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# Old Ghosts

*Nik Korpon*

***(BrownpaperpublishinG)***

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'It's a trap.'

*-Ancient Mon Calamari proverb*



OLD  
GHOSTS

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# ACT ONE

## I

Just before we finished the crown-molding, Will Watkins cut off his finger with the miter saw. He jumped back and screamed like an attacking eagle, and swung his arm all around. Blood mixed with sawdust and metal chips, turned the floor into a Jackson Pollock painting. Because he was hemophobic, Hank scuttled away from the scene and dropped the circular saw he was using, which sent the blade chewing across the wood, which scared the shit out of Paddy the Foreman, who proceeded to knock over the 20-lb sledge and send that through an adjoining wall, taking out half the wiring in the adjacent room with the home theatre system. One of the day laborers tried to shove the finger back into its place, setting off a chain reaction of vomiting. I watched in abject disbelief as one fucking finger set us back more than six days.

I knew I shouldn't have gotten out of bed.

With a tee-shirt turning red around his hand, Watkins shuffled into the truck and one of the plumbers took off for Hopkins hospital. I just sat there, shaking my head, sipping from the cracked thermos of iced tea Amy packed. I imagined us reading in bed this morning, her long blonde hair spilling over the pillow like liquid sunshine. My watch said it was four-thirty, so I guessed she was already halfway through her yoga class. I could've been lying on the floor of her studio, watching her stretch and contort, listening to her instruct the haus-fraus with a voice like wind through tall grass, watching the sinew and muscle striate. Instead, I was sitting on rebar, sipping tepid tea and drawing shapes in the coagulated-blood-and-wood paste with the tip of my boot. Paddy's feet came into my line of view. I looked up. He pursed his lips and shook his head, and I couldn't help but laugh.

'Beer, Picasso?' he said. He always said the ahs like ass, thinking it was funny.

I nodded once. 'Beer.'

\* \* \* \* \*

The November sun tried to warm us, but the clouds choked it to little more than a pallid orb. Leaves crunched under our feet. At the crosswalk, I scraped my boot against the curb to remove the glass of a crushed vial. The Baltimore wind licked at our exposed necks. Ash hung in the air, yard waste or a rowhome burning somewhere close. Amy said she'd meet us after her class, and I thought it'd be a beautiful evening to walk home.

Paddy lit a Marlboro. 'Kind of funny when you think about it.'

‘How so?’

‘I mean, we was worrying because we only got one more job. Now we got this one for another two weeks.’

‘They going to pay for another two weeks, especially if it’s because we screwed up?’

He smirked. ‘I got ways.’

Clapping my hand on his shoulder, I said, ‘Paddy, I’ve never doubted the revisionist tendencies of your bean counters.’

‘Damn right.’ He opened the door to Santo Sangre. Smoke smacked us in the face like a steel wool glove. The mariachi horns wove through the air. ‘Hey, first round’s on me.’

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We were halfway through our beer when he told me about the contract.

‘Some hotshot—I dunno—lawyer or some shit. Lots of Yankee dough. Bought one those fixers by the Park and wants us to remodel it.’

I shrugged, looked over his shoulder for Amy. A wrinkled couple played touch-screen poker on the machine at the end of the bar, silver streaks in their shadow-black hair. A stack of quarters sat next to their overflowing ashtray. Without looking, the man reached for a coin, touched her wrist for a gentle second, then resumed his game.

‘Was gonna have Watkins watch over it while I finished up the fingertrap house, but seeing as how he’s outta commission, I’ll do it for now. But I want you to plan the job.’

‘Sure. Whatever.’

‘Guy says he wants it aesthetically pleasing. You being the art fag, figure you’re the one for him.’

He tipped his mesh hat to the back of his head, scratched at his scalp. Bits of dirt and sawdust fell like dirty snow. Thumbing a Marlboro to the top of the crushed pack, he put it between his teeth and struck a match. I took the matchbook from him; Stay Gold, with a pawnbroker symbol. Come in and pawn when the welfare is gone, it read. Everyone’s so damn cynical.

‘Something not right bout them two, though.’

‘What two?’ The door opened, Amy entering on a gust of wind. She scanned the bar for us, ponytail swinging.

‘The hotshot and his wife. Like—’ he snapped his fingers in the air ‘—what’s that movie with the bastard and the chainsaw?’

I waved my hand to get her attention. I thought it was a good sign that, after eighteen months of being together, her smile still turned my knees to water. Paddy’d told me that the honeymoon ends two weeks after you put the golden shackle around each other’s finger, but we’d been married over a year and still said I love you each time we parted company.

‘Texas Chainsaw Massacre,’ I said to him as an afterthought.

She came over to where we sat. Cotton jacket zipped to her throat, cheeks still flushed from class. Her yoga pants halted just below her knee, a small line where she’d cut herself shaving.

‘Hi, baby,’ she said with a kiss. Her sweat could be bottled as an essential oil.

