you in the living room and ask how long ago it happened, and you say, “Months ago,” they only write down half of what you say. They're just like your mother. You know they're not listening—you know they don't care—so you tell them to fuck off.

Upstairs in my bedroom, I sit at the windowsill and think up ways to murder The Stinky Man, but all I really want is to see Dad fight for the woman he loves—his daughter—but that sort of thing only happens in movies.

Notes on how to kill – The transition from aspiring actress to aspiring murderess isn't so hard, as really these two professions are one and the same.

First you need to discover the weaknesses of the man or woman you're wanting to kill, which, of course, is a no-brainer. You're too young to buy alcohol, but it is quite easy, you've heard on the news, to buy heroin on the streets of Houston after the sun sets.

As most teenagers know, it is not wise to sneak out of your room from your window if your bedroom is on the second floor, as you are likely to break an ankle or leg. Instead, what you do is you grab your backpack and purse, quickly walk out of your room and into the hallway, and pass your father's open bedroom door, where you find him yelling at no one but himself.

With tired, teary eyes, he asks, “Where you off to, Honey?”

In this moment, it is best to tell the truth because the truth will sound like a lie. “I am going out to buy heroin,” you say, and this, of course, makes him laugh.

He likely thinks you’re joking or auditioning for a new role in a school play, so he says, “Oh, yeah? Pick some up for me, too. Ha! You sure you don’t want to become a comedian?”

“Instead of an aspiring murderess? No, I’m good.”

In this moment, he finds you nothing less than delightful. He stands to give you a kiss on the forehead, and you tell him that you love him, and he tells you that he loves you, too, then apologizes for the way he’s been acting the past few days.

“You don’t need to apologize for anything, Dad. You’re a good man.”

He cries when you say this, but you just walk away. You think your dad’s a naïve fool of a man for letting you leave the house at night, but grief pans out in a multitude of ways; on one end of the spectrum, you have depression, which, as you’ve learned through your own, is intertwined with sadness, anger, and the occasional delusional thought; on the other end of the spectrum, you have homicide and suicide, which, when it comes down to it, are basically the same.

At the front door, you leash Billy, who’s already waiting there as if he’s in on your plan, and, even though he’s just a stupid little Shih Tzu, you take him along because you suspect the streets at night are much scarier than what they look like through your bedroom window.

Houston looks pretty tonight – Outside your neighborhood, catcallers call you “Sugar Tits” and “Little Tits,” and some, who shy away from adjectives altogether, call you “Tits”; men, with their pants down to their ankles, fuck other men in alleyways, their moans projecting toward gloomy skies, echoing off alley walls; ugly women give pretty men blowjobs in their Mercedes-Benz, their windows fogging up as though reality has become a B-movie in the most clichéd way; crowds of protesters dressed in red protest, but now, in addition to holding picket signs, they hold

assault rifles, baseball bats, knives; loud electronic music from cars passing by gives you an even worse attitude than you already have; and teenage boys, who look around your own age, stand outside of a soup kitchen.

They wave and say, “Hi,” but look like they want to steal the hair from right off your scalp. A part of you wants to turn around and go back home, but another part of you wants to embrace it all—all the pretty things in the city you’ve now seen up close. You suspect you need to talk to these boys if you’re looking to buy a bag of heroin at 7:00 p.m. down on the corner of Westheimer and Montrose, so you say, “Vamos, Billy,” tugging your stupid dog along, though even he knows this is a stupid idea—you can just tell by the look in his eyes.

When you approach them, you realize they’re identical twins, except the one who said, “Hi,” has a scar across his forehead. He says, “You look too pretty to be out right now.”

And you say, “I know,” because, like always, you’re in an honest mood, and you think you don’t care if you die tonight, but, of course, you’re wrong.

They laugh through yellow crooked teeth, and now you think your father might be right about your whole career path; their laugh, as any undelightful idiot could imagine, is not delightful. You tell them what you need, and they say that they sell the stuff. You think this is way too easy, that, if this were a movie, something bad would happen right about now, and this is when he says, “But it’s going to cost you.”

“Cost me what?”

“Your virginity. And your dog.”

You don’t know what to say, but that doesn’t matter because this is when a truck drives by and its exhaust blows directly at your face, and, because you’re distracted, because you’re not thinking, you breathe it all in. You wheeze. You gasp. You hold your hands against your chest.

You sit on the curb and reach into your backpack, but you can't find your inhaler. You left it at your windowsill. You panic. Your vision blackens. You think, This is it. This is where I'll die. In the newspapers, I imagine my obituary will read: *Honey, narcissist extraordinaire, died of an asthma attack from a stupid truck driving by—biggest idiot that ever was.* But then, as though I'm dreaming, I think I hear my mother's voice, and she says what she used to say when I felt this way, back when I still considered her my mother.

