

# LONER: STORIES

JOHN SHEPPARD

## LONER: STORIES

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# LONER



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# Light

## 1.

My first inkling that he was behind me was when I felt the muzzle of his pistol gently poke the back of my ear. I saw him in the shiny tile, standing behind me, convexly. Naturally, I thought he meant to ass-rape me. That's what happens—so I understood from TV—at restroom stops on our Nation's highway system. So I was relieved when he said that he only needed a ride.

“Oh,” I said. “That's *different*.”

“Different than what?” the man asked.

“Different,” I said. “That's all.”

I finished urinating, zipped up and walked over to the sink to wash my hands. I did not look at him. I remembered that from somewhere: Don't look. This rest stop was not clean. Sometime back in the 1960's, Americans had forgotten how to flush a toilet, and these were not yet automated.

“You could at least act like you're nervous,” he said. “It would give me a bit more confidence that you're taking me seriously.”

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“I *am* nervous,” I said. “I’m very nervous.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” he said.

I attempted to dry my hands with the blower attached to the wall, a metal machine monster from the last century that issued forth the slightest puff of wind. I rubbed my hands together underneath, as shown in the worn pictogram on the label. Someone had carved “FUCK YOU” into its skin.

“You’re stalling,” he said.

“Ready when you are,” I said, shaking the rest of the wet from my hands.

Then I looked at him. He was a bearded gnome in bib overalls, wearing a translucent green visor inscribed with “Viva Las Vegas.” One of the lenses was missing from his mirrored aviator sunglasses. He was wielding an unusual pistol, a hand-held artillery piece. On the left side of his nose, near the nostril, was a red mole, perhaps cancerous. His forehead was composed of pock marks and sweat grease. I tried to concentrate there and not on his single visible, predatory eye. I couldn’t continue looking at the head, so I looked at the gun.

“I see you’re looking at my gun,” he said, all hale-fellow-well-met, using it to wave me toward the lavatory door. “It’s from the Great War.”

“No one says, ‘Great War,’” I said, sidestepping toward the door. I slowly raised my hands to shoulder level.

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“World War One,” he said. “Whatever.”

We walked into the atrium of the building. No one there. No security. Nothing but a video wall yakking about Natural Wonders and Tourist Attractions to be seen on the Claude Pepper Memorial Parkway. An abandoned mop bucket and humming-buzzing machines promised refreshment. A map pointed out where we were in relation to all the Natural Wonders and Tourist Attractions. The state could afford this gabbing wall, but not security? Not self-flushing toilets? A Co'Cola machine hummed. A Tom's Snacks machine flickered.

And still: No one. What kind of rest stop was this? Where were the State Troopers? The private police? Halliburton? Some sort of police should be there. Didn't anyone care about homeland security anymore?

I made an attempt to head over to the snack machine. Hot pork skins, hot cracklin, mild pork skins, goo-goo clusters...

“Nope,” the gnome said. “Let's get out to the parking lot. Let's get to that Volvo of yours.”

And so, I thought, that's it. I'm dead.

Once outside I had a brief moment, sucking in the syrupy Florida air, where I thought that I might be able to run for it. But that gun! It was intimidating.

So many cars and trucks rumbling past, their headlights surging by. And yet none of them had to pee. This is what's

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wrong with America, I thought. Our bladders are too strong. Or we urinate in our cars, possibly in a bottle. If I'd only urinated in a bottle, I wouldn't be in this fix.

There was the awkward moment of car doors opening and not opening. Parking lights flashing. There was the panic button on my electronic key beckoning. We were both inside the car. I dropped the key to the floor mat and leaned down to dig for it.

“Just a ride,” the gnome said.

“Right,” I said. I found the key. I started the car.

“What's your name?” he asked. He placed the massive pistol in the bib part of his overalls, still pointing at me.

“John,” I said.

“John what?”

“John Sloan,” I said. I backed out of the space and clunked the car in gear, headed back toward the highway. The clock on the dash said 3:04. So many cars and trucks out on the road and not one of these people had to take a piss.

“You're being very brave, John Sloan,” the gnome said.

“How very condescending,” I said, “Man With a Gun.”

“I suppose I should give myself a name,” he said. “Call me 'Light.'”

“Light,” I said.

“That's it,” Light said. “Try it out.”

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We went 20, 30 miles without speaking, without anything but road sound. Light never said where he wanted to go, so I continued on toward Apolocka, south of Naples, where my parents live. I thought he might be asleep. I glanced over at him and he caught me.

“I’m awake,” Light said.

“Oh,” I said.

“Don’t you listen to music when you drive? The radio?”

“I’m not political,” I said.

“Music?”

I don’t like most modern music. “What is this?” I asked. “Stockholm syndrome time?”

“How about some music?” he went, and flicked on the radio. It was mostly talk-talk-talk, he found.

I clicked it over to my iPod music stash. In doing so, I almost touched his hand. Sickening. It was sheathed in filth.

“What is this?” he whined, wincing. A billboard advertised a gun show. Another implored me to think about Jesus.

“This is what I listen to while driving,” I said.

“It’s terrible,” he said. He clicked it off.

“You’re the man with the gun,” I said.

Apolocka 57 miles.

Ten, fifteen miles later he said, “I could eat.”

“Lucky you,” I said.

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“That attitude of yours,” he said. A little snort issued forth. “Next exit.” I pulled off the highway into a exit that was as well-lit as an outdoor mall. Five fuel stations, three chain hotels and in-between them a sprinkling of familiar fast food chains. “There,” he said. “Waffle House.”

“The awful waffle,” I said.

“You'll remember this day,” Light said. “Swear to God.”

“It's already in my mental scrapbook, sticky with glue,” I said. I pulled into the spot next to the dumpster.

Light patted the gun tucked between his gnome boobs. “Remember,” he said. He tried to open the door, but it was locked. “For shit's sake.”

I punched the unlock button. “Try it again.”

He opened the door. “You're entirely too comfortable with this situation,” he said.

“I haven't tried to run, have I?”

I preceded him into the restaurant. Ding-a-ling went a bell above our heads. Four booths, three dirty, seven stools at the counter. We sat down across from each other at the clean booth. Windex streaks on the window. The counter man said, “Hey, what do you want?”

“Coffee and waffles for us both,” Light said.

“Meat?” the counter man asked. He made no attempt to write this down. The man was... unclean. He was obese. His hair

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was slicked back, probably without use of hair gel. His fingers were stubs. Stubbed out stubs. Filthy dirty.

My empty stomach clenched, unclenched, clenched again.

“That's a tight little mouth you have there,” Light said to me. He laughed.

“Meat?” the counter man said again.

“Bacon all around,” Light said. “Bacon for all my friends. Throw some on for yourself.”

“Bacon,” the counter man said. He pivoted and began work on the food.

“I guess we'll get our own coffee,” Light said. He nodded at the counter.

“Right,” I said.

Before I could get up, the bell ding-a-linged again. My back was to the door, so I didn't see him at first. The new customer hopped onto a stool at the counter like Roy Rogers leaping onto Trigger. He immediately began drumming his fingers and pumping his legs. I only saw his back. Meth skinny and meth crazy. He hummed through his teeth along with all the tapping and leg pumping, sounding like a Theremin, more or less. On back of his white t-shirt, soaked through with sweat, was a phone number in hot pink. A naked cartoon girl winked below that.

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Light leaned over and whispered, “Trouble in River City.” He winked. “With a capital 'T.’”

“This is America,” the sweaty man announced.

“Ronnie, Ronnie, Ronnie,” the counter man said. “Didn't I chase you out of here once already this morning?”

“It's America!” Ronnie insisted. “This is America.”

“Point being that we can refuse service to anyone,” the counter man said.

“America!” Ronnie shouted. He slapped the counter. A glass salt shaker leapt to its death, crack, on the black and white tiles next to a stepped-upon french fry. Its beef tallow guts spurted.

Light shook his head at me and smiled. “Bad luck,” he said.

Ronnie leaned over the counter. We could hear him rummaging through the silverware, clickity-clack.

“Put that down,” the counter man said forcefully. “I said, 'Put that –’”

“Coffee!” Light shouted. “I ordered coffee!”

Ronnie whipped his head around. Piss-yellow teeth, sleep-death eyes. “Who are you?” Ronnie demanded.

All went silent, save for the sizzling bacon.

“I'll get that coffee,” the counter man said at last.

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“Fuck the coffee,” Ronnie said. He had a cheap steak knife in his hand, held at shoulder level, grasped for the downward plunge.

“No,” Light said, quickly pulling his pistol out and leveling it at Ronnie. “Fuck you, Ronnie.”

Ronnie went, “Reap!” The word came out of his mouth and nose and possibly his ear holes. It was the last sound he made.

Kaboom. And another long moment. Blue smoke. Ears ringing. Ding-a-dinging.

“What the fuck...” the counter man said.

“Heh,” Light went.

“What the fuckity fuck!” the counter man roared, his arms raised, now his hands on his head like surrender, bloody apron, blood mixing with grease.

Dead, dead Ronnie, sloppy on the floor, arms flung out, right index finger crossed with the middle.

“We're leaving,” Light said.

“Get out!” the counter man yelled, his voice taking on a higher pitch. “Jesus! Jesus God! What I gone tell mama?”

We ran toward my car. I dropped my key, it skidded along the asphalt. I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled after it, found it, stumbled to my feet. “I have a job!” I shouted. “I have a kid! A wife, you fucker!”

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“It was *impulse!*” Light shouted.

“Oh, fuck you!” I shouted back, and unlocked the doors. We hopped in. I backed into what I presume to be, now, Ronnie's car, and drove off.

A mile down the road, Light explained, somewhat too calmly: “I did this under the single impulse of resistance to a common danger, with every external circumstance against us.”

“Us?” I went. We were on the highway again, again heading toward my parents' house downstate. “We should get off the highway,” I said.

“That's thinking,” Light said. “That's good thinking.”

“Someone's got to think,” I said. I pulled off at the next exit.

“Nobody will know it's us,” Light said.

“Nobody will know it's *you*, that is,” I said. “There are cameras everywhere. Always running. Always recording. I have a government job. I've been identified by now. You, you fuck, you can hop out anytime you want and run off into the woods. Join the resistance. Make fucking moonshine.”

“No one's watching the cameras,” Light said.

“Everyone's watching them,” I said. “It's half our entertainment.”

“The cameras are all blurry. They're all ten years old,” Light said. “And no one is watching them.” Then he took my

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advice and opened the car door and rolled out into the gutter, tra-la-la-gone. The door slammed shut and I continued on.

Did I have blood all over me? Tiny specks of microscopic blood that could be lifted from my clothes even after ten washings and would convict me in a court of law for being an accessory to the murder of a small-town-misfit-drug-addict-brother-of-a-Waffle-House- proprietor? Probably. I'd learned that much from *CSI: Miami*.

I drove off the road into a dead orange grove, snap-snap-snap through the shattered remains of trees, and stalled.

### 2.

When the sun came up, screaming into my eyes, I started the car and backed out of the dead grove the same way I came in. In the next town, Punta Gorda, I found a sherriff's substation, a glass door adorned with a star. I knocked. Nothing. "Hello?" I shouted. I stood there, shaking. "Hello? Anyone?" I sat on the front step. "Where am I?"

Punta Gorda was a nothing town, surrounded by nothing, with no one in it. It had been gutted by Hurricane Charley and was now populated with FEMA-trailer-dwellers. It needed a coat of paint. But first, it needed a good scraping. The sidewalk underneath my feet needed a good jackhammering, followed by a good pouring of concrete. A thigh-high weed grew

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out of a crack in the asphalt in the middle of the street. What street was I on? How did I get here?

I stood up, hugged myself, paced. “Where is everybody?!” I shouted.

I bounced up the steps and tried the door. It opened. I stepped through it into the sheriff's office: A baby-blue painted, plywood counter with a swing-hinge top on the left side, a single telephone on the right, button lights flashing as if on hold, a bag of Doritos next to the phone, open, and a can of Sprite, fizzing. I tapped the bell on the counter. Ding.

I turned around to look out the window, but saw only my face, which appeared to be speckled. I reached up and ran my index finger along my jawline and scraped off a bit of what appeared to be ground beef. Buzzing bees in my guts. I quickly turned back around and wiped my finger across the counter. A sheriff's deputy was standing there, a little taken aback. He held a sheet of paper in his hand, which backlighting revealed to be a photo. He looked down at the sheet, and then me.

“Hello,” he said. He adjusted his glasses. He snorted a little drip back into his nose and swallowed. His eyes went huge. The little star on his two-tone shirt appeared to be made of plastic with a gold coating.

“Can you help me?”

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“Yes,” he said. He looked down at the sheet again, and then me again. “So what's your name?”

“John Sloan ,” I said.

“John, why don't you take a seat right there and I'll see if I can scare up some help.” He nodded to an all-in-one school chair – red, plastic, contoured seat, chrome legs, fake wood half desk – but before I could sit, three sheriff's deputies burst through the door and tackled me to the ground. I felt knees on my back. My wrists were cuffed tightly. The tile floor was sticky on my face, blue and white flashes. I shouted, “He's in a citrus grove! Five miles from here!” but the floor, institutional green, seemed to absorb my voice. I felt a rib go, pop, crack, pop, and blood gurgled into my mouth, salty and warm and it flowed onto the institutional flooring and I was still awake, still awake, still awake, wild pain jolts coursing through my torso and wicking out through the soles of my feet and my cold palms and my cold-shivery forehead. I hacked and the blood went sploot onto a deputy's shoes. “He's injured!” shouted the sheriff's clerk, the one who swore to scare up some help.

“Glub,” I went. And I was still fucking awake. And the enormity of it all came trembling up from my heart and bubbled through my lungs. I couldn't breathe, my esophagus filled with blood. I wept anyway.

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The deputies flipped me over, pulled me to my feet. I tried to take a breath, but couldn't inhale, my airway still obstructed, and that's when I felt the world swirling away.

When I awoke, a plainclothes deputy sat facing me. An i/v was taped into my arm from a beeping machine. The radio attached to his belt shouted out static-squawks. I looked out the window into sun-choked sky, my mouth and throat raw, my sides wrapped with bruisy pain, a private room in a hospital by the look of it, the door open, scrubs on men, scrubs on women, carts. "How you feeling?" the deputy asked.

"Did you catch him?" I asked. "He called himself 'Light.' I don't even know what that means."

"We saw the tapes," the deputy said. "From the Waffle House." His mustache could use a trim and his sideburns. He needed a cigarette, I could tell.

"I was abducted," I said. A stain in the acoustic tile ceiling above me suggested a lack of building integrity.

"We saw the tapes from the rest stop, too," the deputy said. "So we know that. Now we know that. We couldn't take any chances, you know. You know that, right?"

"Did you catch him?" I asked again.

"No," the deputy said. "Not yet."

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My glance veered involuntarily toward the door. I took a rough breath.

“It's natural to be afraid,” the deputy said. He rubbed the space between his index and middle fingers with his thumb.

“Is somebody here?” I asked, looking toward the door again.

“A deputy? Yes,” he said.

I sighed and leaned back. “I am not safe.”

He leaned toward me. “What can you tell me?”

Shit. Where to begin? “You need a smoke,” I said. “This could take a while.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Do you mind?”

“No,” I said.

He brightened immediately. “I'll be right back,” he said.

“Can I get you anything?” he turned and said at the door.

“I'd love a Zagnut bar,” I said.

“I'll be right back,” he said again.

A nurse came in – female, pink scrubs, blonde hair cinched into a tight bun, minimal makeup, mole on left eyelid, one dead tooth – and adjusted my bed so that I was sitting upright. “Awake now?” she went. Her breath was all candy corn.

“I believe so,” I said.

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“Good!” she said, brightening and showing off that dead tooth, right incisor. “Is there anyone you'd like to call?”

“Call?” I went, and then it registered. “Yes.”

She pushed over a bed tray on wheels, a styrofoam and plastic pitcher filled with ice water, a clear plastic cup, a smaller clear plastic cup containing pills, a white paper napkin folded into a triangle. In the center of this, she placed a black telephone. “Dial nine first,” she said, and she exited. She was shaped like a glass Pepsi bottle, I noticed.

I dialed my house. The phone buzzed and buzzed and I wondered what I would say to my wife Dolly, who was mentally delicate, a tip in the wrong direction and...

“Hi, hi! Who is this?” Dolly sang at the other end. “Where are you? John?”

“Yes,” I said.

“The caller I.D. says 'Anointed Saints Hospital,’” she said, her voice veering toward panicky. “Are you in the hospital? Has there been an accident? Are you all right?”