‘Hey, girl.’ Paddy raised his hands over his head, made the Walk Like an Egyptian motion. ‘I might could learn you something.’

She just smiled. 'Hey, Paddy.'

'What would you like to drink?' I stood and motioned for her to sit.

She plopped down with a sigh. 'Just a water.'

I waved to Consuela the bartender, pointed at mine and Paddy's glasses then asked for *agua con limon*. A few months ago, after we finished a total rehab in under a week, Paddy told all the guys on the job that he'd get them drunk, to show his appreciation for our hard work. The brother of one of the day laborers owned a bar, so we took our business to him, and we've been drinking here ever since.

Hand squeezing Amy's thigh, I said, 'Class okay?'

'It was great. Picked up something for you.' She nodded at my now-empty glass. 'How many is that?'

I put up a finger. Consuela set down our round. I put up another finger.

'Just be careful.' She nodded at my crotch. 'We need that later.'

I opened my mouth to ask if she was ovulating already when Paddy belched, slammed his glass on the bar and announced that there was a fire somewhere he had to put out with his pink fire hose. He kicked the stool away and stomped to the bathroom. A pack of men walked through the front door, lined up on stools. Their flannels smelled of concrete and sawdust.

I lit one of the pawn shop matches, watched the flame until it touched my fingers, then blew it out. 'What'd you want to do tonight?'

She shrugged. 'Make dinner, smoke a joint and watch *Amelie*?'

I tipped back half of my drink, wiped my mouth and extended my arm.

‘Shall we, then?’

She curtsied, wrapped her arm in mine, and as I stepped through the door, someone collided with me, almost at a jogging pace. I stumbled into Amy. The man caught himself with the door. Ashen wool hat, styled like a newsboy from the 40s. A thin mustache crawling across his upper lip. Eyes uneven, as if one was perpetually squinting. He tipped his hat to me. My skin turned gooseflesh, like walking through a pocket of cold air. He spun and disappeared around the corner, the incident so quick I wasn’t positive that he wasn’t a ghost.

‘What a dick,’ Amy said. ‘He didn’t even apologize.’

I adjusted my jacket, brushed away dust.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah.’ I swallowed a hint of bile, my skin still tingling with phantom residue. ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’

\* \* \* \* \*

She lay naked on her back, bent at the waist, right knee kissing her nose, left leg extended. Closed eyes and measured breathing. Every thirty seconds, she alternated legs. Theory held that the sperm would exert less energy traveling to her baby center and thereby have more energy to make said baby. I told her that idea seemed too familiar, so Hollywood that it couldn’t be true, but it hadn’t dissuaded her. She also tried douching with soda water before sex, using egg whites as lubrication and drinking six or seven cups of green tea daily, so my advice usually drifted away like smoke. I alternated between hoping the pot had lowered my sperm count or that I was sterile—so she wouldn’t have to carry any of the childless guilt—and imagining her uterus as a frozen tundra, so there’d be one less thing I did wrong.

I pressed on my eyes, watching the rainbow circles swirl on my flesh while she counted to thirty. Four or twenty-two minutes crept by. I lit the roach, took a few drags and offered it to her.

She exhaled, ‘Once I’m done.’

The one time I insinuated that there could be negative effects to her smoking weed, she cited numerous ancient civilizations who were built upon the same practices, then dismissed it as completely natural with such reserved ferocity that I decided never to bring it up again. I didn’t necessarily agree, but my own reasoning was generally far from sound. In any case, her hippie-dippie theories made her all the more endearing.

Balancing the joint on a book on my night table, I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Water beat down on my body, temperature fluctuating when other people in the building flushed their toilets. Ash and dirt and concrete dust turned the water at my feet into a thin mud. I stayed in until the water was a torrent of white-hot needles and my skin glowed bright red. The scar stayed the same, though, like a mangled prune, a wormhole through my stomach.

Two years ago— before I met Amy, before I came to Baltimore, before I fled Boston—I’d been drinking my way around a party in Kenmore. Bald men in tuxes crowded around the baseball game on the television in the kitchen, spilling cask-aged scotch over the marble floor when the Sox got a hit. I remembered thinking the scene was profound in some ridiculous way: no matter which strata of society made up the gathering, whether business men or drug dealers or college students, the party always ended up in the kitchen. In this case, it was all three. I was working

as a sort of organizer for Chance Miller. It was a natural transition, as I'd been organizing and cleaning up things for Chance in some fashion since we were old enough to cheer for the Red Sox. His younger sister, Delilah, had just given me the most exquisite blowjob in the bathroom and my body, unable to reassemble itself, left me sprawled on the leather couch, watching how the velvet curtains would swish whenever someone brushed past them. I wanted to rub my face on them.