“Think of things that make you calm.”

Calming things – writing emails to people who I know will never respond; dialogue written by Tina Fey; Alec Baldwin's voice and oceanic eyes; staring out my window and watching people walk by; acting like people who I'll never be; fake snow falling in winter scenes depicted on TV; the scent of Tilly's hair when she sleeps beside me; post-it notes my father writes me when he knows I don't want to talk; when, years ago, my mother used to comb my hair before she'd tuck me in; the one time a boy kissed me, then sprinted away.

Making friends – I inhale and count to three, then exhale. You're dumb, I tell myself, but at least your dumbass is alive.

“Hey, rich girl, you O.K.?”

I roll my eyes to make it seem like what happened is no big deal, but, of course, it is.

“Look, I was just messing with you when I said what I said. I'm Bubu, by the way. And this is Mika.”

Bubu and Mika sit with me on the curb, and I shake their hands. Their skin is coarse. Their nails are long. Billy licks their shoes. Billy barks at you. You don't understand much Spanish, but you know Billy is trying to tell you that everything is O.K. You feel just like Dorothy in *The*

Wizard of Oz, or maybe you feel just like the yellow brick road, walked all over and sort of blonde, or maybe this isn't the right time for stupid fucking metaphors.

“Jesus. You fucking scared us there for a second. You were saying shit like, ‘Tina Fey,’ and ‘Alec Baldwin,’ and, I don’t know, you might’ve switched into Spanish for a second.”

“No, I didn’t.”

They look at each other, then back at you. “What’s your name?” Bubu asks.

“Just call me Hamlet,” you say, because they wouldn’t believe you if you told them your name is Honey, anyway.

Bubu looks at Mika, and Mika smiles. “Is that a joke?” Mika asks.

“Sure, yeah,” you tell him. “Y’all got the stuff or what?”

Mika laughs. “I like this rich girl.”

“Yeah. Me, too,” Bubu says.

You grow impatient. You check your watch. It’s late. You’re so tired of being yourself, which is why you’re using *you* instead of *I*, but mostly you’re just tired. You want to be in your bed with Tilly. You miss her and your father. Any minute he’ll call and ask where you are, and you don’t want to lie to him, to worry him anymore than he already worries.

“Look, Bubu, Mika. I haven’t got all day. I’m trying to murder someone tonight. I’ve got two-hundred dollars. Is that enough?”

Bubu nods and laughs. “Shit—*this* crazy ass rich girl.”

Mika says, “Yeah, that’s enough.”

You reach into your backpack and take out your purse. Don’t be cheap. Don’t ask how much it actually costs. Just give them all your cash.

Bubu reaches into his pocket, hands you a small ziploc bag, but there's no point looking at it—you can't tell the difference between it and a bag of dirt—so don't waste their time or yours.

Bubu says, "Look, can I be honest with you?"

And you say, "Honesty is the most beautiful thing."

He laughs. "You're stupid fucking crazy for being out alone right now."

"Why?" you ask. "Should I be worried about getting caught?"

"Nah," Bubu says. "But if you want, we'll walk you home."

Any other day you'd say, "No fucking way," but you almost died tonight, so what do you got to lose? Plus, you're a bit terrified of Houston, now that you've seen it up close at night and almost died, and, let's not kid ourselves, Bubu's scar is sexy, and, yes, you're still a virgin, so you say, "Sure, O.K. Thanks."

Billy looks tired, so you place him in your backpack, and Bubu and Mika follow you down uneven sidewalks, where hundreds of men and women and kids sleep out on the streets; these homeless people ask for money, for food, but you just say you haven't got a dime, which is the truth; they smell just like The Stinky Man, and you want to kick their legs out of the way, but you're too busy stepping over trash. You wonder if Bubu is starring at your butt as he and Mika walk behind you, and you decide that he'd be stupid not to. You're not one for small talk, but, when it comes down to it, all flirting is, in fact, small talk, so you say, "Do y'all do drugs?"

"Nope," Mika says.

"But you sell them?" You turn to face them and see them both nod. "Is this *really* heroin?"

"Uh-huh," Bubu says.

"So, like, where do y'all live?"

“Damn, Hamlet.” Bubu rolls his eyes just like you rolled your eyes at him a minute ago. “You asking way too many questions. We making you nervous or something?”

You nod and shut up. Bubu whistles something sinister sounding. Mika makes drum sounds with his mouth. The three of you walk down Westheimer, passing liquor stores and strip clubs and taquerias, everything outside smelling like Tilly’s farts after she forgets to take her dairy pills before eating ice cream. You look behind you and see that Billy, whose little head is sticking out from your backpack, has fallen asleep.