“I'm all right,” I said. “I'm fine. I fell asleep at the wheel. The doctors are just checking me out. I'll be okay.”

“I knew it,” she said. “I knew something bad would happen on this trip.”

“Don't get yourself wound up,” I said. “I'm fine. Nothing much has happened. I'm okay.”

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“Come straight home,” she said. “Don't bother going to your parents. Just come home and stay home.”

“I'm fine,” I said.

“Are you mad at me?”

“I'm not mad at you.”

“You *are* mad at me, aren't you?”

“Calm down,” I said. “Everything's okay. *I'm* okay.”

“Are *we* okay?”

“We're okay,” I said.

“I don't know what I'd do without you,” she said. She started to cry. “I knew you shouldn't have gone. I knew something bad would happen. I could feel it.”

It went on like this for, like, fifteen, twenty minutes. The deputy came back, sat down. He placed my Zagnut bar down on my tray next to the water pitcher. I smiled at him, apologetically.

He turned his chair and gazed out the window.

I felt a cold flush wash through me. “I need to talk to the sheriff's deputy,” I told her.

She was crying uncontrollably. “Are you in trouble with the police? Don't leave me,” she said, weeping.

“I'm not leaving you,” I said. “I have to go.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love *you*,” I said. And hung up.

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The deputy introduced me to a sketch artist. She was five-foot-nothing, plain, wearing a western shirt and western skirt and cowboy boots and a bolo tie. “I have square-dancing practice this afternoon,” she said by way of explanation.

I asked her for the sketchpad and the charcoal. “This’ll be quicker,” I said. I brought my knees up and sketched Mr. Light from the gnome boobs up to the top of his gnarly head.

“Yeah,” the deputy said. “That looks like the guy from the security cameras.”

“Nice,” the sketch artist said.

“I work for BVISA,” I said.

“Oh,” she went.

“That’s the Federal Bureau of Visual Art,” I told the deputy.

“Ah,” the deputy went.

So we had a nice little we’re-all-civil-servants-here festival.

The sketch artist took her pad back. “Mmm,” she went, admiring, and sprayed some fixatif on my sketch.

“Ugly fucker,” the deputy said, looking over the top of her head. “Excuse my French.”

“Pop that into a bronze frame,” I said. “Then jam an X-acto knife through its still-beating heart.”

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“Everybody out,” nurse pinchy-hair-dead-tooth said, thumbing toward the exit.

“Just so you know,” the deputy said, “the sheriff’s office is paying for your stay here. No charge.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. It would make it easier to lie to my wife about it later, I assumed.

“And we fixed up your car at the sheriff’s garage.”

“Thanks!” I called to him.

I left Punta Gorda, released from the hospital and sheriff’s custody, a day later. My cell phone was returned to me, along with my Volvo, which was dinged up a bit, but that was fine. Everything would be fine.

Everything would be fine.

I broke a rib in a car crash, I’d tell the wife. No press existed in the town to report otherwise. The TV showed my sketch of Light, along with blurry video.

Dolly would not know, and then worry until she had to be institutionalized, about a grubby man, who in her imagination would show up at our door to murder us all, probably with something blunt and painful and in a drawn-out manner. Instead, I would worry about it.

I called work and let them know I’d need two days more leave, and I left it at that. I called my parents and let them know

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I would be there soon, and apologized for the delay. They were not worried. They had their own life-consuming worries.

### 3.

I was met by a German shepherd when I pulled into my parents' driveway/front yard/dirt patch. The dog was tied up and barking crazily. I said hello to it and it sat down, laid down, rolled over and showed me her gender, rolled back over, sniffed my hand and bit it, not hard.

“Hey,” I said.

And the dog was immediately regretful. “Moof,” she went, cowering.

“Hello!” I went to the house.

“Is that him?” Big Jim, my father, asked.

“It's him,” Henrietta, my mother, replied. She came out on the front shiny aluminum steps. “He's been thinking about you!”

“Good,” I called back. “That's good.”

“It takes him outside himself,” she said. “I see you've met the dog.”

“She have a name?”

“Nipper,” Henrietta said.

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I unsteadily clanked up the steps, stiffly wrapped round the torso with bandages, and kissed her on the cheek. The two of them were good parents, mostly. “You're getting old,” I said.

She patted her swimming cap of hair. “I stopped dying it.” She buttoned and unbuttoned the throat button on her shirt. “I have a gizzard, too,” she whispered mock-conspiratorily. She led me inside.

The old man, what remained of him, sat in a vinyl easy chair in a room stacked with books and drawings, a glass of sweet tea with a mint leaf floating in half-melted ice in his trembling hand, a mostly smoked pack of Winstons in his shirt pocket, his fingers coated in grease and paint flecks. He smiled at me, peering through his smeary coke-bottle glasses. “Them bastards,” Big Jim said.

“What bastards?” I went.

“Don't get him started,” Henrietta said. She stood next to a fan and let it blow all over her. “Christ.”

Big Jim's lips trembled, puckered up, then relaxed. He peered down at his iced tea, as if he'd forgotten it was there, and lifted it gingerly up to his lips and sipped and swallowed. He set the glass down on a nearby TV tray. “What's going on with you?” he asked. He wasn't interested, but he meant well by asking.

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“Nothing much,” I said. “I brought you a new computer. A laptop. So you can get email.” The laptop wasn't new. I'd bought it on impulse for \$50 at a government auction, and then decided that I didn't like the gummy residue adhered on the keyboard.

“Why would I want that?” he asked. Before I could answer, he said, “Did you see that guy on the news?”

“The news?”

“On TV,” he said. The irony here being that he didn't allow us to have a TV in the house when we were kids and now that's all he did – watch TV. “It looked like one of yours. It did! I coulda swore it was your work.”

“It was,” I said. “I'm the guy he abducted.”

“Shit,” the old man said, smiling. “I knew it was yours! I recognized it right off, didn't I?”

“He did,” Henrietta said. “I had to hear about it all day yesterday.”

“So the guy abducted me,” I said.

“You did a good job on that,” Big Jim said. “Nice shading.” His face clicked into neutral, his eyes went half-lidded, and he leaned his head back like a heroin addict who'd just shot up for the first time in a day or two. “Knew it,” he whispered. He whistled, then hummed, then whistled, irritatingly untunefully.

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“You look good for an abducted man,” my mother said at last, in a way that suggested that she did not believe me, which was fine. I'm fine with that. It's fine. She turned around so the fan could cool her backside. She is a schoolteacher. She's used to lies and assumes that most people lie to her, even when they are clearly telling the truth. It's an easy shortcut.

Big Jim is nothing now. He's a human paperweight. He was once an artist, mostly in his head. He's held twenty, thirty, I-don't-know-how-many jobs in his life. Some of them he considered careers.

I am the only child who didn't disappoint him. My sister is a CPA. My brother is a particle physicist. I'm the slacker-artist who barely made it out of high school and bumbled halfheartedly through art school.

“I should be getting home,” I said.

“You just got here,” my mother said.

“I'll set up this computer,” I said.

“It'll only make him angry. Another thing to prove that he's incompetent,” my mother said. She raised an arm next to the fan to dry out a pit.

“You talk to Tim lately? Cheryl?”

“No,” my mother said. “You?”

“They talk about their jobs, which is all gibberish to me.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Me, too.”

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“Anyway,” I said. “The computer.”

“Yet another goddamned thing we don't need to pile on top of all these other goddamned things we don't need.”

Big Jim let out a yip in his sleep. I leapt.

“Buk, buk,” my mother went, like a chicken. Her back was to me. She was drying out her other pit.

### 4.

I left them detailed instructions, printed out in Helvetica 12-point, with headers like “Logging into your email account” and “How to turn on the computer.” But they called me anyway, each yelling into a separate handset, to complain about how difficult the computer was turning out to be an hour into owning it and what a burden I'd dropped on their shoulders.

“I shouldn't talk on the phone and drive,” I said, then shouted, “Whoops!” and hung up on them.

I don't know what I was thinking. The whole trip was a disaster from beginning to end.

Home, to hearth and home, to crazy wife and sullen, speechless child, I went, buzzing along the Claude Pepper Memorial Parkway in my shitbox car. It was making new irritating noises to go along with the old irritating noises it had always made. Thanks police garage!

## JOHN SHEPPARD

Yes, my child was all of five years old now, and hadn't yet felt the need to speak a word. She stared at me with her judgy-judge eyes at the dinner table.

"I didn't invent peas and carrots!" I shouted at her one time. "I didn't even serve them!"

"Don't shout at the baby!" my wife shouted at me.

The baby sighed and stared off into space, continuing to mash her peas and carrots into a vile paste with the tines of her fork. I looked down at the vile paste and said, "I like it," and took the fork from her, which she let me have without a fight, continuing to stare off, and I formed the pea-carrot paste into a cardboard cutout of a cat. The baby looked down at what I'd made, snorted her approval, hmmp!, leaned down her widdle face to plate and slurped it up.

She grinned at me, paste on teeth.

"Nice," my wife said, like we'd somehow allied against her.

It was probably the best moment I had ever had with my child.

There had been doctors – many, many doctors. Autism, said one. Depression, said another. A stroke, said a third. One blamed Dolly: Munchausen syndrome by proxy. Dolly was looking for attention. Dolly was causing the kid not to speak, some-

## LONER

how. He told me this on the sly. Said he was thinking about calling the police.

“Go ahead,” I said to him. “No one's stopping you.”

But he didn't call the cops, the little weasel.

So we have this speechless child who is supposed to go to school at some point, probably soon. I'm sure the decision will be made to place her in special education, which is fine by me. But not Dolly. Dolly has convinced herself that the child is a genius, probably mathematical. “You know how those math guys are! Like your brother and sister! They're all social morons!”

Over the years Dolly had bought her tons of toys, which are all stored neatly in rubber totes in the attic. The child plays with the boxes the toys came in instead, fussily stacking them inside each other, then disassembling them, then meticulously re-assembling them. She is uninterested in TV. She finds other children annoying.

On occasion, after we've convinced ourselves that it is a Good Idea, Dolly and I bring the child to the park down the street from us and attempt to release her. “Go,” I tell her. “Be free.” I wave my hands in scoot mode. She stands next to us, glaring at the children, possibly disgusted that they are having non-organizational fun.

She finds nothing much interesting about us either, like she's the one with the burden.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

And maybe she is.

I hope that some day my child will be able to find a job, pay rent and live approximately like a human being. Those are my highest hopes for her, my fondest wishes. My gut feeling is that the child and I will be living together until I am dead.

After that, of course, she's on her own.

I passed by the rest stop where I'd picked up Light and considered, momentarily, the bad idea that maybe I should stop there. That maybe that was a good idea. Instead, I drove past, jangling creeps roiling through me.

I turned on the radio. After a report about orange juice futures, Sam Vermont came on. "I am the most courageous man in America and I'm taking calls right now," he said. "Kevin in Idaho, you're on the Sam Vermont Show."

"Sam, first of all, great show."

"Thank you, Kevin."

"I had a rash."

"We're talking about the President's health care proposal."

"He's a socialist. And a fascist. And a Muslim."

"Given. About this rash?"

"I went to the VA hospital to get it taken care of."

"Uh-huh?"

## LONER

“And there was a three-hour wait. For a rash!”

“This is how we treat our veterans in this country!”

“Socialized medicine, Sam!”

“Socialized medicine. And some bureaucrat decided that your rash didn't take precedence. Am I right?”

“You're always right, Sam.”

“Good talking to you, Kevin. And good luck with that rash!”

“They gave me some ointment. It's all cleared up. Thank you, Sam!”

“The number to call is –”

I turned it off.

I met Dolly during the airport silence following 9/11. My buddy George and I drove to Bradenton, only minutes away from beautiful, downtown Sarasota, where we both had just won jobs with BVISA, which occupied the third floor of the Federal building. It was a plum job for a newly minted BFA, straight out of the Ringling School of Art. The place was brand new when we arrived. We were both U.S. civil service illustrators, GS-1020-07. I went from being a boho pen-and-ink guy with no real plans, to a guy with a pension plan, like (snaps fingers) that.

So what did I do with my new money? I bought a second-hand, three-piece, mothball-stinking, cinnamon-brown

## JOHN SHEPPARD

suit, a snap-brim fedora and a pair of turtle-shell horned-rimmed glasses. I looked like a classic, Hoover-era G-man, replete with worn-down wingtips laced tight. I was skinny enough then to pull off the look. This was how I was dressed when I first saw Dolly and she first saw me.

How was she dressed? She didn't have a stitch of clothing on. She was lolling around in a gigantic martini glass, makeup slapped on her face with a trowel, spidery eyelashes big enough to trap flies in, squeezing a sponge that was meant to look like an olive.

She was one of the stars of *New College Goes Burlesque!* at the Buddy Ebsen Theatre in beautiful downtown Bradenton – intellectual college girls playing at being vamps, boop-boop-pee-doo.

My cellphone went off, playing a tinny version of “California Uber Alles.”

“How far away are you?”

“If I had to guess, about an hour.”

“An hour,” Dolly repeated, skeptically.

“An hour,” I said. “Give or take.”

“Huh,” she went. She hung up.

The cellphone chimed. The text was, “I h8 u.”

“What else is new?” I went.

## LONER

Before Our Nation decided to invade Afghanistan, but after the attacks, I am dressed like a Depression-era FBI agent, scoping out my future wife as she slides around in a gigantic martini glass. The place is full, maybe 500 people crammed into an old movie theater whose seating has been ripped out. It's standing room only. I see my future wife's bottom slide along plexiglas and hear the accompanying squeak. Music vibrates out of blown-out speakers. She tries to stand up, wobbles, and manages to somehow rock and tilt the glass, loses her footing and flops onto the stage, along with half the pink-tinted water from the glass. Splat, flop.

No one makes a move to help her. She's holding onto her ankle now, making pretty obvious “oww” noises. Rowdy boys laugh, then boo, then laugh some more. No one is coming from behind the curtains or anything.

The bouncer up front stands with his back to her, arms crossed.

She's on her back on the stage, in a puddle, hair wet, sort of grasping at her ankle. Not a move from backstage. I push my way up front. I poke the bouncer in the chest and he pushes me back. “Turn around,” I shout at him above all the booing. “She's hurt herself.”

“What?” he goes, flexing.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

“The girl,” I say. “On stage. She's hurt herself.”

He kind of tilts his head, like he's taking a look, and then pushes me in the chest. “Back!” he shouts.

And George sneaks around us both while I'm arguing with the bouncer and hops on-stage. Dolly flails at George like he's assaulting her. “I'm trying to help!” he shouts.

Cheering. Wild cheering. A pair of boxer shorts, striped, sails out of the crowd.

“What the fuck!” Dolly shouts.

George tries to grab her under her armpits.

The bouncer shoves me back with both hands. The crowd behind me parts and I flop onto the floor.

“Goddamn it!” I shout.

The bouncer points at me. “Last warning!” He crosses his arms.

Dolly bites George's forearm. He drops her and she bangs her head.

“You're on double-secret probation!” a frat boy shouts in my face right before he turns around slugs the bouncer, hard on the chin, and knocks him backwards.

I scramble to my feet, step on the flattened bouncer's chest and vault onto the stage. I land on my knees and slide over to Dolly.

“Jesus Christ,” she says.

## LONER

“Let me help you,” I say.

“Don’t help her,” George says, holding his bitten forearm.

“I’m from the government,” I say.

She appraises me. “Okay,” she says.

I scoop her up in my arms and attempt to stand and slide around in the pink water splashed all over the wooden stage, bang my head on the martini glass, slip, stumble, feet fly out and I land on my ass without letting go of her. And she laughs melodically, her eyes full of bipolar nutbag upswing high, her arms soft around my neck, and I’m in love with her.

### 5.

I pulled into the driveway of my suburban home. My suburban wife and suburban child were in the front yard, Dolly pulling weeds while the child looked on. Our garage was full of crap, so I parked in the driveway, killed the engine, stepped shakily outside the car and stood there like a jerk.

The two women in my life turned and regarded me, and then continued what they were doing.

“This is where you shout, 'Daddy's home!' and fling yourselves into my arms,” I said.

“Your parents called,” Dolly said.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

The child sat down on the wet lawn, took off her itty-bitty mary janes and little sockies and began counting her toes. Or I assumed that was what she was doing as she touched all of them in order with the tip of her index finger, pinkie to mashed together big toes to pinkie and back again, head between knees. She was wearing bib overalls that matched Dolly's bib overalls, Dolly's jet black hair scooped into a red bandanna.