A few men were deep in conversation, sitting in the chairs surrounding the couch. They used deliberately vague pseudo-business terms like product, assets, distribution chain and acceptable loss, but the gold piled on their necks said they'd never read shit about Milton Friedman and free-market theory. Chance drifted through the party, injecting comments into various conversations. One of his eyes was smaller than the other; he passed it off as being perpetually in thought, but I knew his mother had actually dropped him in the basement as a newborn. Though twenty years younger than most of the men, he'd as easily shake their hand to confirm a shipment's price as break their forearm with a hammer. Maybe I wanted to assert my position in the room, to infer that our status was equal. Maybe my brain was drifting somewhere in a post-ejaculation haze, or maybe I was just drunk and stupid. Whatever the reason, I said something—to this day, I still don't remember what it was—and apparently dropped Chance's name in the wrong company.

Ten minutes later, standing in the hallway, lighting a cigarette because Chance wouldn't allow smoking inside his apartment, watching the passersby eleven stories below us from a vented window, one of the guys Chance called his security division passed by me. I nodded to him,

because I couldn't remember his name. We'd worked together before, visiting some kid at BC who'd liberated one of Chance's couriers of his shipment using a rusted piece of metal and an acetylene torch. While working construction six months later, my stomach turned sour on realizing how similar the damp crack of plasterboard sounded to shattering the kid's ribs. When the security guy passed me in the hallway that evening, I averted my eyes, following a crack in the wall that snaked behind crown molding, then caught a flash of metallic light at his side and electric fire bursting through my stomach. A stain like oil spread across my white shirt. My hands were sticky with blood. He continued walking down the hallway as if nothing had happened, the knife already sheathed.

I left Boston the next day, holding a duffel bag and a gut crisscrossed with handmade sutures.

As the shower fell silent, I could hear Amy counting twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and thirty through the door. I wrapped a towel around my waist and lay next to her on the bed. Her hair was piled on her head like an abstract sculpture.

'I got you a present,' she said.

I pressed my hand to her stomach. 'I thought it was two-to-four weeks before you'd know.'

She smacked my shoulder and called me an asshole. She grabbed a tin the size of my palm from her yoga bag and took off the lid.

'I got this from one of the ladies in my class.' It smelled of pine trees and burning insulation.

'Very pungent.'

She scooped some out with her fingers and pushed me onto my back. 'It's supposed to break down scar tissue. I thought you'd like it.'

‘Thank you,’ I said. The salve felt like frozen Vaseline with bits of sand and glass.

‘You’re pretty lucky, you know. A lot of people end up worse.’ She spoke slowly, words seeping out as she concentrated on covering the area.

‘What do you mean?’

‘This is pretty clean. If there was a jagged edge, it could’ve torn you up pretty badly. You didn’t get tetanus or some other crazy infection. Who knows?’ She rubbed in the last bit with a quick pat and looked up. ‘You got off lucky. Rebar can be some nasty shit.’

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun slashed through the gaps between buildings. It reflected in serrated prisms off oil-slick puddles. It tinged leaves a lurid color, as if about to be set aflame. It turned the dark windows of apartments into mouths of a bottomless void.

The guy had done his research. The house’s brick exterior showed only slight cracks, no evidence of a sinking foundation. I guessed sixteen-foot ceilings in the first floor, probably a vaulted-cathedral atrium inside the door. Judging by the width of the block, I figured they had four rooms on the second floor with the possibility of putting another in the basement and still having a lounge area. It was the kind of house Amy and I would pause in front of when we went for walks, cupping palms to our foreheads as we peered into the houses. We’d plan out how to redo the rooms, which walls to knock down, which colors to keep.

Paddy’s truck sat on the curb. Next to it, a Jaguar. Opalescent blue, the infinite sea at sunset. Seats made

from the flesh of a dozen baby cows. Chrome rims with a reflection that made me think of snarling. Voices echoed inside the house. I helped myself to some coffee from Paddy's thermos and went inside.

'Hello?'

Footsteps in the dust tracked up the stairs. Above me, wisps of cobweb hung from the chandelier like ghostly Spanish moss. One of the dining room walls featured a gaping hole that might've been a thrown chair. Sixteen-foot ceilings, like I'd thought. From the second floor trickled voices.

None of the stairs creaked. Solid construction: this job might've been easier than Paddy thought. The top of the stairwell overlooked the entranceway. Looking at the long chain suspending the chandelier, I almost got vertigo. Dark wood and dust motes.

Five doors in the hallway. Four rooms and a bathroom, and all of them closed except the one at the far end. Paddy laughed and I heard a dull smack. I pictured him clapping the shoulder of this yuppie, already yukking it up so the guy wouldn't notice Paddy's hand on his wallet. Half-recessed brass light fixtures lined the walls. They'd be beautiful once they were polished. Faded mauve paint made the hall feel like a necrotic birth canal. I sipped my coffee and it tasted of smoke.

'I think this was a good decision,' the voice said.

Paddy laughed. 'You ain't never find a place like this, sir, not round here. Just you wait til we get her done and you won't even recognize her.'

The man stood by the window, looking over the neighborhood like a hawk in its nest. Slicked hair hugged the back of his skull, so black he might've used oil for pomade. One ear slightly smaller than the other. The

phantom familiarity wrapped tight around my neck as I cataloged his features. Paddy checked his watch. I cleared my throat and startled him.