When the wind picks up before you enter your neighborhood, when the rain begins to fall and you’re not wearing your raincoat or boots, when you see The Stinky Man’s house and his dented car from all his drunken fender-benders, and you tell Bubu and Mika that this is where you live, they know you’re lying. They shrug and leave you and Billy to it.

“Wait,” you say, and they turn around. You reach into your backpack, your hand grazing against Billy’s furry belly, to grab a pen and a piece of paper. You write down your phone number. You say, “Call me some time,” and hand it to Bubu, but you know he never will.

“Ight, Hamlet,” Bubu says. “You be good. Don’t do anything drastic.”

“O.K., I won’t, but my name’s not Hamlet. It’s Honey.”

Bubu says, “You’ve got to be the weirdest girl I’ve ever met,” and I smile because this is the nicest thing anyone’s said to me all year.

When they walk away this time, I wonder if they have a mother, if she’s as repulsive as my own, if she fucks stupid, undelightful men, if she, too, settles for mediocrity.

The rain stops and the night now is cold, the moon more beautiful than it’s ever looked through my bedroom window. Billy shivers against my back, vibrating like the battery-operated stuffed animals I used to play with when I was little. I hurry and walk to The Stinky Man’s front

door. Standing there, you can't believe what you hear; you hear the slapping of skin against skin. You recognize the voice of the woman who moans. It disgusts you more than anything you've seen out on the streets tonight. Your stomach hollows out, but you are not hungry. You crouch down and leave the bag of heroin on his door mat, and, as you walk home, you pray he's as weak as you know he is.

Just Like Honey – Six days later, I still wait for the news of The Stinky Man's overdose, but the news never comes. From my bedroom window, I see The Stinky Man knock on Mom's front door. He wears all black like he's mourning the death of someone, and his bald spot reflects the midday sun.

Tilly sits next to me and sucks on an animal cracker until it dissolves in her mouth. "Why is Uncle Stephen going inside her house?"

"Please, Tilly, don't ask me that question, and please don't say his name around me, O.K.?"

"O.K., I promise," she says. "I'm sorry, Honey. Please don't slap me."

I shake my inhaler and take a slow hit like I'm a stoner-girl in a movie, exhaling a faint cloud of albuterol that disappears just as quick as it appeared, and Tilly and I watch cars drive by. On my phone, I play "Just Like Honey" on repeat, a song by *The Jesus and Mary Chain* that I heard yesterday in a movie not worth mentioning, and now, for the first time in my life, I think I'm in love with my name, and, I don't know, maybe even myself. Tilly says she wants a song about her, too, and I tell her that this song isn't about me, but she says, "Yes, it is."

For a moment, everything outside is still until the street disappears, filled with the protesters dressed in red. There are thousands of them now, shoulder to shoulder, holding their assault rifles, knives, and picket signs. Behind them, just miles away, skyscrapers in the Houston skyline are in flames, and, seconds later, ash falls as uncertain as snow on our lawn.

When Tilly asks, “What do they want?” I feel like an idiot because I finally realize I’ve known this all along.

“They want to be listened to is all.”

And she says, “That’s what I want, too.”

We keep looking out my window, watching these people walk by. Down there with the them are Bubu and Mika, dressed in red, smiling and talking to other teenagers our age, and they see me through my window and wave.

I want to know where they’re going. I want to know what they’re saying. I open my window and ask, “Hey, Bubu, where are y’all going?”

And Bubu yells, “Somewhere worth living!”

Tilly says, “You know that boy?” but I just stand up and go to my closet. I take off my stupid, expensive shirt and put on a cheap, red one that I got from summer camp two years ago, back when I used to be happy, back when I used to be the girl I once was, who I still want to be. I find another one that’s too small for me and tell Tilly to put it on.

She says, “Do I have to?” but I just give her a look and she does what I say.

I grab my inhaler and an extra one just in case, and we go downstairs, where Dad’s reading one of his history books, studying what life used to be like but no longer is. It’s clear to me he has no idea what’s going on outside, and Tilly and I, we give him a kiss and tell him goodbye.

I leash Billy, and we join Bubu and Mika and their friends on the street. We don’t look back to see if Mom’s looking out her window with The Stinky Man or anything clichéd like you’d find in a stupid movie. It’s unclear where we’re going, but, walking with these people, I already feel alive. Maybe when we get there, I’ll write Mom the most beautiful, heartbreaking email of my life, telling her that Tilly, Billy, and me are just fine, or maybe I’ll never write another one again.