“Yay, daddy,” I called out, weakly, waving my hands. “Weee.”

Dolly got up, wiped her hands on her thighs, strolled over and gave me a kiss. Every day with her was like a box of Monty Python's chocolates. Mainly, I was constantly preparing myself for the chocolate with the cheek-piercing steel springs.

“Work called, too,” she said. “They want to know when you're coming back. Something about a logo that's gone missing.”

“Ah,” I went. “How am I feeling?”

“How *are* you feeling?”

“Sore,” I said. “No hugs.”

“When do you ever let me hug you?”

We, my wife and I, had both put on pounds since the day we met in the theater. We were proud overweight Americans now. I had a potbelly and she was padded nicely. The kiddo was skinny as hell. Dolly put her arm around me gently and aimed

## LONER

me at the kid, who was still counting her toes. “Math genius,” Dolly said.

“Right,” I said.

“You’re *not* a math genius,” Dolly said. “Know how I can tell?”

“I overspent on this trip, didn’t I?”

“We have twenty bucks to live on until payday,” Dolly said. She poked me in the gut.

“Ow!” I went.

“Don’t be melodramatic,” she said. “It was only a car accident. You look fine.”

I may have changed physically, but my work hadn’t changed a bit. I was still the same paygrade, GS-07, though I was now a step 5. Dolly refused to believe that I couldn’t go marching into my boss Tom’s office and demand to be made a GS-09, or to be given extra steps.

Civil service doesn’t work like that. Tom would have to rewrite my position description to upgrade my position to a GS-09, which wasn’t likely considering I was doing the same exact work that I always had, and steps were given out by number of years of federal service. The first two steps were once-a-year, the next few steps were every other year, and the final steps were every four years. Once a year, Congress might decide to give us a raise, so that the entire civil service table rose by one-half-of-

## JOHN SHEPPARD

one-percent, give or take. I told Dolly, only half-joking, that when Tom had the heart attack accompanied by a stroke he'd been working on, I'd try to take his job, even though Tom was a GS-11, which was too many paygrades above my own for me to successfully apply. More than likely, someone from outside would have to apply, since all of Tom's employees were all GS-07's, and all of us were, in most ways, oddballs who shouldn't be in charge of locking up a few hundred dollars worth of art supplies, much less a \$2 million-a-year operation.

I looked down our street, lined with mature Australian pines and sickly palm trees. Years ago, when I was in art school, Sarasota had a congressman sitting on the House Appropriations Committee. Our congressman, who when she was Florida secretary of state had rigged a national election, managed to hold up an appropriations bill for water reclamation for months until House leadership finally asked her what she wanted. What she wanted was a federal building in his town. So she got a tiny steel-and-glass building, a stone's throw away from where I lived. In addition to our little operation, she got two completely bored FBI agents and a field extension of the Department of Agriculture – a three-story building, about 30 employees. And there we sat, halfway between Naples and Tampa, doing federal business. Our branch of BVISA was originally intended for Boston, so we were officially BVISA-NE.

## LONER

Unfortunately for Sarasota, the congressman was voted out of office in the big Democratic sweep of 2008, so no one was going to fight if sanity prevailed and my office was transferred to where it was originally intended.

We bought one of the nicest houses on our street, which isn't saying much. To our south was the house of Butch, who spent his days sipping beer in his back yard and firing off explosives. His house appeared to be standing only because it was leaning up against itself. Butch spent most of his time in his dirt patch lawn next to his newish shed, which was only newish because the old one, he claimed, was burnt to the ground by the former owners of my house, who, he claimed, had it in for him for no good reason that he could think of... sip beer, stare into distance, shake head. His daughter, angry and teenaged and dirty-blond, took the opportunity during that pause to come stomping out of Butch Manor, point at him and shriek, "Why do you have to be such a gay homosexual?!" She retreated in a huff.

"I oughta whoop her," Butch confided sadly... sip beer, stare into distance, shake head.

I had this conversation with Butch the day we moved into the house. Dolly was hugely pregnant, and I was taking a break from my move-in labors.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

Other than the occasional nod, Butch and I have not communicated much since that day.

There was the time he shot fireworks at my house, though not on purpose, he said. I gathered the spent rounds from my yard and flung them in his face (sip beer, stare into distance, shake head) to the delight of his daughter.

I'm not sure what Butch does for a living. Parked in his front dirt patch is a truck with OAK stenciled on the rusting door. It does not move. It has not, to my knowledge, ever moved.

To our north is Mike, a carpet installer. He asks, approximately once a week, if I need carpet. I tell him no. His wife raises mini-pins, tiny skinny dogs locked up in a four-by-four pen in their back yard. The mini pins yip and bark if I cough while pouring my morning coffee. Their other pursuit, other than fucking and whelping out yipping pups that is, is snapping at dragonflies and each other.

Even though Mike is constantly attempting to improve his property, it is similar to Butch's disaster zone. "Goddamn house!" Mike yells to me from a ladder while tacking something new to the house to cover its shame. "You want some carpet? Cheap? You sure?"

Butch's rode-hard-and-put-up-wet wife offers to mow my lawn during the rainy season. "Mow your lawn?" she shouts

## LONER

at me while I'm mowing my lawn. She wears a faded string-bikini made of old red handkerchiefs and cracked leather work boots that match her skin. I think her false teeth weren't originally built for her. I think she picked them up at a thrift shop.

Across the street, at the house flying a confederate flag, a parole officer knocks on the door. "Government man!" a voice shrieks from inside.

You get the idea.

### 6.

Inside, the walls of our home were covered over in my artwork. Once, when I was desperate for canvas but we couldn't afford it, I painted on all the pulldown shades covering the windows, so even the windows in our home are covered in my artwork.

You'd be tempted to think, looking at all the artwork, that I believe that there is a deeper meaning to life. More than one artist has been accused of this. My brother, the particle physicist, has been accused of this. As far as I can tell, life does not have a purpose or a meaning. It just is.

I haven't painted for myself in two years. Work has sucked the life out of me and the child's judgmental eyes make me feel guilty about indulging in such a personal pleasure. My paints have gone hard, my brushes are dusty.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

Dolly helped me inside the house with the child following close behind. “You’re walking like an old man,” Dolly said.

“It hurts to suspire,” I said.

“Who says, ‘suspire?’”

“Um,” I went.

“Poor baby,” Dolly said. “Did they give you any drugs?”

“Vicodin,” I said. I pulled the bottle out of my pants pocket.

“Nice,” she said. “You go in the bedroom and lay down. I’ll get you a glass of water.”

I went inside our bedroom, took off my pants and my shirt and sat on the mussy bed wearing only boxer shorts and bandages. The shade was drawn, lighting up a landscape I’d painted so that it glowed like dawn. I dry-swallowed a pill, bitter, and it hung in my throat all raw until Dolly brought me the water. I washed it down. Dolly fingertipped the bandages, gasping and a little weepy. I rotated on my ass until I was laying face-up, staring at the fresco on the ceiling – Dolly in her martini glass. She kissed me on the forehead and I drifted off into a hazy-sweaty place between sleep and wakefulness.

Vicodin does not dull pain, as far as I can tell. All that it does it make you not care about the pain, which is, I suppose, enough.

## LONER

And then it was morning, the alarm blaring through a dream about not dreaming. I clicked off the clock and slowly pushed myself to my feet. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I had to go to work.

### 7.

The moment the government decides that I no longer need to work, that they'll pay me to stay away from work either because either I've reached that age when I am no longer considered necessary to society or that I am too disabled physically (or mentally) to function, I will stay at home. No arguments.

Some people fight this. My boss Tom is fighting this. He will lose, eventually. He is 67. He's been a government man since he was 22, when he joined the United States Navy fresh out of college as an enlisted draftsman. He stayed in the Navy until he was 42, when the Navy told him he had to leave. He fought it and lost.

So he took a job with the Department of Commerce afterward and worked in D.C. for 20 years. He later accepted a job as the supervisor for this new outpost of BVISA. He understood when he took the job that it would be in Boston, where he hails from. He fought unsuccessfully to be transferred in some fashion to Boston, as a supervisor or otherwise. He didn't like Florida. It's wicked hot, he said.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

Our office is a bullpen about the size of a two-car garage. There are drafting tables spread out with Macintosh computers glowing atop rolling taborets, whose drawers are stuffed with soft charcoal pencils, Rotring art pens, blending stumps, art gum erasers, pica poles and so on. We could have had real desks, but Tom didn't like a mess. Artists and desks don't mix well, according to Tom.

Part of the tension of my workday is that I'm stuck looking at my coworkers.

There's Eulabee, a very short woman who uses her lack of height to her advantage. She's always shouting to Tom for help and Tom, being a gentleman, cannot seem to turn her down. Tom ends up executing approximately 75 percent of Eulabee's work.

There's Bill and Bob, the two retired Navy chiefs who were hired not because they can draw worth a lick, but because they were in the Navy. Each claims a 60-percent disability, though both have the ability to stomp around the office, stuff themselves full of donuts, slurp coffee from mugs emblazoned with little Navy anchors, boast of their ordinary accomplishments in the office, thump chests, tell sea stories about Olongapo (a city in the Philippines that apparently is filled with prostitutes and whose only notable geographic feature is something called "Shit River") and complain about how the gov-

## LONER

ernment is fucking them even though the government has taken care of them since they managed to somehow stumble out of high school. If you do a little math – I have – you can figure that they're each making about \$75k a year (civil service plus Navy pension) for doing next to nothing. Bob, in particular, seems to figure out ways to shove work off on me, saying that he needs to take his time to do what little work he performs properly. He would invite Tom to read his PD (position description) on a regular basis and find where in the PD he was to be held responsible for whatever work Tom was attempting to have him do.

Bob's major preoccupation was musing on the things he would do if he were King of Sarasota. “Just let me be king for a day,” he says mistily. Mostly, he would hang people. He imagines each of the light poles in our little town with a dead man (or woman) swinging from it. Offenses as minor as parking in his parking space are hanging offenses.

“What a charming world you imagine,” I said to him once, and immediately ended up on his list of people who require hanging, also known as “morons.”

Bob calls Eulabee “Frodo,” because she played a part in the annual Ringling Renaissance Faire. He also calls her “Pepper Shaker” because she's black and short.

Bill follows Bob around like a puppy, hanging on his every word. They are golfing partners. Bill tries to perform work

## JOHN SHEPPARD

that is well beyond his ken, striving not for perfection but for compliments from all of us. Once a week, we are dragged over to his drafting table to gaze upon his lifeless work, so as to elicit startled gasps of appreciation that are not forthcoming from anyone but Bob. “Beautiful!” Bob declares, slapping his shipmate on the shoulder.

“Fucking Navy mafia,” George says to me afterward. We are the two art school fags, the only classically trained BFA's in the office.

George has a family history of schizophrenia, which he is certain would make itself manifest in his artist's brain *any-god-damned-minute-now*.

“I hear voices,” he confided to me once at lunch.

“Are they saying anything?”

“They're saying that Bill and Bob are fat fucks who need to be shoved out the plate glass window.” He glanced around the Burger King to see if anyone had heard. If they did, they weren't reacting.

“Your voices are right on target,” I said. “I double-dog-dare your voices to carry it out.”

“Don't say that,” he said too loud.

“We're only on the second floor,” I said, leaning across our heart attack meals conspiratorially. “They'd only get horrific-

## LONER

ally injured. Maybe get a government pension for the rest of their miserable lives.”

“They could spend the rest of their days in Olongapo, fucking little Filipino boys,” George said, smiling. “And each other.”

“That's the spirit.”

Bob calls George “Maverick” because he looks like “Top Gun”-era Tom Cruise.

Bob calls me “Check-My-Oil” because I wear Dickies work shirts.

Bob calls Bill “Pecker Checker” because Bill's first job in the military was as an independent-duty corpsman.

I arrived to work late because I drove. Usually I bicycle to work, but given my battered condition, I decided that even mild exercise was out of the question. One of the security guards, who doesn't have an assigned spot, was parked in my spot. So I had to park in the back of the parking lot, an extra 25 feet added to my commute – boo-hoo.

I said hello to the guard, I do not know his name, when I walked in. I usually don't speak to him. In my head, I called him the Walrus, Goo-Goo-Ga-Joob.

“I took your spot,” he said.

“Yes, you did.”

“You usually don't drive,” he said.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

"I'm usually not fresh out of the hospital," I said.

"Do you want me to move?" he said. "I can move my car."

"It would be more bother than it's worth," I said. I showed him my ID card and walked through the metal detector arch.

"You're good," he said. "You know I'm disabled. Thirty percent. From the Navy."

"Of course you are," I said.

I took the elevator instead of the stairs. Ding. And there I was in the two-car garage bullpen. Bill and Bob leered angrily over at me. In my absence, they had to work. George nodded. Eulabee continued clicking around on her Mac, probably playing World of Warcraft with the sound off. Off in the corner, leaning back in his chair, his hands behind his head, displaying the crusty-yellow pit stains on his formerly white polyester short-sleeved shirt, sat Tom. He nodded his head for me to come over. I walked over and sat down on one of the two sherbet-orange chairs next to his stainless steel desk. He was the only one with a desk.

"A little late," he noted.

"Yes," I said.

"A couple of days late," he said.

"Sorry. Car accident," I said.

"That's not what the FBI said," Tom said.

## LONER

Bill and Bob snorted.

“What did the FBI say?”

“That you were kidnapped,” Tom said. “And that some local cops put a beat-down on you. True?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Then you better take the elevator back downstairs and have a chat with them,” Tom said. “They're waiting for you.” I glanced at Tom's computer screen. He was bidding on a 1947 Elgin watch on eBay.

### **8.**

The room was sterile. No windows.

“We take kidnapping seriously,” Agent Shinn said. He was the older one. He was meant to be stern.

“At the FBI, kidnapping is our bread and butter,” Agent Lawson said. He was the black one.

Both agents were bereft of facial hair. They had close-shorn haircuts.

“Let's take a look at the tape,” Agent Shinn said. He waved a remote at an old tube TV set on a roller cart, which buzzed to life. Agent Lawson popped a VHS tape into a VCR underneath. Nothing happened. “The fuck?” Agent Lawson muttered.

“Nice,” Agent Shinn said.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

“I swear to God,” Agent Lawson said.

“Suffice it to say, we've only done this song-and-dance a million times,” Agent Shinn said.

Both wore skinny ties, white shirts, gray suits. They didn't appear to be armed.

“The tale of the tape,” Agent Lawson said. The VCR made a strange whirring sound. “Great. Fan-fucking-tastic.”

“Profanity, Agent Lawson,” Agent Shinn said.

I sat on a metal chair with a metal back. The floor was made of thick powder-blue linoleum squares, like in an old hospital. The table in front of me was metal. The walls and ceiling appeared to be made of acoustic-absorbing material.

“Do people throw up in here?” I asked. “I mean, a lot?”

“You would *not* believe,” Agent Lawson said. He smacked the top of the VCR. It made more strange whirring sounds.

“As you can see, we're very well-funded out here in the middle of goddamned nowhere,” Agent Shinn said. “You're not feeling sick are you?”

“No,” I lied. Actually, I felt like throwing up, and knowing that people often threw up in the room wasn't helping.

“This is great,” Agent Lawson said. “Wonderful. You wanna give it a shot, Everett?”

## LONER

“No,” Agent Shinn said. “So this character who kidnapped you...”

“That goddamned weapon of his looked like a handheld artillery piece,” Agent Lawson said. “Father Christmas!”

“It was big,” I said. “He was...”

“Yes,” Agent Shinn said. “Go on.” He turned to Agent Lawson, “See, that’s called allowing the victim to talk.”

“I bow to your extraordinary skills,” Agent Lawson said.

“...weird,” I said.

“No shit,” Agent Lawson said. “Describe this weirdness, *por favor*.”

“Do go on,” Agent Shinn said. They both stood facing me now. Both stroked their nonexistent chin whiskers.

“I think he was some sort of escaped mental patient,” I said. “I also think he got his clothes off a scarecrow.”

“When was the last time you saw a scarecrow?” Agent Lawson asked Agent Shinn.

“I do not know,” Agent Shinn replied. “How about you? Have you ever seen a scarecrow? I mean in real life, not in a movie.”

I thought about it. “I guess I’ve never actually seen a scarecrow. Not in real life.”

“So your hypothesis involving a scarecrow...”

## JOHN SHEPPARD

“His clothes were dirty and – ” I tried to continue. I felt desperate.

“Scarecrow-like?” Agent Lawson said. “How about that Santa Claus beard he was rockin'? Hmm?”