‘There he is.’ He rushed over to me. ‘We been waiting for you to start going over some plans.’

‘Sorry I’m late.’ I set the coffee cup on the floor and swore I saw concentric circles. A thousand bugs gnawed on my fingertips.

‘I’ll introduce you two.’ He grabbed my elbow and pulled me towards the man. ‘This here is Cole. He’ll be designing the house for you.’

The man spun on his heels. Black, oiled leather shoes. The tips of a white collar-shirt peeked from under his olive green peacoat. A thin mustache crawled across his upper lip. One eye squinted. Ghosts wailed inside my skull: I should’ve fucking known. A galaxy far, far away from lying in a hallway nursing a stab wound, the lipstick of a sociopath ringing the base of my cock, and still I hadn’t gotten far enough away.

‘Cole, this here is Mr. Miller. You’re going to be designing his house for him.’ Paddy nudged me forward to shake hands.

‘Nice to meet you, Mr. Miller.’ I extended my hand; his was sharkskin.

‘The pleasure is all mine.’ He smiled like a wolf slinking away from a henhouse, covered in blood. ‘And please, Cole, call me Chance.’

## II

We trailed Chance through the hallway and down to the kitchen, a two-headed snake following the charmer's horn. His shoes clicked on the wood floor like cartilage snapping. He wanted to tour the house, to see what I had in mind.

Paddy nudged my elbow, whispered, 'You okay?'

'Fine.'

'Don't look fine. Look like you just lifted up a skirt and found some balls.'

'I'm just hungover.'

The sun bled through the exposed window over the sink. Bars of light caught dust motes, swirling like we were standing in a Billy Wilder movie. I examined the pattern of splattered cement on my boots.

'So, Cole.' Chance stood in the middle of the floor, arms extended Christ-like. His suit looked cut from fresh cloth, but crescent moons of dirt darkened his fingernails. Wrinkles like cracked leather around his eyes. Two brown lines on his neck where he cut himself shaving. The past two years had passed like sand over his crystalline sense of propriety. 'Please enlighten me.'

I surveyed the kitchen, walls a muddy shade of human heart, moving to different angles to see how the color of the adjacent rooms changed the hue. Amy would've said to keep the dining room the same, because green meant energy and if you painted it red that would stimulate your appetite and you'd end up looking like a walrus. It nauseated me, though, the way it contrasted the kitchen. I would've painted it a sterile white, then she'd argue with me, saying the kitchen shouldn't look like a surgeon's auditorium.

Chance clucked his tongue. 'So, Cole?'

'Speak up, son. Man's asking you something,' Paddy shifted his weight from foot to foot.

'Don't touch the dining room, it's fine. Paint the kitchen walls white to brighten the room and replace these cabinets.' So easily, we fall into old routines.

'What's wrong with them?' Chance said.

I sidestepped to my right, yanked the door off an open cabinet. A splinter tore my fingertip. 'Replace the cabinets.' So quickly, we regress.

A smile crept across his face. 'What would you suggest?'

'Rosewood.' Yet so fucking stupid, we never learn.

'And the appliances?'

I sucked at my fingertip. 'They'll work, but stainless steel would look better.'

He pulled a silver case from inside his jacket and lit a cigarette. The smoke smelled of acrid perfume. 'Rosewood and steel. Rosewood being cultivated and used by numerous Amazonian tribes during religious ceremonies, juxtaposed with the sterility of Western-man-made steel. Beauty and death. The yin and the yang. Both sides of the Force.' He twisted the tip of his mustache. Paddy looked around the room, utterly bewildered.

‘Yeah, something like that.’

‘I always thought those theories were bullshit.’

I shrugged, drew an arc in the dust with the toe of my boot and flicked a glob of blood on the floor. ‘I liked mind-expanders when I was in Art School.’

Chance smiled, opened his mouth as if about to speak, then spun and disappeared into the next room, heel-clicks fading.

Paddy smacked my arm. ‘What the shit was that?’

‘Dunno.’ I wiped my nose on the inside of my shirt. Pine trees and burning insulation. The scent of Amy’s salve clung to my chest like a hazy memory.

‘Say, Cole.’ Chance’s voice echoed. ‘Let’s save the basement for tomorrow.’

Paddy answered for me. ‘That sounds great, Mr. Miller. We’ll have some plans drawn up for you right quick.’

‘Care to join me for a cup of coffee?’

‘Why sure,’ Paddy said. ‘Sounds great.’

‘Not you.’ Chance came around the corner and pointed at me. ‘Let’s take a ride.’

\* \* \* \* \*

‘What the fuck is on your face?’ I had the urge to yank out his mustache by the tips.

Chance slid his Jag in front of a city bus, cutting it off by inches. The bus bellowed like wounded cow.

‘It took a while to grow.’ He drove with one hand on the mahogany wheel, the other primping his mustache. ‘It’s very Orson Welles, don’t you think?’