“Scarecrow Santa Claus,” Agent Shinn said. “Did he smell like hay and gingerbread cookies?”

“He smelled like pee,” I said. Then I threw up. Explosively. I missed both agents.

The two men leapt backward half a step.

“Fuck!” Agent Lawson shouted.

“Paper, rock, scissors,” Agent Shinn said. They both shook a fist out at the other. Agent Shinn threw paper, Agent Lawson threw scissors. “Damn it,” Agent Shinn said.

“You gotta stop throwing paper,” Agent Lawson said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Agent Shinn said. He left.

My vomit was all over the table.

“Anything you wanna add before Agent Shinn comes back with the fucking mop?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“See you around,” Agent Lawson said, not offering his hand, or anything else for that matter.

### 9.

The child.

## LONER

The child shook me awake. “Hello,” I said to her. It was a rare moment of human-to-human contact for her. “So, what can I do for you?”

The wife continued happily gurgling through her sleep, making yub-yub sounds.

The child grabbed my hand and pulled.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll get up. Do you want me to make you something? Food?”

She shook her head no.

“Holy crap,” I said, startled that she was communicating. In the dim light, we were even making eye contact. I sat up, ribs screaming bloody murder. I considered waking the wife, and then tossed out that idea. I painfully slipped on my slippers and a robe. The drugs had stopped doing their job, leaving behind a slight headache. The child grabbed my hand again, led me out of the bedroom and down the hall to hers. I sauntered behind her, old-man-like.

Sitting in her bedroom on a nursing rocker, his legs crossed, sipping a paper cup of foul-smelling tea, was Light.

The child let go of my hand and ran over to him, sat on his knee.

“I see you popped out the other lens of your sunglasses,” I said. Both his eyes were present now.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

“It fell out when I leapt out of your car,” he said. He swirled his tea and smiled. “Did you know that there are two FBI agents watching your house?”

“That would be special agents Shinn and Lawson,” I said. “They're a lot of fun.”

“Not anymore,” Light said. He patted the child on the head. He winked at me.

“Oh, come on,” I said.

“All right,” Light said. “You got me. But they're awfully easy to sneak past. The black one's snoozing and the white one's playing with his phone.”

“So here you are,” I said.

“Here I am,” Light said.

“With my kid on your knee,” I said.

“So it appears.”

“Anything I can do for you?”

“I need some money,” Light said. “I'm going to Alaska. Moose hunting is good up there, I've been led to believe.”

“You're handy with a firearm,” I said.

“I am,” Light said.

“Unfortunately, I am as broke as broke gets,” I said.

“So no hidden cash, eh?” Light said. He sighed. “I got that feeling just walking around in here, but still, I had to ask, right?”

## LONER

“Do you want to get out of here before the wife wakes up?”

“She doesn't know about me?”

“And you guessed it on the first try,” I said.

“You intrigue me,” Light said. The kiddo slid off his knee and walked over to me. She sat down by my feet in a lump. Counted her toes.

“Oh yeah,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I mean, I could kill you.”

“Yep.”

“And still you wisecrack.”

“My grandmother, years ago, said that you die the way you live. Maybe that's true.”

“Maybe,” the gnome said. He reached into the overalls and pulled his gun slowly out. “Let's find out.”

My heart kicked into gear, thuddingly.

He aimed the big gun at me. “Kaboom, kaboom,” he went. While he was blowing imaginary smoke off the muzzle, I felt myself jerk forward. Even while I was moving toward him, I was thinking, “Is this such a good idea? Maybe I shouldn't be doing this?” But I was doing this. I was doing. Which really isn't the way I do business, but there I was.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

And Light was surprised. His face went “oooo,” eyebrows all arched and nostrils flaring, his lips still pursed and blowy.

My left hand grasped the barrel and shoved it under his chin. My right hand gripped his gnarled and dirty trigger. And kaboom went the gun, for real this time.

I stepped back. I was shaking.

The child wrapped herself around my leg.

My wife was the first into the room. “What?!” she shouted. “What?!”

The FBI agents woke up at some point, because they were there, too.

“Damn,” said Shinn, without a hint of emotion. He placed a hand on my shoulder.

For once, I didn't have anything smart to say. I didn't have anything to say at all. Where the remains of light sat, I saw no detail... nothing. Nothing but an outline.

## Death Drove an F-150

### 1.

Before my Army career started falling apart, before it had barely begun, I found myself in the Federal Republic of Germany on a two-year stay. Six months into my visit, I hadn't made a friend yet. I was aloof, I was told by my superiors. They put it in writing and made me sign it.

So when the new guy came in, I gave him a charming nickname.

"Slice," everyone called him, taking my lead.

The editor-in-chief of the European Command Times, a hardnosed Vietnam vet named Chet, paired me up with Slice, who was a Navy photographer's mate. I was an Army spec-four journalist with slight reporting skills.

It was the Reagan era and the entire military was lousy with money. We had so much funding, we didn't know where to spend it all.

Oftentimes, we'd spend a thousand dollars on rolls of T-Max that would quickly go bad in the basement of the kaserne. Then we'd DX the film and buy a thousand dollars more, just so we wouldn't lose the funding that we didn't really need.

Out of my kaserne window, I could look down on the Rhein gently flowing past the ruins of ye olde Heidelberg castle.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

On a sunny day it looked like Disney World out there, except not fake.

Slice and I were given a cush assignment our first time out. During the big Reforger exercise, our annual dress rehearsal for World War III, we were sent to the home of a notorious hausfrau. She lived off the largesse of the U.S. government by encouraging heavy vehicles to run over her lawn, then she would make an exorbitant claim. The tenth year in a row of the Army running over her flower bed was coming up and our newspaper wanted us to stand across the road from her house in the rollingly beautiful countryside and witness what happened. I'm sure the orders came from higher up, though all these years later I can't be sure.

We brought all of our TA-50 with us, intending to camp out across the road like pioneers. All of our equipment was like new, not a speck of dirt on it. We pulled up in our tiny jeep, the back weighted down with our shiny equipment. I turned off the engine and hopped out. Slice emptied his waterproof bag and puzzled over his shelter half and accompanying metal stakes. "Where's the rest of the tent?" he asked me.

"I have it," I said. "Mine buttons to yours."

"We're sharing?"

"That's the way it works," I said. "Two to a tent."

## LONER

“And they call the Navy gay,” he said, holding up the four by eight sheet of olive drab. He let it drop to the ground. “Isn’t that a HUMVEE?” he asked me, pointing.

The HUMVEE was still so new that no one but the infantry had them and they barely used them, preferring to walk.

“Yeah,” I said. “Ever ridden in one?”

“Nope,” he said.

“Me neither,” I said. “I hear they’re like buckboards.”

“I grew up in Pennsylvania, near the Amish country,” he said.

“Good for you,” I said. I looked over my shoulder at the quaint little place across the lane-and-a-half road. “I hope that’s it,” I said. “Shit, I hope I can still read a map.” I wasn’t that long out of basic training.

“You’re the Army guy,” Slice said. “I’m just along for the ride.”

You would have thought he was a Marine, the way he was dressed, except for the “U.S. Navy” stitched above one of his pockets. “I need a beer,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. I pulled out the cooler and we each popped open a local brew called Eichbaum. It was disgusting, unlike most German beers. But it was cheap and richly alcoholic, so we made due.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

I clanked together the little tent, beating the metal tent-pegs into the ground with my e-tool, getting the olive drab tarps nice and tight, just like my drill sergeant taught me. Slice set up his tripod and aimed the Nikon F-3 at the old lady's house. We had a nice vantage point where we'd set up. We could make picture postcards out of the before pictures.

The after pictures were another matter.

"No curve in the road," Slice said.

"Huh?"

"I mean, you'd think tankers would be using her garden as a shortcut, right?"

"She probably waves them in," I said. "The government pays a lot out to the Krauts every year for exercise damage. She wants her cut."

"Waves them in?"

"Yeah," I said. "With big orange paddles, I'd guess."

"Why would a tanker drive through her garden? What's in it for them?" Slice asked.

"They get to destroy something pretty," I said.

## 2.

"So, I was just passing through," Slice said. "And aren't you the picture of health." He'd written me a letter from Iceland, letting me know that he'd retired, too—as a Senior Chief Petty

## LONER

Officer, an E-8, one paygrade above what I'd retired as, an E-7 Sergeant First Class.

Me—I don't sleep so much. My appearance was shabby, but it had been shabby for some time—my adult life.

In the big world of the military, and in two separate services, we'd somehow managed to get stationed together three times. I knew his wife and kids, and they considered me their eccentric, single brother-in-law and uncle.

“Where's the wife? The kiddies?” I asked, looking out the door.

“It's just me,” he said, smiling unhappily.

It's the oldest story in the history of the military. Marriages and military life don't mix.

“Shitski,” I said.

“I'm sure we'll get back together,” Slice said. I don't think he believed it. “She's with her mother. She says she needs some time alone with the kids.”

With a husband in the Navy, you'd think she'd have had a gut-full of time alone with the kids. I didn't say that. I said, “How about a beer?” and went to the fridge and came back with a couple of open bottles, both Spatenbrau. I'd found a semi-authentic German gasthaus nearby. They had the beer flown over from the Fatherland every couple of weeks. It was the good stuff, not the export.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

Slice noticed it right away. He shot me an appreciative look. We are both part-German. Once you have the good stuff, you don't really want to go back to the canned swill you filched from daddy.

"So how's your mom?" he asked. "Visited your brother lately? How are your sisters?"

"Yeah," I said. "That'll keep me from asking what the fuck happened."

I led him out to my balcony. It overlooks the swimming pool in my shitty little rental complex, a former no-tell motel out beyond the threshold of civilization in Fruitville, a former citrus community that was quickly switching over to highfalutin housing featuring walls and gates.

Plenty of walls.

My apartment building was only a few blocks from the newspaper office. We sat down on a couple of plastic chairs and watched a couple of too-skinny girls make eyes at a couple of too-skinny boys who were performing cannonballs off the edge of the pool where the diving board had been. The insurance company, I'd been told by the apartment manager, made the landlord remove it. *Splloosh!* and the girls looked at each other and giggled with their hands over their mouths.

We swigged beer and endured the pounding Florida heat.

## LONER

“Mom’s back in chemo,” I said. “She’s more upset about losing her hair than she is about dying. My sisters live on the other coast and still aren’t married and still believe themselves to be descended from Vanderbilts and not white trash and a wacky German lady. My brother is still locked up in the looney bin in Arcadia. And no, I haven’t seen him since I got back.” He’s my identical twin. Paranoid schizophrenia crept over him shortly before I joined the Army and he’s been in and out of the nut hutch since.

And what about my father? Who gives a shit about my father?

“You should visit your brother,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “The son-of-a-bitch will tell me how I’m him from another universe. Thanks to all the election talk he’s absorbed, it’s now red universe versus blue universe, my mother tells me. Thank you, Tom Brokaw. I’m sick of it.” I took a sip. I stared over at him. Without the slight overhang above our heads casting a thin shadow, I probably wouldn’t have been able to make him out in all the relentless sunshine.

The girls flipped over on their tummies so the boys could get a good look at their asses. I thought, for a moment, that they might untie their tops and continued watching. Then I cut my eyes back toward my friend, feeling a bit like a pervert. He has a daughter their age.

JOHN SHEPPARD

“Sick of the election, or your brother?”

“Both,” I said.

We sat on the plastic chairs sweating. I put my feet up on the balcony railing. Slice did likewise.

“So how was Iceland? I hear the Icelandic people are friendly,” I said.

“Iceland,” he said. “So it was an unaccompanied tour. And I’d just come off the Enterprise—”

“Yeah, yeah. Lonely. You hooked up with some local talent.”

“That’s not a nice way to put it.”

“I’m not nice,” I said.

“She worked at the Chief Petty Officers’ Club, in the back, washing beer glasses. I was in there alone one night, just me and a bartender, another chief I knew. I heard a crash. The bartender rolled his eyes. ‘Dumb cooze,’ he said. I went back to see if she was okay.”

“You went back to see if she was a nice-looking cooze,” I said.

“And she was. One thing led to another—”

“That’s making short work of your adultery.”

“One thing led to another, I gave her a ride home from work. I was pretty well lubricated and, I don’t know.”

“You know, you dumb fuck.”

## LONER

“Some of us don’t have your self-control,” Slice said.

“You had a pretty good thing going and you fucked it up. And suddenly I’m a bad guy for suggesting you knew what you were doing?”

### 3.

When you set up a tripod and attach an expensive camera to it next to a road barely a lane and a half wide featuring convoys of soldiers rumbling past, maybe you should expect disaster. But we were young, that was our excuse, so when the HUMVEE clipped one of the legs of the tripod and sent the camera hurtling into our little tent at 0300 hours, we shouldn’t have been surprised. I was wide awake when it happened, listening to the trucks burble past, pebbles popping under their tonnage.

Then, a camera.

Nor should we have been surprised that the little old lady, who was no taller than a lawn gnome standing atop another lawn gnome’s head, was outside, excitedly waving at the deuce-and-a-halves, jeeps and HUMVEEs slipping past, their headlights off, the only illumination the little night lights on the rear of the vehicles, so the vehicle behind could follow. It was a convoy of the blind. The driver up front probably had a pair of night vision goggles on.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

The old lady didn't realize that, seemingly. She was almost out in traffic, and then she was. And a moment later we heard a sickening thump.

"Shit!" Slice shouted.

We had a Prick 77 radio in the jeep. But we had no list of frequencies. We had no one to call. Slice went back to the tent and got the flashlight. I would have told him to aim the camera at a bumper, where the unit ID would be, if they hadn't covered that up. The last vehicle went past and Slice came back to my side. I found a lantern in the jeep and we crept across the road, following the glowing cone of light. A cat's eyes glittered and disappeared. We found the old lady, her torso twisted sickeningly from her hips. Her legs were splayed out, heels down at the lip of the road.

"She's dead," Slice said.

"You don't know that," I said accusingly.

"She's dead all right," Slice said.

"Hold the light," I said and handed him the flashlight. I crouched down and placed my hand over her forehead, like she had a fever. She coughed. I leapt back and fell on my ass. "Shit!"

"Oh, shit!" Slice went.

"Oh, fuck!" I went.

## LONER

“Shit, fuck!” Slice went. He ran across the road with the flashlight still in his hand, leaving me in the dark with the still-alive lady.

“Are you good?” I asked the lady in my Army-issued German.

“I am not so good,” she replied.

“We are getting help,” I said.

“This is good,” she said.

“Why were you in road?” I asked.

She talked a lot, but I couldn’t make much of it out. It was a constant string of guttural syllables, probably swearing. I was a dumbhead. I could make that much out.

My German never got much better, even after I was stationed there a second time.

I heard Slice reading the grid coordinates off the note I’d scotchtaped to the map. By some miracle, he’d managed to scare someone up on the box. I was never very good with mechanical things. I could barely turn on the Prick 77.

After approximately forever, I heard a Huey beating the air overhead. Slice had turned on the jeep’s lights and had popped a couple of road flares next to the old lady. She, and we, glowed evilly. She squinted at me like I’d run her over, even as the medevac troopers gingerly transferred her to a stretcher.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

“You walked out into traffic,” I shouted, but no one heard me over the chopper wash. She was ready to blame anyone but herself.

A few days later, Chet put us in for the Soldier’s Medal, but nothing ever came of it. I hadn’t risked my life to save the old lady’s worthless hide.

I wrote a first-person narrative about what happened, which won the Thomas Jefferson award and pretty much made my career for the next 18 years. Every editor I had for the next decade would tell me: I read that piece. Good stuff. I put in all this hoo-hah about personal responsibility. Integrity. Owning up to what you’ve done.

The kicker is that the old lady got her biggest payday ever from Uncle Sugar. She should have gotten herself run over in the beginning instead of dicking around with the garden. The German press, of course, had portrayed her as yet another innocent victim of the rampaging Americans and their loud machinery.

Slice never got a photo of her. He was too busy trying to save her life. He took a photo of the spot where she lay, a few rocks next to a hedge.

Chet chewed him out for that.

“Listen up, troops,” he said a few days later, after he’d had a chance to calm down. He’d called the two of us into his

## LONER

office. “I hope you’ve taken away some valuable lessons-learned from this.”

“Snap first, save later,” Slice said.

“Roger that,” Chet said.

### 4.

Moving back to the same town you grew up in probably isn’t the best idea, especially removed by a couple of decades. I didn’t know anyone other than family and a couple co-workers, and every street corner reminded me of something that I’d rather forget, even if something new was where something familiar should have been.

“This is where the old Ringling hotel used to be,” I told Slice, driving past a high-rise condo. The whole city was lousy with high-rises. “Built in the ‘20’s when Ringling still had his fortune,” I said in my best tour guide voice. “Fell apart in the ‘40’s and sat there forever, decaying. Bunch of bored old people, City of the Arts types, tried to save it for a long time, like it was historical. It was a decaying heap. The irony being that the high rise is now stocked with City of the Arts types.”

“Fascinating,” said Slice.

I turned up the a/c in the Saturn by one click. It was a plastic car, no frills, which I’d bought at an end-of-the-model-

## JOHN SHEPPARD

year sale. I'd saved mucho dinero during my Army years by not getting involved with people and had bought the car with cash.

The other cars on the road were mostly Ford F-150 pickups, most of them sporting the ubiquitous "W '04" oval bumperstickers and yellow (or red, white and blue) magnetic ribbons demanding that the reader "Support the Troops."

I had a good idea on how to support the troops, having recently been one of them. It involved body armor, liquor, ammo and methamphetamines.

"So how did Sue find out?" I asked. "Ol' Bjork drop her a line?"

"Ol' Bjork showed up on the front porch, courtesy of Icelandic Air," Slice said, wincing at the memory.

"Where'd she get that kind of scratch? Washing dishes?"

"Me."

"Of course," I said. I glared over at him. "You dumb bastard."

"The heart wants what it wants," he said, possibly quoting a movie.

"The heart?"

"It wasn't all dick doing the thinking," he said.

"Sure," I said, my eyes back on the road.

## LONER

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess it was all dick.” He peered out the window. Sucked on his teeth. “What did that used to be?” he asked, nodding at another high rise.

“A little hole in the wall bar,” I said.

“And that?” Another high rise.

“A bicycle shop.”

“Listen, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Stop riding me,” he said. “I know I fucked up.” He smiled.

“One of these days, you’ll fuck up. That is, if you ever do anything.”

“Ouch,” I said. Then, “Hey!”

I suppose I do have a lot of nerve, lecturing others on responsibility, when my whole life has been about avoidance. Even my Army fall from grace, making an off-hand comment to my humorless CO, was about avoiding something else—mainly, going back to a combat zone.

The whole Army experience was about things I’d rather not do: Not paying rent, not choosing the clothes I put on in the morning, not cooking my own meals, not choosing a hairstyle, not thinking much for myself. The Army even chose where I lived. Very thoughtful of them.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

When the Army chose badly—say, my nine months skulking in Baghdad’s lovely green zone—I blamed the fucking Army and not myself for reenlisting.

When the Army told me I had to stay in, indefinitely, I made my well-chosen comment to a senior officer and got my ass kicked out, with full benefits.

Now here I was, on my own, with my featureless car, in an apartment with nothing on the walls, save a copy of my final DD-214 thumbtacked opposite my toilet so that I could contemplate my discharge during my morning discharge.

I bought myself a bed, finally, so that Slice could have the cot I’d been drowsing on. I didn’t see the point of spending money on something I rarely use. Three, four hours in bed and I’m wide awake, staring out the window, boozing.

The salesman asked me all sorts of questions for which I had no answer—such as, what was my comfort level?

“My what?”

Slice snickered and tried out the more expensive beds, tossing in comments like, “This one’s dandy.” Some of them had pillows sewn into the top, like people are made of eggshells.

I bought an el cheapo twin, which came with a plain-jane mattress, box springs and a metal frame. We strapped the mattress and box springs to the roof of the car with a few white

## LONER

ropes bought at the Ace Hardware next door in the shabby little stripmall. The metal frame went in the trunk.

“You know what this place should be?” Slice asked the salesman, who’d wandered outside to watch us ready the bed for transport and wish us well.

“What?” asked the salesman, who looked about 12, all sandyhaired, hazel-eyed and whose glistening skin was tanned to the point of cancer.

“A 20-story high rise,” Slice said. He winked at the kid.

The salesman took one step back and attempted a smile. Failing, he jammed his hands into the pockets of his too-large trousers and looked down at the fading blacktop delineated with indistinct, crumbling yellow stripes.

I drove slowly, slowly back east, following Fruitville Road out to Fruitville, past my old high school, past the Bobby Jones Golf Course and finally past the Interstate and into the wilds.

### 6.

I lived in Sarasota from the time I was six until I was 18. Our father moved us down from Nebraska in search of boodles of cash to be provided by an endless supply of suckers. The cash rarely materialized.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

My sole ambition from the time I was seven was to leave Florida and never come back, not even for a visit. In that, I've failed miserably.

The recruiter came to pick me up in the morning that I was to formally enter the Army. My mother was attempting to stuff a 12-course breakfast into me. My sisters, ten years and 12 years younger than me, followed Mom around the kitchen asking, "Charley doesn't have to go, does he?" Magda, the older one, asked, "Chess isn't leaving, too, is he?"

They were in their Strawberry Shortcake phase, dressed in their matching pajamas, each trailing the scent of an overly sweet breakfast behind them.

I'm not sure whether the clothes exuded the scent or if they'd bought perfume.

My brother, who showed signs that his brain was beginning to curdle, sat across the table from me. Despite being identical twins, and sleeping in bunk beds (me top, him bottom), and being forced to wear the same clothes our first ten years of life, and sit together in church and school, and being put through "Which one are you?" all the time, we'd never become close. We each considered the other a far shabbier version of himself.

"You're never coming back, are you?" he asked. It wasn't an accusation. There was a lot of hope in his voice.

## LONER

He'd developed this tick.

The left side of his face would spasm, like a muscular wink. Afterward, he'd stretch his jaw by closing his eyes and opening his mouth as wide as he could. No one acknowledged it. To acknowledge it would be to grant it special status. Then someone might have to acknowledge that he was going nuts.

"That's the plan," I said.

He finished stretching out his jaw and smiled what I thought of as his gray smile.

The recruiter knocked and let himself in. "Which one's my guy?" he bellowed cheerfully. "The one with all the food in front of him, I bet!"

How could anyone mistake my brother for me? I wondered. Couldn't they tell? "When am I going to get you to sign up?" the recruiter asked my brother.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" my brother growled across the table at me. "I can see it." He got up and went to our room, slamming the door behind him.

"His problem is jealousy," the recruiter said. If he hadn't been a black dude, I could have said that the recruiter was a living Nazi master race poster. He was a massive man, robust in all senses of the word, not an ounce of fat on him, his uniform gleaming with ribbons, marksmanship badges, a blue rope and yellow stripes. And his teeth!

## JOHN SHEPPARD

He was a salesman. His main selling point was his unshakable faith in himself and his Army. When he came to my high school, I took one look at him and said aloud, “That’s who I want to be.” I craved his certitude.

My brother, standing next to me when I said that, commented, “Jerk.”

I wanted to scrape my brother off my shoe, every last bit of him.

And now I was getting to do just that. Sort of. I dropped my fork, chewed what was in my mouth, and got up to leave.

“Naw,” said the recruiter. “Finish your breakfast. Plenty of time.”

He clapped me on the shoulder to sit me back down. He walked around the house, running his hands across our shabby furniture. Almost the entire house was in one great room—the kitchen, dining room, living room. The bedrooms were all tucked away down a narrow corridor.

“Yes, indeed. Shouldn’t be in a rush to leave all this. Your moms makes a nice house.” He knew that my father was gone already. The old man took off to start a new family a few years before, though that wasn’t the story we handed to strangers.

My mother went to work in the china department of Maas Brothers.

## LONER

“Here there is no money,” my mother said, wiping her hands. “This is why Charley joined the Army.”

“Are you German, ma’am?” the recruiter asked, slipping into a chair that my father used to sit in. He’d met her a half-dozen times before, but had rarely let a word slip from her lips. Mostly, he’d rhapsodized about the opportunities awaiting me in Uncle Sugar’s camping club.

“Yes,” she said.

“Was your late husband a soldier?” he asked. Mom had told us to tell anyone who asked that our father had been hit by a bus. She was ashamed of being divorced.

“He was in the Air Force,” she said. I was to find out ten years later that he’d been married before my mother, to his childhood sweetheart, and that there were two older half-siblings living in Ohio, where my father hailed from originally. My mother knew this all along, but had felt no need to divulge it.

“Oh, the Air Force,” he said contemptuously. He got up from the chair, he was a restless fellow, and walked over to our bookcase.

“Reader’s Digest books. Haven’t seen these in a while.” He touched one.

He looked at the Hummels under glass.

My brother very carefully had snapped off their heads when we were little, before the arrival of Magda and Marta, be-

## JOHN SHEPPARD

fore we came to Florida, and had glued the heads back on meticulously with a mixture of Elmer's Glue-All and library paste. He told me about it much later.

Where was I? "You were sitting around in our room, reading," he said, as if what he'd been doing was much more productive.

When we were packing up to move to Florida, my mother saw the cracks around the tiny ceramic children's necks and let out a little shriek. She clamped a hand over her mouth and looked at both of us accusingly, but never said a word directly about it to us—though to anyone who looked at them, she said, "The boys broke them."

"Tsk, tsk," went the recruiter, as the accusatory words spilled from the mother's mouth.

I furiously stabbed at my food and crammed it down my throat in hard swallows. Jesus fuck I needed to get out of there.

Magda and Marta hid behind my mother. Mom wouldn't leave the kitchen. It was still her sanctuary, even years after the sperm donor took off.

I stood up chewing a massive wad of scrambled eggs and the last bite of an English muffin. "Mmmph!" I went and headed toward the door. I grabbed an overnight bag there with one change of clothes (the Army would provide new clothes) and

## LONER

toiletries (which the Army would not provide), opened the door, swallowed and said, “You coming?”

“Hold up!” the recruiter shouted. “Ain’t you gonna say goodbye?”

“Goodbye!” I shouted, and walked out to his government-issued Reliant K, “For Official Use Only.”

The recruiter was outside like a shot. He popped open the trunk and I dropped in my little gym bag.

Mom and the girls wandered outside. Mom stood on the front doorstep, her arms crossed, watching me like I was some kid who’d been arrested and was going off to jail and it was about time the cops caught up with me, the creep that I am.

The car started up. The recruiter reached across and unlocked the passenger-side door. I opened the door and hesitated for a moment, looking at the old lady. “Just like his father,” she said, and turned around and went back inside, the door clapping shut behind her.

I rode in silence. The recruiter was unusually silent. At the bus station, he handed me my ticket to St. Pete. “Keep your head down,” he said, and popped open the trunk. “Don’t make no waves,” he said, handing me my gym bag. “That’s the best way to get through basic training.”

I nodded at him and walked into the bus station.

## JOHN SHEPPARD

### 7.

I awoke from a dream in which I was still in the Army. It was a banal dream of the “you’re late for morning formation” variety. I was getting ready to look for my boots, they were always missing in this dream, when the alarm went off.

My alarm clock is an old, wind-up Big Ben. It makes all sorts of racket, even when it isn’t ringing. I wound the apparatus up and set it down on the TV tray next to my new bed.

I still had about two hours before I had to cover a Boy Scout Jamboree for the paper. The editor gives me four or five items a week, mostly features, and he summarizes them via a note on my desk stapled to printed out emails or faxes of the original press releases. He also handed me a cellphone shortly after he’d hired me and told me to never leave it out of reach. I hadn’t. The damn thing rang once and scared hell out of me while I was driving. I pulled over, answered it and talked to a German lady who was looking for her cousin Monica. “*Hier ist kein Monica,*” I said in my crap German, and hung up.

Once, I flipped through the paperback book that came with the phone. The cellphone could do all sorts of tricks if I’d bother to learn them.

Slice was already up, watching the 13-inch TV in the corner of the room, which was perched atop the box it came in. He was sitting in a lawn chair he’d dragged in from the balcony,

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drinking a beer. “There’s a new invention called, ‘cable TV,’” he said. “It allows you to receive more than five channels. No static or snow either.”

“You want fancy? Go to Motel 6,” I said.

“I’m taking off today, actually,” he said. “Heading up to Mayport to see some old shipmates.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know. Get a job, I guess. Maybe go home to Pennsylvania,” he said.

“Don’t do it,” I said. I dug a beer out of the fridge. “Take it from me, going home isn’t what it’s cracked up to be.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Slice said. “Do you need anything?”

I dragged in a chair from outside and sat down near him, aimed myself at the TV. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” Slice said. “You look worse than I feel.”

“Send Bjork down,” I said. “She can massage my aching heart.” I took a swig of my beer. With two hours of sleep in me, it tasted good.

“No can do,” Slice said. He smiled bitterly and finished off his beer. “I’ll have one for the road, I guess,” he said. He got up and went into the kitchen and came back with a fresh beer. He stood there looking at me.

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“What?” I went.

“There’s gotta be something I can do,” he said.

After Slice left, after experiencing the shrieks of children at the Boy Scout Jamboree, I drove out to Arcadia, to the G. Pierce Wood mental hospital to visit my brother, through the wilds of undeveloped Florida. State Route 72 is straight, slightly warped, two-lane blacktop. Scrub palmettoes, razor wire fences, Australian pines, armadillo roadkill, turkey buzzards, Florida beef cattle covered in swarms of horseflies, the burnt remains of a former citrus grove, a county work farm, a makeshift trailer park and I was in Arcadia.

I found a visitor’s parking spot. The facility had been built in the 1960’s. The way it looked, it could have stood in for Starfleet Academy on the first Star Trek series.

The guard eyed my press badge suspiciously as I signed in. I was wearing a red pocket t-shirt, jeans and combat boots. She led me down a corridor to a visitor’s area and directed me to a table. I sat down on a plastic chair in the empty room. It was very clean. The walls were a narcotic shade of green.

After a few minutes, in walked my brother in pajamas, a ratty bathrobe hung over his shoulders.

“So,” he said. “You’ve come at last.” He plopped down in the seat next to mine. He had about 30 pounds on me. His face was round and pink, accented by a poorly trimmed Van Dyke

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with little streaks of gray in it. "It's my twin brother," he told the attendant who'd led him in.

The attendant smiled indulgently. He walked over to the far corner of the room and flipped open a paperback book.

The last time I'd seen Chess, he was bug-eyed insane. He only took his pills if someone stood over him and watched him swallow.

"What brings you out here?" Chess asked brusquely.

"I could leave," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "You could do that."

We sat uncomfortably. "Look," I said. "Are you planning on getting out of here anytime soon? Mom's sick. She's probably getting sicker. If you could manage to take your pills, on occasion, you could take care of her. I'm sure she'd like that."

"Oh, I get it," Chess said, narrowing his dark eyes. "This is about the pills."

"This is about Mom," I said. "This is about you making a fucking effort."

"Yes, sir, sergeant, sir," he said. "Am I planning on getting out of here? That's rich. I'd leave today if that was an option."

"You're working on someone," I said. He'd told me how to get out of these places. Step one, find a young doctor who needs his or her first success. Step two, develop a tick that dis-

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rupts the entire ward. Step three, let the young doctor cure you of the tick. The doctor becomes your most fervent advocate and soon you're on the street.

"Nah," he said. "These docs are all on to my little tricks. Bastards." Chess stood up. "Have you finished yet? Have you done your good deed for the day? Because I have to go back to yanking my arm hairs out. I still have three or four left."

I slumped forward in my chair, elbows on knees, and let out a long gasp.

"Wait. Now I can see it, your grand plan. Mom takes care of me, the poor sick thing. And I take care of her, the poor sick thing. And Charley hovers nearby, not really part of it, but claiming responsibility anyway. Charley has done his duty without doing a fucking thing, like always. Ain't that right, my man Charles?" He rubbed his belly counterclockwise three times and then snapped his fingers three times, quickly.

"New tick?"

"Do-wah, do-wah, do-wah," he went. "Yeah. You like it?"

"It has a certain style," I said.

"On to plan B, Sir Charles," Chess said.

On the way back to Sarasota, the afternoon rain approached darkly, rumbling. It was the rainy season. Every afternoon had a thunderboomer that swept in quickly and crept away,

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west to east. I slowed down. The Saturn did not take well to hydroplaning. All around, a cascade of water and black skies.

An F-150 rumbled past me at breakneck speed. It disappeared into the black storm as quickly as it had approached.

“That has doom written all over it,” I said aloud.

I love being right. Most of the time.

Fifteen minutes later, I saw the F-150 turned on its side in the drainage ditch on the opposite side of the road. I slowed down and pull to the side of the road the best I could. There wasn't much in the way of shoulder on that stretch of road and the drainage ditches were full to overflowing.