I stifled a yawn. ‘You look like Rollie Fingers if he was a pederast.’

My stomach caved in, fire in the shape of a fist spreading

through my chest. I gasped for breath. I never saw his hand move, before or after he buried it in my gut.

‘We grow up a windy piss away from Fenway and you’re going to talk about that Oakland asshole?’ He shook his head, tsk tsk tsk, and curled his mustache. ‘Anyway, of all people, I thought you would appreciate the perks of a revisionist personality. You seem quite adept.’

Air filled my chest like water through sand. I squeezed the skinned-calf seat until my breath was more than a gasp. If I had that fucker’s hand, I wouldn’t need a hammer ever again.

The dashboard panels could’ve been pilfered from a space shuttle. The trim that hugged the doors, made from ancient trees. The locks, from some animal that had probably been poached. Potholes littered the asphalt like trackmarks on the city’s veins, but the Jag floated over them as if it was the carpet from the Arabian Nights movie we’d watched a thousand times in his parents’ basement.

We stopped at a red light. A rap on the window. Next to us, a man rattled a cup of change. One leg hung gnarled. The other used a chunk of wood for prosthesis, a rusted nail jutting from what would’ve been his calf. Simultaneously, we waved our hands, said these are not the droids you want. A thread of nostalgia, maybe nausea, snaked through me. Chance pulled through the red light.

‘Turn right,’ I said, pointing towards the Royal Farms. Their coffee wasn’t great, but I assumed he’d suffer through it. People around the neighborhood liked it, but convenience store coffee is convenience store coffee, and if I called the place The Farm Store like Baltimoreans, I’d never hear the end of it from Chance. ‘So really, Chance, why are you here?’

He smirked, tapped the steering wheel to the beat of a

Madonna song on the radio. Black dots tattooed just below the knuckle of each thumb, like rolling a five with dice.

‘Don’t you Southerners believe in Dunkin Donuts? Christ, I’ve only seen two since I’ve been here.’

‘I wouldn’t call Baltimore southern.’

‘Well, look who became Dixie-fried all the sudden.’

‘I’m not Dixie.’

‘Housing,’ he said, guiding the car into the parking lot.

‘What?’

‘The market in Baltimore. I came down here to buy every house and turn the city into full-scale replica of Endor for us.’

I muttered Jesus Christ and slid out of the car, the door whispering closed. Saltwater in the air. Gasoline vapors and sewage run-off. The harbor shimmered, green in the mid-morning sun.

‘Remember the Ewok village the three of us tried to build in your backyard? And your dad tore it down because we’d taken all the fire wood.’ Chance opened the door, gestured for me to enter first. Floor wax and grease, sausage. Dusty flannels and sawdust. The fluorescent lights flickered, buzzed.

‘You know, I never really forgave him for that.’ I handed him a paper coffee cup. ‘Though it wasn’t as bad as your mom and that ounce.’

‘From the Jamaican guy by the Square? That she flushed?’ He whistled as if impressed, poured coffee for the two of us.

I breathed a laugh. ‘I think that was the first time I saw you cry. Or, only time, actually.’

‘Fuck yeah, I cried.’ He shook his head when I tried to pour cream in his, said he took it black now. ‘You

remember the size of those crystals? God, I could've still been high today.'

'I thought you'd kill her.'

'Should have.'

The cashier wedged the phone between his ear and shoulder. Bleach blond hair with skin like aged caulk and Mongol eyes. Pulling a few bills from his pocket to pay for the coffee, Chance squinted at some invisible point in the air. I said thanks but he wasn't listening. Steam rose from my cup. When the cashier gave our change, Chance just stood there, hand extended. The cashier looked at him. Chance said something guttural, motioned with his thumb. The cashier's eyes twitched and he hung up the phone without speaking. He recounted the coins, laid a nickel and two pennies in his palm, clasped his hand and gave a slight bow. Chance nodded, said *do svidaniya* and left.

I leaned against the car, sipping coffee. 'Was that Russian?'

He smiled, pleased. 'The Force is strong with this one.'

'Since when the fuck do you speak Russian? And get your hands tattooed?'

The horn bleated and startled me. 'Sorry, wrong button,' he said, and opened the car.

We drove down Eastern Avenue, heading into the sun. Every ten seconds, he'd change the radio station, finally settling on a Public Radio news show. Reports of tragedy and warfare from anonymous foreign lands filled the car. He flipped it to the salsa station.