What to do? I powered on my cell phone and waited for it to finish its startup routine. I turned on the overhead light. No signal. I pulled out the little antenna. Still no signal. I waved the phone around, like that would do something. It didn't.

What to do, what to do? I took a deep breath like I was about to jump into the deep end of the pool, jumped out of the car into the pounding rain and ran over to the truck, which was showing me its belly. I was instantly soaked through. The rain was surprisingly warm, almost body temperature.

I leaned on the truck's bumper and peered around. The windshield was partially busted out. I hopped up and walked across the side of the truck. Through the passenger side window, intact, I could look down through the coursing blanket of water

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covering the window and see the dead woman's hand floating up past her submerged body and her baby, strapped in its car seat. The baby was not crying. It's pink, round head appeared to have fixated on it drowned mom, turned down with gravity. How old was it? It was awfully small.

The door wasn't locked, but it was heavy. My body and the door managed to shield the baby from most of the rain. I wedged myself in, legs splayed outside, working my torso in past the door that leaned upon my back. It hurt. I couldn't figure out how the baby seat worked at first, then it dawned on me that it was all attached to the seat belt. I unbuckled it and the baby plummeted down to mama. I slid further into the truck, my knees now all the way in and grabbed the baby seat. The whole thing must have weighed 50 pounds. The baby still wasn't crying.

"Hey mister," someone yelled at me from behind. He was pulling me by the ankles and soon I was on my feet on the side of the road, the baby and seat in my arms. I saw his citrus truck, parked behind the Saturn, its emergency lights flashing, its wire mesh trailer filled with oranges.

"This baby's sick," I said.

"That baby's dead," the truck driver said.

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I very carefully set the baby down on the side of the road. It looked like a grandpa gnome sitting in a quarter-sized bar-calounger.

“Ain’t you got a cell phone?” the truck driver yelled over the rain.

“No signal,” I said.

“It’s okay,” the truck driver said. “Ain’t nothing you can do anyway. You go on back in your car and set for a minute.” He pulled a cell phone from a belt holster, shielded it with his body and examined its face. He poked at the keypad.

I walked across the street and got into my car and shut the door.

I could drive away right now. I could drive and no one would know. The car was still running. I clicked from A/C to heat and shook uncontrollably. I closed my eyes and laid my shaking forehead on the steering wheel.

The rain pounded on the roof and windshield. It slowed and quickly stopped. I opened my eyes and turned my head to look at the baby. I could hear it before I saw. The baby was screaming.

I threw open the door and ran over. I dropped to my knees on the crumbling gravel by the side of the road. The baby was in full throat, its moon face red with rage and life. That fucking baby was pissed. Its rage warmed me.

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The sun appeared off in the west, turning the world orange and blue and casting its horrible light across the scrub palmettos and Australian pines awash in glistening rainwater. That baby was shrieking and shrieking.

Soon, so was I.

## Company Man

### 1.

John wakes up in a Holiday Inn in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

He drove the whole day and night before to get there. He is still tired. A crick had formed in his neck motoring along somewhere outside Atlanta, and hasn't yet gone away. A sickly blackbird outside his window squawks his name, he thinks. He calls room service and asks for a bowl of Cheerios and a glass of Tang. They have no Tang, so John settles for a glass of juice from concentrate.

The clean sheets, the juice from concentrate, the antiseptic air blowing from the McQuay beneath the sealed-shut window, and the braying laughter from the television set, all sends him back to his childhood and reruns of *Gilligan's Island*.

*Gilligan's Island!* John wonders if it is on right now. He reaches for the remote control atop the end table next to his Vibromajic, coin-operated bed. The remote control is bolted down.

*Gilligan's Island* is on! Thank God for Ted Turner, John thinks. It is the episode in which Gilligan and friends put on a musical version of Hamlet for Sergeant Bilko. If Sergeant Bilko liked it, went the castaways' reasoning, he would take them off the island with him.

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The last time John had seen this episode he was ten- or eleven-years-old. He had watched it sprawled across the beige wall-to-wall carpeting in front of the family television set, a 25-inch Quasar in a faux oak cabinet, then later had a bowl of Cap'n Crunch that his spinsterish mother had fixed for him in their kitchen. All the appliances in that kitchen were avocado-colored. A few years later, his mother would buy all-new appliances in harvest gold. But on this day, the appliances were all avocado-colored. A drawing by John was attached to the refrigerator door with a magnet shaped like a tiny banana. He'd drawn a picture of his happy two-person family with a swirling yellow sun smiling down upon them as they stood next to the festive house that they were living in, filled with avocado appliances.

His mother, John remembers, patted him on the head and told him he was a good boy. "I'm a good boy," John remembers telling himself.

"Perhaps you should go fishing," his mother suggested to him.

Nearby in his neighborhood an artificial pond had been created. The dirt was excavated from it by backhoes and used to build up pads for nice suburban houses to sit atop. A pump was employed to fill the pond with water, and later small flat fish were seeded in the pond. The fish were too easy to catch, so John always tossed them back. Sometimes he didn't even bait his

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hook; he just sat there beside the pond pretending to fish, watching the neighbor ladies walking their miniature purebred dogs and scooping up the dogs' tiny turds in Ziplock storage bags.

But John didn't go fishing that day. Instead, he went over to a neighbor's house and watched her polish the furniture. She was a pleasant, childless lady with an absent husband. She often was very lonely. Sometimes John watched her stoically weep while she sprayed Pledge and buffed until the coffee table took on a mirrorlike sheen. Then she would fill John with delicious homemade fudge. John liked her fudge tremendously. She seemed to enjoy watching him eat it. "I can't eat it myself," she told him on this day when he was supposed to be fishing. "It goes straight to my hips." Instead, she ate Ayds candy, which was supposed to reduce her hips. She slipped quietly over to John while he stuffed fudge in his mouth and wrapped her arms around him, grasping his head and pressing it against her fragrant and ample bosom. The embrace made John feel things that he felt he should not yet be feeling, so he took his leave abruptly, making a lame excuse in the process.

The phone next to John's bed rings, bringing him out of his moony remembrance. Gilligan is singing Hamlet's soliloquy. It is Bob on the phone, John's area supervisor. John likes Bob a

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lot. Bob asks John if he is ready to have the best Mid-South Industrial Carpeting Sales Conference ever.

“I sure am!” John replies, and he means it. He smiles now, talking to Bob.

“Say, is that the episode of Gilligan’s Island where they turned Hamlet into a musical?” Bob asks. He can hear it over the phone.

“Yes, it is,” John replies.

“That sure takes me back,” Bob says.

“It does me, too,” John says.

“That Phil Silvers is something else,” Bob says.

“He sure is,” John says, now remembering that that was Sergeant Bilko’s real name.

“I’ll meet you downstairs in about an hour. Is that enough time?”

“Yes,” John says.

They say their goodbyes and hang up. John finishes watching Gilligan and laughs many times. He feels sorry for the castaways, though, at the end of every episode. They are always stuck on that island, and don’t seem to like it very much.

John finishes his orange juice and sees something very peculiar at the bottom of the glass. It is part of a seed. This isn’t from concentrate at all, John realizes. It is real orange juice! He taps the seed from the bottom of the glass down into his hand

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and takes it into the bathroom with him. He washes it off in the sink then places it in his briefcase in a baby food jar filled with other curios he has come across on his trips around the Mid-South as a traveling salesman. All of the curios seem commonplace to other people, but John finds magic in them.

After he showers and shaves and puts on his JC Penney's suit and ties his tie, the sickly black bird lights on the windowsill outside his room once more. It peers in through the crack in the drapes at him, and doesn't look at all like a mean or unkind bird. Early morning sunlight comes pouring through the crack in the drapes, past the bird. "Caw!" says the bird, and flaps off. John affixes his company-issued nametag to his lapel. He steps outside his room and into a humid, yet glorious, day.

## 2.

John drives a 1972 Dodge Dart Swinger that his grandfather willed to him ten years before. He thinks that the Dart somehow has the essence of his dead grandfather in it. That's probably due to the stinky cigars his grandfather smoked all his life. The car has no air conditioning and the slant-six engine, though bulletproof, is not what it once was. On a hill outside Edwinstown, Georgia, the engine passes out from heat and exhaustion after finishing a climb up a hill. John wrestles with the steering wheel. The car pulls silently to the dirt edge of the road.

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John is wearing a tie with orange and blue stripes. It is his school tie. The armpits of his glowing white shirt are saturated with sweat. He rolls up his sleeves and loosens his tie. He steps outside his vehicle onto the crunch of gravel rimming the road.

He uses his cellphone all the time, but still it confounds him.

Most modern technology does. He wants to know why it works sometimes and why it does not work sometimes. He thinks about people's voices flying into outer space and bouncing off satellites and into his phone. The cellphone can purchase no signal. John is out of bounds, standing atop a red clay hill. Beyond the hill, he can see what may be farms. There are little farmhouses, but no vegetation save wild grass and sickly trees.

He removes a handkerchief from his pocket and uses it to wipe sweat from his face. He smells cedar in a drippy breeze. He thinks that he may never fall in love. He wishes that he had a dog, but it would be cruel to have a dog when you're on the road all the time.

John barks. "Arf ! Arf !" The sound of his voice is absorbed into the vast, empty, weed-choked landscape. Orange dust swirls across the shimmering two-lane blacktop.

John steps away from his car and into the gooey road and stands on the double yellow line bisecting it. He tries the cell-

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phone again. The cellphone is helpless. He places it into the holster on his belt.

“Edwinstown is that way,” he says, pointing forward. He decides to walk.

His car steams. Green fluid bubbles onto the dirt underneath the front of his car. The green fluid looks delicious.

Two hundred yards from the car, strolling atop the double yellow line, downhill from the car, John takes a wistful look back. The fronts of cars all have faces. The expression on his car’s face looks peeved, yet eager to please, from his angle below it. A glint of sunshine off the chrome bumper beams a dot into his vision. Closing his eyes makes the dot dance across a burnt-orange background. “One banana, two banana, three banana, four!” John sings aloud. He holds his arms out from his sides and walks one of the double lines like it is a high wire. He takes off his tie and knots it across his forehead like a bandana. He rolls his sleeves up until they are tight across his skinny biceps.

He swears that he sees water in the heat shimmer melting the road far in front of him. He likes the clacking sound of his brown oxfords on the pavement.

He doesn’t know how long he’s been walking when he sees the town up ahead. He jogs a little bit, then puts a skip in

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his step every third stride, then slows down. A car honks behind him and he trots to the side of the road.

“Hey mister,” a young lady says. She is sitting in the passenger seat. A man about her age, wearing a feed hat, steers the car, peering out past his traveling companion at John.

“You need a ride?” the man asks.

“Is there an auto repair shop in this town?” John asks.

“Yes, sir,” the man says. “Just past the diner on the right. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” John says.

The car, a muscle car the same age as John’s car, burbles and coughs beside him as he walks. “You want a ride there?”

“Is it far?”

“No, but we figure you must’ve had a good walk already, if that was your car back yonder,” the young lady says. She smiles good naturedly at him. It is an open smile, the kind that John does not see enough of.

“I thank you for the offer,” John says, wiping the sweat from his eyes as he takes off his makeshift bandana, “but I think I’ll just walk the rest of the way. I don’t get nearly enough exercise, and it is a beautiful day.”

“Suit yourself,” the man says, and guns the engine. The car lopes into town ahead of John.

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### 3.

Sitting across the kitchen table from his mother, John notices that she has aged considerably since the last time he saw her. She is no longer herself, he decides. When was the last time he saw her? It has been too long. Tampa is no longer in his sales district. He has been entrusted with one of the most important districts in the Southeast. He is a good salesman, and his contacts like and trust him, he hopes.

“Have another muffin,” his mother says. Her chin is resting on the heel of her hand. Her elbow points in his general direction on the tabletop in front of her. Her fingernails brush her lower lip.

“I couldn’t,” John says. “I’m stuffed. I’m not used to eating so much.” Bacon and eggs and hash browns expand his stomach outward.

His old bathrobe is scratchy on him. His old pajama bottoms are worn in the seat. In the pocket of his pocket t-shirt is a hard knot of laundered Kleenex.

“You work too hard,” his mother concludes.

“Maybe, but that’s how you get ahead,” John says. He tears a muffin in half and places one half on the tiny plate in front of him. The other half goes back onto the platter between

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the mother and son. Cold dregs of coffee swirl in the bottom of his cup. His mother gets up and brings over the coffee decanter and refills his cup up to the brim.

“When do you have to go back?” she asks him after she sits back down.

“Tomorrow,” he says, blowing on the coffee.

“What was the name of that girl from the office?” his mother asks suddenly. “The one you had the crush on?”

“Darlene,” John says. “She’s engaged to Bob.”

“Bob?” his mother asks. “Which one’s Bob?”

“You met him,” John says.

“I don’t recall a Bob,” his mother says. She’s wearing a housecoat that may be older than John. He remembers it from his childhood, from Christmas days and Easters. It was once a festive garment, but it is now worn and frayed and faded.

“Anyway,” John says.

A palm tree in the backyard that used to be small now seems huge. Trees and elephants outlive people. Maybe whales, too. What other living creatures outlive people? John wonders to himself.

“Where were you just now?” his mother asks him.

“In the backyard, with an elephant, a whale and the palm tree,” he says, smiling at her. This is a game that they’ve played

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too long. He is an only child. His mother's uterus was tipped. His birth, she always tells him, was a miracle.

"My poor, sweet boy," she says.

His father has been dead a long, long time. He was his mother's only companionship. Every moment away from her has felt like a betrayal.

"I'm not so poor," he says, looking at her hands splayed out on the table between them. They are liver-spotted and etched with age.

There is half a muffin between them, too, not counting the half on his plate. He is no longer hungry.

### 4.

The National Association of Industrial Furnishings Expo is a bust John decides sitting at the bar in the KC Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri. The bar is dark. Glasses clink somewhere out of sight. The bartender is wearing a gold bowtie and matching vest. John eats nuts out of the bowl in front of him. Some of the nuts are cashews, his favorite. He tries not to eat only cashews. A woman sits beside him and orders a gin and tonic. She is a prostitute. John knows her from before.

She smiles and nods at him.

He shrugs.

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“Not such a good convention, eh?” she says. She’s from Minnesota, or at least that’s her line. She sells herself. John envies her that. She is her own merchandise. She balances an impossible blonde wig atop her head. Her neck muscles must be something.

“It was a bust,” John admits. He hasn’t loosened his tie yet. It is a hopeful non-gesture, one that glows of not giving up. His hair is still combed. His drink is watered down, as requested. He nurses it, hoping that a few contacts may wander in. Maybe he can get a few business cards. Something.

“Well, what do you think?” she asks him. Her hand slips into the nuts, extracts a filbert. She pops it into her mouth. Her eyes are ridiculously over-painted. Her eyelashes form tiny black scimitars.

He shrugs again, peers around the dark bar. No one is there but the three people. The ambient clinking noise is gone. The bartender leans on the cash register. He nods his approval of the transaction, scratches his ensleeved forearm absently. “Yeah,” John says. “Same-same as last time?”

“Sure,” she says.

They ride the elevator up toward his room on the fifth floor. It is not a long ride at all. There is a brass rail waist high. The rug has amoebic patterns dyed into it. She takes off her wig, pops off a hairnet, and lets her natural dirt brown hair loose,

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shaking her head. “You don’t mind, do you? You weren’t fooled by the wig?”

“You took it off last time, too,” John says. He loosens his tie just a bit. “And the time before that.”

“I can take your clothes off for you if you like,” she says. “It won’t cost extra.” Her lipstick looks untouched. She holds the wig like a cherished pet.

“Shit,” John says. “Do you have any condoms?”

“Sure, sure,” she says. “I’d be stupid not to. Don’t worry. Oh, do you remember the first time—” she says, and abruptly stops. She catches herself becoming almost too familiar with him.

“The first time, yes,” John says. He chuckles a bit. There had been miscommunication between them. There had been minor difficulties as a result, but everything was fine in the end. Money changed hands. Hurt feelings were smoothed over. More transactions were made possible.

The elevator pings. The elevator doors open.

“I think it’s this way,” John says, his chin and nose gesturing. He studies his room key.

### 5.

John realizes, after a few minutes, that he needs new wiperblades.

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The wipers slap back and forth and do not-much good. The Prairie Home Companion guy talks to him from the tape-deck bolted underneath his dash. John wishes that he'd learned how to smoke. It would come in handy, he thinks, during tense, boring times like this.