An awkward blanket fell over the car and for a moment, I thought he'd spiked my drink. Warmth settled in my body. The same houses and buildings I'd walked past a hundred times were oddly unique. My brain wasn't racing in a thousand directions and I found myself falling into a

contented trance. Like the first few months with Amy, but not. Like waking up and seeing her face, but not. Like eating at our favorite Thai diner we'd heard had closed, but not. A faint ticking, a ghost scratching its fingernails on the back of my skull. I glanced over at Chance. Uneven ears and squinting eyes webbed with crow's feet. Thin white thread of a scar starting at his temple then disappearing into thinning hair. He stared out the front window, head resting on a fist, the other hand on the wheel. I wondered what was playing on the movie screen inside his skull, if he was thinking about the last time we saw each other—me lying on the ground, a sliver of his face between the apartment door and its frame, the shimmer I told myself was a tear—or if he was just thinking how nice it was that the sun was shining. Maybe I was just superimposing my own thoughts, and he wasn't looking for anything, just looking.

'So when did you get married?' I said.

He laughed. 'Cole, you know I have no use for that.'

'Paddy said something about you and your wife.'

He turned the wrong way on a one-way street. A dog with fur like a stained mop ran between cars.

'Chance,' I said, pointing behind us. 'The house is back there.'

Mnhh, he said, lips forming a smile like a maggot molting into a fly.

Something not right bout them two.

'Where the hell are you going?' A woman lay sprawled on her front porch, one sleeve rolled above her elbow.

Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Hotshot and his wife.

He licked the edge of his teeth. 'I need to make a quick stop.'

I yanked on the seat belt, clenched my fists so nails dug

into my flesh. 'I'm out of the business, Chance. I've got a family. I'm done.'

'Breathe into a paper bag or something. It'll only take a second.'

Turn the city into Endor. For us. Us.

'Shut the fuck up,' I said. Goosebumps seized my body as he pulled the car over. I ground my palms into my eyes.

The back door opened. A thousand nails scraping glass reverberated through my chest.

'How goes it, sister?'

'Everything is good.' A voice like mercury in the palm of my hand.

'Everything is cut and ready to be disposed of?' Vague terms, old habits.

'Like a coat-hanger abortion.' And her sense of humor hadn't changed a bit.

I bit my tongue until copper coated my mouth. I imagined her lipstick in my crotch.

'Cole,' she said. 'You never returned my calls.'

'Long time, Delilah.' I opened my eyes. 'Long time.'

### III

Delilah sat in the backseat, twirling her hair around her finger while Chance whistled along with the radio. The last time we were together, I saw only the top of her head, then a flash of white as the knife entered my stomach, then the Baltimore skyline. Her aura was putting on a favorite shirt that had been borrowed by someone twenty pounds heavier. Familiar and comfortable, yet unsettling. Her perfume filled the car, like wind-blown jasmine and a struck match. Her mouth could make a man sterile. She pursed her lips in an air-kiss and I realized I'd been staring at her in the mirror.

'Cole,' she cooed, 'can you light me a cigarette?'

I told her that I'd quit, but patted my pockets anyway, knowing they were empty.

'Since when?'

'When I met Amy.'

Del clucked like a mad chicken, then burst into a giggling fit.

'Shut up, you cow,' Chance said. He tossed his case and a lighter into the backseat. 'Now, when are we due?'

‘Three weeks,’ she said in a cloud of smoke.

‘That’s unacceptable,’ he said. I opened my mouth out of habit, to mediate their argument before someone threw a chair, then snapped it shut.

‘That’s life.’ She handed the case and lighter to me. ‘We’ll meet in two to discuss final arrangements.’

I wiped my forehead. My hand shone in the sun, covered in sweat. The scent of burning insulation and pine trees smothered me. ‘I can’t do this. I need to go. I need to get out of the car.’

Chance laid a reassuring hand on my thigh while Delilah just cackled.

‘No, really,’ I said. ‘Stop and let me out.’

‘You know, Cole, you keep saying that, yet you follow me like a lost little duckling.’

‘I need to get back to the job.’

Chance squeezed my leg. ‘Where did you think we were going?’

‘I’d like to see it,’ Delilah said. ‘Is it going to be ready in time?’

‘That’s a great question.’ He looked at me, smiling. ‘Will you be ready, Cole?’

I tucked my hands between my legs, trying to conceal their trembling. A woman pushed a baby stroller down the street, trailed by one child holding a baseball bat, another skipping rope. Looking out the window as if bored, I saw Amy’s hair cascading from the fur-trimmed hood like a blonde waterfall, her whistle on the woman’s tongue.

Breath, warm on my neck. Delilah’s voice next to me. ‘Remember when I tied you up with that jump rope?’

‘Yes,’ I said. Arctic fingers compressed my spine and a warm, familiar sensation spread through my thighs. Anticipation. ‘Yes, the house will be ready.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Now where can we get a burger around here?’

‘I thought we were going back to the job!’

Something hit me on the back of the head. An orange plastic bottle with a prescription label fell into my lap.

‘Take a few. Jesus,’ Del said. ‘You know, Cole, you used to be a lot more fun.’

Chance decided to bestow his mercy upon me and we pulled up to the site five minutes later. I hurried away from the car as quickly as I could while remaining inconspicuous, following the echo of Paddy’s voice like a dolphin finding a safe cove. He stood beneath a light fixture in the kitchen, trying to explain how to rewire it to one of the day laborers.