The traffic jam has been going on for a while. It seems that he has been in Texas for hours, and maybe he has. John imagines that Lake Wobegon is a real place, and that they need industrial carpeting. He can imagine driving into town—past bachelor farmers, past the pretty good grocery store, past Lutherans. John doesn't even know what Lutherans believe in. All that he knows about them comes from his CCD classes from when he was tiny. Father Gerard, an angry, black-haired, Irish-priest, said that they were formed by Martin Luther—not to be confused with Dr. Martin Luther King—and Martin Luther was a dangerous heretic who tried to destroy the Catholic Church. And failed.

Inching forward now, one half car length—now a full car length.

It's slow going.

The tape ends and pops out of the tape player and flies underneath the seat. It is a peculiarity of this tape player. It was made in China. So now it is nearly silent in the enclosure of his Dodge. The rain is beginning to let up. It ticks and slaps against

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the roof and washes across the windshield where it is pushed aside poorly by the worn wiper blades. There is a Whattaburger ahead, two miles, according to a roadside banner.

There are lights flashing, blue and red. John cranes his neck to see. There is nothing to see so far.

He feels underneath the seat for the errant tape. “C’mon, c’mon,” he urges himself on. “Where are you?” he asks the tape. Instead he finds a marble. He brings the marble up to his face and is looking into an eye.

It is his grandfather’s glass eye, he’d recognize it anywhere. Someone honks behind him, flashes his lights. John moves forward two car lengths.

Stops.

Now he’s free to study the eye again. His grandfather lost his real eye working in shipbuilding in Tampa. He was helping to create a Navy frigate. One spark from a welder’s torch: Eye gone. John flicks on the map light below the dash by flipping a toggle switch. He holds the eye near the yellow bulb and turns it slowly like a gem.

He pops the eye into his mouth. It is large-ish for his mouth. It makes him feel as if he is gagging, almost.

He moves forward three car lengths. The blue and reds are blindingly close now, but the pickup truck in front of him obscures his view. The accident must be horrible. He sees

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shattered safety glass in the middle of the road. He sees a large piece of a red turn signal lens. The wrecks have been dragged from the middle to the side, leaving oil and car chunks in their wake. An officer wearing a Smokey the Bear hat wrapped in a shower cap directs cars forward with a flashlight with a translucent orange cone on the end. The cone glows all orange sherbet. A badge is affixed to the outside of the reflective vest the officer's wearing. Water runs sole-deep past his feet. The rain is letting up.

The pickup moves forward, then away quickly, revealing the traffic jam's cause. Two cars are joined messily together. A man's hand is all that John can see. It is on the dash of one of the cars. It does not appear to be attached. John sees a garish ring on the finger.

Muffled, "Move along!"

John steps on the gas and the old Dodge lurches forward, sliding across grease and rain and crunching car bits, then the tires catch and grip the road. "Mmph!" John goes, spitting the dead old man's eyeball out onto the dash.

### **6.**

John wakes up at 1 a.m. on a Sunday morning in his apartment in Gainesville and weeps.

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He's lived in the same small studio apartment in the student ghetto for 13 years, since his sophomore year in college. He was a business major. The hideous day-glo green carpeting has worn out. He could recarpet the tiny room for free, have a couple of guys come over from work and help him out, but he doesn't want to. Some things have to stay the same.

The tiny window unit blasts cold air out at him. It shuts itself off periodically, then starts up again with a loud clunk. It probably needs to be replaced.

The refrigerator is another appliance that could use some replacing. It is not doing its job well at all. Some items are frozen, and some feel almost warm. The freezer compartment is a crusty tundra.

John'll have to unplug it one of these days and let the ice melt. There may be ice cream buried in the back.

John's corner apartment is lit frostily by a mercury vapor security lamp hanging from a telephone pole outside his window. He lives on the second floor. An angry couple lives in the apartment above.

They throw things at each other sometimes. They have a child who cries.

John wonders how all three of them can live in such a tiny space. A guy who likes old timey music lives in the apartment below. John can hear him singing along with the Carter

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Family every now and then. The guy in the apartment next door wears expensive jogging suits. John and he used to nod to each other in the hallway. They talked once or twice. He was making too much noise one evening when John was trying to get some sleep, so John knocked on his door and asked him to please quiet down, and the guy in the expensive jogging suit threatened him with a baseball bat. He had a diamond stud in his earlobe. John called the police.

Now the guy next door doesn't talk to him anymore.

John received his ten-year pin from work in the mail yesterday. It's a handsome pin. He picked it up along with the rest of his mail at the post office, where his mail is on perpetual hold. He hardly spends any time at all in Gainesville.

The football game was out of town this week. Perhaps that's why the student ghetto is strangely silent. It's fall, and Saturday night, and John hasn't heard one loud "Wool!" since he's been home. That's what all the students shout these days. It is their expression of youthful joy.

John rolls out of his futon and takes the four steps over to his refrigerator. One, two, three, four. He pulls out the pitcher of filtered water and pours some into a plastic cup labeled with a grinning gator. The gator is giving the old thumbs-up. John stands in the dark next to the sink drinking his water. It is not so cool. The air conditioner clunks back on. John pours the

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rest of the water into the sink and leaves the gator cup there. He pulls a paper towel off the rack and wipes his face and blows his nose.

### 7.

Outside Memphis, maybe forty miles south, John finds a tiny hotel off the beaten path that he thinks he would like to stay in. “Free HBO!” the sign promises. John parks in the tiny dirt lot. The swimming pool’s covered over with a dirty, ripped tarp that is sun-beaten blue. The manager signs him in. She’s sweaty and fat and sports a bleached mustache. She points at the diner across the street, Big Lil’s, and suggests that it is just about time for supper. John agrees. He presents the woman with his company-issued credit card and she swipes it through a machine. The machine dials in loudly and verifies the card with a horrid beep. A window-mounted air conditioner blasts the woman and pushes her sweat-scent at John. He smiles at her, even though her odor is appalling. She hands him his room key.

All of the units are in a single, long building. John’s is at dead center. He unlocks the door and feels an oven breeze escaping past him.

He tosses his suitcase on the bed and cranks up the a/c.

He urinates with the bathroom door open. The bathroom has one of those gigantic mirrors that take up the half of

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the wall above the sink and toilet, so John is subjected to watching himself piss.

He notices a five-o'clock shadow on his chin.

On his way across the two-lane highway, hunger pulling him over the width of the road, John is hit by a station wagon piloted by a harried mother who is late for a church social. Her car skids on the melty blacktop, fishtails slightly, before clipping John and sending him to the gravel at the side of the road. He lands on his feet and stands for one miraculous moment before crumpling onto his back. There is not a cloud in the sky, he notices, save for a thin vapor stream attached to a passenger jet high, high above. He imagines people gazing down at him from their windows while being served boiled peanuts by a germ phobic stewardess wearing snappy rubber gloves.

The car backs up. Its windows are down. The woman driving stares at him. Her children crowd to the window nearest him in the backseat. A girl child with stringy blonde hair says, "Mama, you kilt a nigger."

"What have I told you about that word?" Mama asks her, before putting the car back into drive and continuing on her way.

"Me?" John thinks. "Me, a nigger?" He is awake and feeling no pain, so far. He is not inclined to get up yet, though. He's not sure if he can.

## LONER

John thinks he can hear that jet airplane far off rumbling. It looks like a tiny piece of white chalk scraping a pale blue board. Birds chirp in sickly roadside trees.

The fat lady from the hotel blocks his view of the glorious sky, her head looming over him. A drop of her sweat plunks into his right eye.

“I called an ambulance,” she says.

He tries to lift his right hand to wipe away the sweat that’s closed his eye, but his arm won’t respond. “Thank you,” he says.

“I know that old gal,” the fat lady says. “She didn’t do that on purpose or nothing.”

“I didn’t think she did,” John says. He blinks the sweat out of his eye.

“What’re you doing out this way, anyway?” she asks him. It sounds like an accusation. She crouches down heavily, then sits in the gravel.

“I sell carpeting,” John says. He can’t turn his head to look at her.

He can feel the heat coming off her body near his head. “I’m a traveling salesman. I go where I’m needed.”

“Traveling carpet salesman?” she asks incredulously. “I never heard of such a thing.”

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“Industrial carpeting. For hotels, corporate headquarters, bingo halls, VFW’s and such,” John says. “I go where I’m needed.”

The palm of her hand rests on his forehead, a warm pillow.

“Don’t get yourself riled,” she says.

“I go where I’m needed,” John says, realizing that he is repeating himself.

“Keep your eyes open,” she says. “Don’t go into shock.” The voice is attached to the hand.

“I’m fine,” John says. “I’m just fine. I need a moment to rest, then I’ll be up and at ‘em. No time flat.”

“You ain’t gonna get her into trouble, are you?” the hotel lady asks. She’s stroking his hair now.

“Who?”

The hotel lady laughs. “That’s the spirit!”

A shudder goes through John, an arctic wind. He hyperventilates for a moment. “*Estoy frio*,” he says.

“Stay with me,” the hotel lady says, panicky voiced. “Don’t go nowhere.”

“Mama,” John says. “*Mamacita*.”

Before he awakes, he knows he is in a hospital. It’s the scent.

## LONER

John has sold a lot of carpeting to hospitals. Hospitals make him nervous.

“*Como estas, Juanito?*” his uncle Carlos asks when he awakes. An unlit stub of cigar is jammed between his teeth.

“My name is John,” John says.

“Is that any way to talk to your uncle?” Uncle Carlos asks him. “Your uncle all the way up from Florida?”

John shrinks back from his uncle’s embarrassing accent. Y’s are J’s in his mouth. Floor-eee-da. He doesn’t want to be associated with it.

It reminds him of the cartoony accent of Al Pacino in *Scarface*. He wonders how many people here have heard it already and have attached it to him. “I’m sorry,” John says.

“The *gordita*, she tells me you spoke Spanish to her,” Uncle Carlos says. He seems pretty pleased.

John flushes with embarrassment.

“At least she thought it was Spanish,” Uncle Carlos says. He laughs and slaps his knee. He’s dressed like a Cuban. He doesn’t realize what country he’s in. He thinks that once Castro dies, he can go back and return to his father’s land and be a farmer. Uncle Carlos flies low over Cuba every two weeks in a Cessna dropping Bibles on people so that he can have Papa’s land back.

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John is an American. He was born here in this country and he has no desire to go to Cuba. Would he be able to make the living he does in Cuba? Of course not. People like his uncle are crazy. They live in a dream world.

“So what brings you to Mississippi?” John asks him. He can move his head. He tries out his hand and it moves. He wiggles his toes and can see them through the sheet moving. His whole body feels heavy.

His head is light. An IV drips something clear into his arm.

Uncle Carlos laughs again. He has John’s dark eyes and olive skin. “So why do you drive my father’s car around if you have no desire to be Cuban?”

“Papa was an American, like me,” John says defiantly. “He knew what country he was in. He built American ships for America.”

“*Sí*, and that redneck who ran you over knew what country she was in, too. Yes?” Uncle Carlos says.

“There are good and bad people everywhere,” John says. “You think Cuba before Castro was some bed of roses?”

“Your father, God rest him, he thought Cuba was worth fighting for,” Uncle Carlos says. “*Por qué no me hablará español?*”

“*Es estúpido. Ahora estamos en América. Hable Americano.*”

“*Eres Cubano. No blanco. Sea un hombre.*”

## LONER

“Enough,” John says.

My father, John thinks, loved Cuba more than he did me. What business does a man with a wife and kid have running off to fight in a communist country, playing some sort of stupid game? His father disappeared in—what? 1970? Back to Cuba. Back to fight his own Bay of Pigs when nobody cared anymore what happened in Cuba.

And Alpha 66. What right did they have to make demands on anyone living in a free country?

*Cuba Libre*. What’s that?

### 8.

Trees without branches, like telephone poles, zipping past. The windows down in the Dodge, Uncle Carlos driving, sticky wind rushing through. John with his head resting on a sweat-soaked pillow, reclining uneasily across the backseat. His uncle’s hairy arm draped across the top of the front seat. His hairy knuckles. A gold chain around his thick wrist.

Gold signet ring, family crest. Buffed up manicure.

And the music coming out of the tape player! They will get arrested for sure!

Officially, John has a month’s time to recuperate, to get back into his game. His body is merely bruised. There was internal bleeding, and an operation, so he can’t move quickly. The

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doctor thought that his kneecap was busted, but it is only a deep bruise and some tendon strain.

Crutches are involved.

Everything is covered by your insurance, Mr. Garcia. Please sign here. Um, how do you folks say it? Por favor?

Couldn't his uncle turn down the *musica* just a little? *Un poco*?

John imagines the inevitable redneck cop on the side of the road waiting for this opportunity. You can't make yourself obvious like this.

His uncle is smoking a cigar. His arm rises from the seat top and removes the cigar from his mouth. He steers with the cigar hand now, and drapes his other arm out the window. He's slapping the door along with the music. He's begging for trouble. They're in southern Mississippi now, hurrying toward the Gulf Coast.

John grits his teeth. Why doesn't Uncle Carlos wrap himself in a Cuban flag and be done with it? A straw, short-brimmed hat atop his brillcremed head, his tiny mustache, the tacky jewelry. You're not in Miami, Uncle Carlos, *mi tío*. You're in the deep South. Pride is what gets you killed.

My name is John. I'm from Tampa. You betcha. By golly. Gosh darn it. How are you? I'm just super.

John drifts into a sweaty sleep.

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*“Deseas comer los mariscos?”*

“Please speak English. For God’s sake,” John says.

*“Los mejillones son buenos aquí.”*

“You’re doing this on purpose,” John says.

*“Necesito ir al cuarto de baño.”*

“No, don’t leave me alone,” John pleads, panicking at the thought of being alone amongst all these strangers after his uncle has exposed the two of them for what they are.

But his uncle gets up, smiling like a bastard, and walks off to the bathroom.

The waitress comes to the table with a basket of bread. “Um. Do you speak English?” she asks him.

“Yes,” John says, perhaps too hotly.

She says, ever-so-slowly, “Do you want to order, or wait for your daddy to get back?”

“I hear the mussels are good here,” John says, adding a slight Southern lilt to his voice. “Is that true?”

She relaxes a bit and speaks almost normally to him. “Oh, sure, honey. They’re very good. We’re famous for them.” Outside the window the Gulf of Mexico is sparkling near the end of a long summer day. John sees a sailboat out there. A floating casino is attached to the dock. It looks like an old-fashioned paddlewheel steamer.

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“I’d like some mussels then, please. Some hushuppies on the side, too. And sweet tea,” John says. “My uncle will order when he gets back from the bathroom.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” the girl says. She’s fat. Lots of southerners are. It’s all the lard they eat. “If you don’t mind my asking, were you in an accident or something?”

“I got hit by a car,” John says. “I’m okay. My uncle is driving me back to Florida. That’s where we’re from.”

She seems relieved that they are from Florida. Her face relaxes as the word passes from his lips. It’s like: Oh. That explains why you two obvious Hispanics are here. Florida is full of your type.

His uncle gets back to the table and sits down. “*Ella es gorda, y fea.*”

“He can speak English, ma’am. Really,” John says.

“I will have the lobster,” Uncle Carlos says in as thick an accent as he can muster.

“Why don’t you get the surf and turf ?” John asks him, syruping up his Southern accent. “It’s real good, probably.”

“*Filete y mariscos?* I don’t think so,” Uncle Carlos says.

“I’d just stick with the lobster,” the girl says. “You want anything to drink? A beer maybe?”

“Yes, bring a beer,” he says, dismissing her with a wave.

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After she's gone, John leans over and whispers, "You know, you don't have to be so aggressive all the time. It's unseemly."

"Unseemly? Like your fake Southern accent? I'll tell you what's unseemly..." Uncle Carlos says. Then he doesn't. He sits back in his chair and looks out at the vast blue waters of the gulf. Seabirds hovering over the casino attack a couple of burly gamblers, who run inside as the gulls snap at their heads. Uncle Carlos laughs. "Do you think they allow smoking in here?"

"I doubt it," John says. He tears a piece of white bread in half.

### 9.

His mother is in his apartment when they get back. Uncle Carlos half-carries him up the stairs to his second-floor apartment. His mother is holding the door open for them. "Honestly," she says, "I don't understand why you felt the need to come back to this awful little apartment." She's lived in Carrollwood Estates for 30 years, and now sounds like a white bread matron. She's on the tennis team for seniors there.

"It's my home," John says, staggering over to a hard-backed chair.

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His mother has set up a cot for herself near the kitchenette. John fears that she's discovered his cache of *Playboy* magazines.

"Doesn't anybody in this family speak Spanish anymore?" Uncle Carlos asks. He sits down on the futon.