‘You’d think red, green and yellow would translate worldwide.’ He coughed, spit on the floor and covered it with his boot.

‘Rojo, verde and amarillo.’

‘Huh?’

‘That’s how you say red, green and yellow in Spanish.’

He considered me with a long glare then invited me to give myself an enema with the nozzle beside the kitchen sink. ‘How was your coffee date?’

‘It wasn’t a date.’

From down the hallway, I heard Delilah’s laugh. I debated whether to slink away to the basement and wait until they were gone or jump through the plate-glass back door and sprint home to Amy. Instead, I stood and waited. As if I would’ve done anything else.

‘Mrs. Miller, nice to see you again.’ Paddy rushed forward and shook her hand, kissed her knuckles. ‘I was just about to walk through the plans with Cole here. Reckon you’d like to join us?’

‘That would be positively lovely.’ She wrapped her fingers between Chance’s and we followed them upstairs, Paddy pointing out which doors to replace, which walls to knock down and which fixtures to keep. Picking out which wires to wrap around her neck until threads of veins filled her eyes. I floated in and out of the conversation.

In the last room upstairs, Paddy and Chance were drawing theoretical blueprints in the air, their backs towards us. Delilah drifted around the room, cupping my crotch when she passed. I was less than pleased to realize I had a massive erection. Chance said something about for the kids.

‘Yes, darling,’ she said. ‘This would be the perfect room for the kids to play.’ She stood behind him and gave a quick kiss on the neck. Paddy blushed. I wanted to bite off her lips.

We made our way through the rest of the house, Chance and Paddy breaking off to discuss some alterations, Delilah wrapping extension cords around her wrists and grinding her pelvis against my leg.

Twice I saw Chance smile and wondered if he was watching in the window reflection. She’d pull away just as Chance turned around and asked my opinion of Paddy’s plans. I’d give the answer that Amy would approve of, invoking her presence as the single light in this lurid scene.

Eventually, they were called away for other business—to lead a bondage ceremony or roast children over a trashcan fire or file their taxes: each was just as likely as the next—and left the house to Paddy and me. While he argued with a distributor on the phone, I worked upstairs, repeatedly sinking a 20-pound sledge into a wall, watching the asbestos and drywall burst in the air and drift down like carcinogen snowflakes. This room would be a nursery.

Without closing my eyes, I could see cartoon jungle creatures parading around the chair-rail, the stuffed animal mobile hanging over a bamboo crib, the blanket Amy's grandmother crocheted for her as an infant lying over our child. I could smell baby oil, cotton diapers, the warm musk of innocent child. I could hear Amy's whisper-singing, tiny breathing.

I tore apart the last part of the wall, wiped the paste from my face and headed home before Chance or Delilah could make a surprise return visit.

\*\*\*\*\*

Assholedickwhore echoed in the bathroom as I walked through the front door of our apartment.

'Everything copacetic in there?'

'Out in a second.' She could be singing a French lullaby or uttering something that would make Joe Pesci blush, yet her voice was always as soothing as an ocean breeze. I threw my shirt across the room and fell onto the bed, pressing against my eyelids until I saw circus shapes. They swirled and twisted and bled into an oblong splotch that resembled Del's head after being hit with a hammer.

'Hey, you,' Amy said. My hair stood on end.

'Thank God.' I wrapped my arm around her neck and pulled her onto me. 'You smell good.'

She nestled her face into my chest; her breath made my hair flutter. 'You stink,' she whispered.

'What was all the commotion about?'

'Stupid toilet.' Her voice reverberated inside me. 'You know how it wobbles when you sit, and I've been saying we're going to end up in the middle of the apartment downstairs?'

‘But you’re not downstairs.’ That got me a pinched nipple.

‘We will be soon. Stupid thing broke through part of the floor.’

‘Shit.’

‘I was.’ She bit her lip at her own pun.

‘You are one sick bird.’

I draped her hair over my face, inhaled and let her fill my lungs. Feeling her body rise and fall, I patterned my breathing after hers, like ouroboros, unending. As the haze of sleep began to drift over us, she looked up, smoothed my eyebrows with her fingertips.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah.’ Her hand was a feather over my cheek, brushing the debris of the day, of Boston, down to the floor to be buried by dead skin and fiberglass dust.

‘Just asking. You don’t seem okay.’

Chance and Delilah flashed on the back of my skull, mouths lurid and dripping.

‘Long day.’ I pressed my lips on her forehead. ‘I’m fine.’

Her pelvis pressed against my thigh, toes caressing my calves. She brushed hair from my forehead and put her lips next to my ear. ‘Today’s the day,’ she said.

‘What?’

She started to speak, caught her words, then blushed and whispered, ‘I’m ovulating.’

Before I could even get pissed off, I caught myself, realizing that it couldn’t have been any other way than this. Penance and retribution. All that Catholic nonsense Chance and Del’s parents used to go on about. The inevitability almost made me laugh.