"When in America," John's mother says. She gave up speaking Spanish after John's father died. She spent a lot of time in front of the TV set perfecting her diction, her cadence and accent. John's father died wealthy. She never had to work in her life. Where the money came from is as much a mystery as what happened to his father thirty years ago.

"Are you going to be staying long?" she asks. "Carlos?"

"No," Uncle Carlos says. "I still have my work. I have a plane ticket back for today."

"Yes," says Mrs. Garcia darkly. "Your work." Her arms cross over her chest. She practically looks like a nun in her severe get-up. Her jet black hair is twisted into a stiff bun. Her lips purse. "*Que bueno*," she says sneering in her affected snob American accent. It's an old argument.

None of them feel like going through it again. They hear clomping noises above them in the apartment upstairs. "I have no idea how you can stand living in this place. I swear those upstairs neighbors of yours are riding horses around."

"How long have you been here?" John asks her.

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“I got in yesterday. Your uncle hasn’t been filling your head with ideas, has he?” she asks.

Clomp, clomp, clomp. Their heads tilt toward the ceiling and watch the sounds. The ceiling fixture shakes a bit.

“You can’t put ideas into a stone,” Uncle Carlos says.

“Goddamn you!” a muffled female voice shouts.

“I’ve had it! You’re on your own!” a male voice shouts. They watch the footsteps thud quickly toward the apartment front. A door slams. They hear footfalls thumping down the outdoor stairs. A car starts up. Loud rock music blares. Tires bark. The loud rock music and car engine rumble recedes.

A child wails grief up above.

“It’s not without its charms,” John’s mother says.

Uncle Carlos laughs. The two older people share a look that John doesn’t like. Uncle Carlos never married, except to *la causa*.

“Don’t look in the freezer,” John warns them. “You may not like what you see in there.” It’s his way of making his mother look in the freezer and maybe clean it out for him. It will keep her busy chipping away for a day or two, then it will be time for her to leave.

His mother doesn’t nip at the bait. She’s still looking at Uncle Carlos, a sly smile across taut lips. Uncle Carlos’ eyes glow warmly. John doesn’t like it at all.

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“I have to be going now,” Uncle Carlos says. “I’ll need a ride to the airport to catch my flight back to Miami.”

“Can’t afford a cab?” his mother asks.

“I can afford a cab,” Uncle Carlos says.

“Maybe I’ll give you a ride anyway. You did drive my boy all the way down here,” she says. She walks over to Uncle Carlos, touches him on the arm. He stands up and smiles at her. He towers over her.

“We need to leave right now,” he says, “if we’re going to make the flight.”

“Will you be able to manage?” she asks John.

“I guess so,” he replies. He can’t believe what’s going on. He refuses to believe it.

“I’ll drive you in my car,” she says. She owns a three-year-old Lexus.

Uncle Carlos pulls John’s keys out. “My things are in the trunk of the Dodge.” The two of them leave. They clomp down the stairs. Car doors and trunks slam.

Uncle Carlos returns to the room. John has already turned on the television. A documentary about sea lions living on the wharf in San Francisco is on. Uncle Carlos tosses him the keys. John fumbles them onto the floor.

When he looks up, Uncle Carlos winks.

## Milk Carton Girl Turns 40

Every year my parents pop up on TV on my birthday.

They indulge in the same moaning, over and over, about how I'm gone and how they wish someone would tell them where I am—tell them where my corpse is, that is. The assumption is that I'm long dead, perhaps buried in a shallow grave off the Interstate after having been defiled and decapitated by a rapist-murderer.

In real life, I work in a used bookstore in Sarasota, Florida. I have ever since I left home at 15. Same job, same room in a boarding house. I own very little, and have very little to do with the rest of humanity. It's been 25 years, and still my parents pop up on the tube to cry and beg for the return of my mutilated corpse, so they can weep some more. That's life in showbiz, I guess.

The photo filling the screen is from my 8th grade yearbook, all blurry and gray and lifeless. My mother says, "She was such a charming child." I was never charming. And I am not a "was," though that wouldn't fit in with the storyline. Brown bones and a faded Catholic schoolgirl uniform (finally exposed after a gulley-washer out in a cow pasture near I-75)—that's what's implied by all the teeth gnashing. I watch the annual show, now gone national thanks to Montel Williams, on the tiny TV set I keep next to the register. All these dusty, yellowing

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books and I turn to the boob tube for entertainment? That's almost as sad as the fictional dead girl on TV—sort of.

My boss Red says, "Why do you watch that junk?" as my parents begin to bawl on 3... 2... 1...

"It keeps me grounded," I say. "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

"Oh, please," Red says, and disappears into the back-room, where dusty books await his pricing pencil. He's jittery and bearded, our Red, a shaky man who needs nips from the bottle and a cigarette to get him through the half-hour. One rheumy eye points to the ceiling, the other right through you. He's ten years my senior, but looks like he has 20 or 30 years on me.

I remember the first time I saw him. He was almost, but not quite, sexy. I walked in the door, knapsack on shoulder, and asked, "Job?"

I'd left home a few hours before. My parents wouldn't start looking for me for another day and a half. By that time, I'd be settled into the life I continue to lead today.

He looked me up and down, smiled wolfishly, and said, "Sure."

I get paid in cash and all the chewing gum I can steal from the yellowed gumball dispenser next to me on the scratched glass countertop. Next to the gumball machine, there's the little

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TV. Beneath those two items, and my thin wrists, are locked-up copies of the Charles Bukowski and Jim Thompson books that kids are, for whatever reason, driven to swipe.

I remember Red's hot breath and his quivering hands when he took me to the backroom and humped me. Has it been 25 years already?

He pulled down my panties and lifted my skirt. I lay face down on an uneven stack of mystery novels, most of them not worth the nickel asking price scribbled inside their covers. My Keds found purchase on the linoleum, squeakity-squeak. I turned my head and chewed my gum.

3... 2... 1... A quick stabbing pain and a slight sensation. Pumpitypump.

And that was it. No big deal. From all the buildup around the schoolyard, I thought losing my virginity would be the rough equivalent of a personalized thermonuclear war.

I cleaned up in the adjacent bathroom, wiping my thighs and inner parts with toilet paper. I gazed into my face in the mirror. No tears, nothing. I was pleased with myself. I slipped my panties back on. I asked Red, as I left the bathroom, "How many times a week would you like to do that?" I thought that, given time, I might begin to enjoy it.

"It's not required," Red said, his mouth open crooked, his pricing pencil already doing its work.

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“No, really,” I said. I chewed my gum. Snap, crack.

“Really,” Red said, getting hot, “it’s not a requirement.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m not trying to be difficult or anything like that.” I gave him what I thought might be a winning smile. It probably wasn’t.

He grinned nervously and took a nip out of a metal flask. He offered it to me. I took a quick snort and decided that I didn’t like it much. I may have had a couple of drinks since then, but I don’t have any use for alcohol. Smoking either. And drugs, legal and otherwise, seem like too much of a bother.

Red asked if I had a place to stay. I shrugged. He gave me the address of a couple he knew who had an extra room. After work, I walked over there and rented the room with some money I’d stolen from my father’s bureau drawer. In a few years or so, on one of the annual broadcasts, my father would forgive me for the theft. Nice guy.

My mother sits next to him on the TV, sobbing like Tammy Faye, abundant mascara running in hot, black rivers down her saucer face. “I just want my baby back is all,” she says. I see nothing of myself in these gushy people.

“You can’t have me,” I say to the TV. A customer gives me this look. “What?” I say peering up at him, my elbows making elbow prints on the glass counter. “I suppose you don’t talk to the TV ever?”

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“Heh,” he snorts, a half-laugh and a smirk. He’s looking down my cleavage. Ever since the neighborhood gentrified a decade or so ago, we’ve been getting these snobby types in here. You know. Haircut and glasses. Manicure. Teeth artificially white and straight. Boating clothes.

We were a used bookstore way back when. Now we call ourselves antiquarians, and we’ve added a few digits to the prices. We also sell on eBay.

I ring up a copy of *Revolutionary Road*, 2nd edition, wildly overpriced. He pays for it and leaves. Jingle-jingle goes the bell above the door. I spit my gum into the wastebasket. Montel goes to commercial.

Mrs. Ready says, when I walk in the door, “I saw you on TV again.” This is a joke, of course. She says this every year, in her joking way. She thought it was me the first time she saw the 8th grade photo, but I convinced her otherwise. “Look at the nose,” I remember telling her. “And that hair!”

“It’s not your nose at all,” she replied.

“Those poor people,” I say. “How long has it been?” Tsk-tsking.

“It seems like forever, dear,” Mrs. Ready says. She’s making bread with her bread machine, a toy her daughter gave her for Christmas a year or two ago.

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I sit down at the kitchen table and we enjoy a cup of tea together.

She pours it out in chipped flowery cups, once prized possessions and now merely useful. “We’re just a couple of old gals,” Mrs. Ready says.

She’s been old forever like some cartoon character that never ages. She’s all crevices and facial powder, her hair done up in an unnatural color that verges on gunmetal.

“Speak for yourself,” I say, and smile to show that I’m kidding. I think I’m one of the only women on earth who doesn’t care that she’s aging. What does it mean to me, that I’m getting older? “What kind of bread you making?” I ask, and sip the tea. The tea is weak. She keeps using the same bags over and over. The bread will be served with dinner, probably.

“Cranberry?” Mrs. Ready says, wincing with attempted remembrance. “I’ll have to look at the box.” She makes no attempt to stand up. Instead, she takes a tentative sip of her tea. It’s too hot, so she blows on it.

“Don’t bother,” I say. “It smells delightful.” It doesn’t. It smells like industrial air freshener.

Hipster Boy, who is renting the room once occupied by the daughter, comes slamming through the kitchen door. He’s home, presumably, from his art classes at the art school that is named after a circus owner, now dead. Hipster Boy is a peach-

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fuzz soul-patch and scraggly hair, a colorful tattoo and an anti-corporate tee shirt. Despite my better judgment, I find him attractive. I notice him leering at me sometimes, especially in the morning after I exit the bathroom semibare, all showered up, with the scent of Dial soap steaming from my pores, a moist towel wrapped around my midsection. I like the leer enough that I lock my door and pleasure myself with the Throbbing Thrillhammer. Maybe I will sex him up one of these mornings, when he is getting ready to leave these digs.

“Hey,” the boy says, a tentative smile creeping across his thin lips. He is vulnerable and sweaty. I like that.

“Hi,” I say, and scratch my bare knee. The Throbbing Thrillhammer is calling my name, but I resist and sit a few more minutes with Mrs. Ready waiting for Mr. Ready to come home from the shell mines. He does, 15 long minutes later, trailing his strange shell dust behind him like a ghost leaving residue. I say, “Good afternoon, Mr. Ready,” and slip upstairs. I listen at the boy’s door for a moment, my ear against the peeling-painted wood, trying to catch a whiff of him. Then I go to my room and lock the door. I click on the Thrillhammer—rumba! rumba!—and muffle my sighs with a pillow.

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I had a brother, who was faintly annoying, and the emotive parents. It wasn't like I had a pressing need to leave. There is no sad molestation story for you to enjoy.

My father sold cars. My mother sold Junie May cosmetics from the back of a pink Ford Ranchero with lipstick red stripes coursing down the sides. They were Americans, striving out their American existence.

Mother and father wanted more and more. I found that the more they wanted, the less I cared. The brother sneered around the house, occasionally gasping out his exasperation. I ignored him.

I was sent to a private school that we couldn't afford. I wore plaid miniskirts and the boys whistled at my legs. That was the good part. The school wasn't worth going into hock for. The girls swapped sexual gossip, mostly bad-mouthing each other and jockeying for position for the most desirable boys, who did not seem all that desirable to me.

The teachers peddled the same crap teachers always peddled.

The teachers all drove home this point: *Fail here, and the rest of your life will be shit.*

After failing a few tests at school, probably on purpose, I went home and gathered some clothes into a knapsack. I dug through my father's bureau and discovered a rich vein of cash,

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and pocketed it. I walked down to the Greyhound station and hopped the next bus. I got off 50 miles later, walked two blocks and found the bookstore with its Help Wanted sign leaning inside the window. I took a job, lost my virginity and moved into my own digs, all at once.

They were wrong, those teachers. My life isn't shit. It's mostly okay. Rumba! Rumba!

I am painting my toenails. Toward what end? I don't know.

Probably something to do with Hipster Boy. It is past midnight and Montel is on again. I set the volume low on the TV so that the Mr., Mrs. and Boy won't be disturbed in their slumber. The Mr. is snoring in a particularly lusty manner. He sounds like a leaf blower with all that shell dust rasping out of his lungs.

An 800 number flashes on the screen. I pick up the phone and spin the rotary dial. The lady who answers seems a bit officious. "Maybe some people would like to be left alone after 25 years," I say. "You ever think of that?" I hang up. I finish painting my big toenail. It is a happy, conch-like pink. The phone rings. I pick it up quickly. "There are people sleeping here," I say. "Attempt some consideration."

There is a vague threat. Something about penalties for calling a hotline with bum information.

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“Oh, please,” I say. I hang up and the phone does not ring again.

“Happy birthday to me,” I sing under my breath, and then blow on my toes.

A semi-competent private investigator could find me in half a day. Once I turned 18, I used my Social Security number to open a bank account and get an ID from the state of Florida. I figured that at that point, someone would come by and tell me to go home, then I’d tell him to fuck off and I’d lead a normal life. But no one showed up. My parents kept appearing on TV, and I kept my life.

I don’t have much, and I’ve never cared for having much, but this is something that belongs only to me, this secret.

I’m all dolled up and wearing perfume like this is a special day. I’ve shaved my legs and hot-rolled my hair, even. It’s a day like any other, featuring work and a possible walk to the grocery store afterward. I’m wearing my escape clothes, the same mini-skirt that got me the job so many years ago. The day seems charged, crackling outside my window. I open my door and step into the hallway and bump into Hipster Boy.

“Hi,” he says. His hands are up in a weak surrender. We are nose tip to nose tip in the narrow hallway. He is dripping with shower spray.

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“Mmm,” I go. “Listerine.”

His eyes dart. Fight or flight. I reach down and tickle his jutting ribs. He leaps back and his towel drops. He’s embarrassed now and makes a quick gesture to pick up the towel with one hand and cover his privates with the other. There’s no hair down there. He’s shaved clean.

He blushes and whips the towel up, avoiding eye contact, and sprints past, almost knocking me down in the narrow hallway. A photo of the daughter winks from the wall. He makes this “wuh-wuh-wuh” sound and the door slams shut behind him.

I can feel Red’s current marriage failing. This is number four, and she’s put the screws to him to stop his drinking. I’m up front watching the milling customers. I see him through the open door to the backroom, where he’s stacking and restacking books and books and books.

He looks worried.

I’ve helped him out of the first three marriages, just by being there for him. We’ve been having sex in the backroom on and off for the past two and a half decades. Early in his marriages, he tells me we’re through, and I pretend to be crushed. I wish him well. Then, about a year in, he’ll come to work looking worried, and I hold his hand and take him out for a drink, and

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he pouts about how his wife doesn't respect or understand him. Or both. He gets drunk while I sip on lemonade.

"There, there," I tell him. Then I take him back to the bookstore, lead him by the hand into the backroom, and let him take me. He cries all over my back, and slobbers snot on me, and so on. He tells me how I'm the only one who understands him. And he wonders aloud why we don't get hitched.

Yeah. It's a mystery.

I wish I could say, "I need a drink." I envy him that, the way Red says it with such conviction, with such need in his voice. I want to need something that much. I want to be powerless before such a need. But it is not in me to want or need. Not even the Throbbing Thrillhammer holds much sway over me.

In five or ten years, my reproductive system will shut down, and I will not have had a kid. And I don't care. I wish that clock would tick, and loudly, too. But it does not.

The last of the customers clear out and I lock the door behind them. I spin the sign hanging from the window. Back in five minutes.

I walk back to where Red is sorting the books, pretending that he didn't see me shut the place down. I walk up behind him and grasp his shoulders and coo in his ear. He stands up and turns me around. He shakes with want, with need. I can feel the want and need in his body as he pushes me over the stacks of

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books and tears down my panties and hammers into me and gasps and wheezes all phlegmy in my ear.

In front of my face, as I'm sprawled out over the piles of books, is Clive Cussler's *Raise the Titanic*. I think, momentarily, about flipping it open and reading a few pages, but decide against it.

I can wait.

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## **About the author**

John Sheppard wrote *Tales of the Peacetime Army* and *Small Town Punk*. He lives near Chicago.