‘Amy, sweetie, I—’ and her finger on my lips, her thighs straddling my hips, quieted me. She leaned down, said just

lay there and pulled her shirt over her head. Shadowed ribs. Her hips, pallid seashells. Neck extended like an alabaster giraffe. I closed my eyes and dissolved into the warmth of her.

After she came, after she did her alternating-knee sperm-magnet routine, after she curled against my body and softly snored into my neck, I laid on my back and stared at the watermark cracks in the ceiling. Faces and scenes and whispered exchanges crashed inside my skull. I saw Chance and Delilah, holding hands inside the home they were going to use as a stash-house while Paddy gave the grand tour. I saw the reverent look on the cashier's face in Royal Farms that afternoon. The fear, the respect. I saw Amy's smile, her golden hair swimming among the debris of Boston, the shards of an abandoned life. I saw myself lying in an alley with ice picks stabbed through my eyes.



## ACT TWO

### IV

The days passed, because that is what days do. Their ethereal genetic code is comprised of moments lost and savored and relived, but never held. Of instances and loss. Of kissing and cutting and shitting. The days buzzed past us like shrapnel-winged flies, slipping through our fingers as if covered with scales and casting us away, palms smeared with longing.

I used to fight against it. In Chance's college dorm room, I'd hold smoke in my lungs to the point of choking, absorbing and cataloging every detail: the nauseating weave of his carpet, the laminate grain of his desk, the gold-turning-green Orthodox cross he'd taken to wearing. As Delilah tried to consume my soul through my penis, I watched her hair tumble like chunks of slate, her hands

squeeze my flesh like a butcher; anything to prolong the sensation of teetering along orgasm's razor edge.

All of these scenes flashed on the back of my skull like some post-liberation concentration camp compilation video I couldn't scrape my eyes from, all while Amy breathed softly next to me on another of my sleepless mornings, her snores punctuating the rhythm like her subconscious was using Morse code, telling me to stay away from the light, don't step into the light. Crawl into the present, it said. Nestle yourself in the moment and sleep.

Her breathing, her breathing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chance once broke up with an artist's model because she refused to remove her shoes in his apartment. He pushed a fifteen year-old Delilah down the steps for ironing a crease into his jeans. He also punched me in the face for adding too much milk to the macaroni and cheese: we were stoned, he had the munchies, I became unmoored somewhere inside my skull. Though the last two years had tarnished his façade, his anal-retentive sense of design remained intact. As it stood, though, he was two reprimands from having his dental work ruined.

'This is all wrong. All wrong.' He flapped his hands like a flightless bird.

The crown-molding and floors upstairs were perfect, but the dining room glowed less mustard gas, more canary. The shade reminded Amy of the curry hut we'd go to during the winter. To me, it was watching the back of our eyelids while lying in Patterson Park on Sunday afternoons. At least Chance liked the kitchen. I worried that Paddy's head might otherwise explode.

We stood in the basement, scratching imaginary walls in the dirt, positioning chunks of concrete to stand in for ventilation ducts. I could feel the grit in the air between my teeth. My skin damp.

‘A dehumidifier would be of more use. You don’t need this many vents.’

‘The speakers draw in air, and if there aren’t enough vents, I’ll suffocate.’

‘How many speakers do you plan to have down here?’

He smiled and licked his teeth. ‘A lot.’

‘And this is the reason for all the locks?’ I motioned at five separate points.

He stood in the corner, smoothing his mustache and measuring distances with a glance while ignoring my question. Paddy kicked away an empty bottle, afraid to say anything. It tinkled like a handful of dropped teeth of a dealer who had diluted Chance’s package to make some extra cash on the side. Ball-peen hammers were never the same for me after that.

‘Okay.’ Chance unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them above his elbows. ‘This is all wrong. We need less space between the cellar walls and the drywall.’

‘Seriously, I’m going to cut off your balls if you change—’ Paddy’s watch your goddamned mouth cough stopped me short. Chance’s hand silenced us both, the just let me explain motion he used so well.

‘Remember soundproofing your room for drums?’ he said.

I nodded in Paddy’s direction. ‘We’re a legitimate company. We don’t need to use mattresses for insulation.’

‘Dead air,’ he said. His palm hit the wall with a damp smack. I could almost see ripples through the moisture. ‘Pre sound-foam, post getting-beat-for-using-you-dad’s-

mattress. Leave a foot of dead space between the walls.'

'Then you lose—' I looked around the room, trying to calculate some square-footage of space lost so that my answer would be authoritative and he'd finally shut the fuck up, '—a bunch of space.'

'So use some nouveau shit to make it look bigger.' He glanced at his watch.

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'That art shit you're into. All over Miami.'

'Art Deco?'

'Sure. The Jew art.'

'Doing Art Deco won't change any...' I raised my hands, palms out. 'Know what, never mind. I'll make it work.'

Paddy coughed; I jumped. I'd forgotten he was there.

'I need to be going,' Chance said. 'See me out?'

I started to follow him up the steps and Paddy grabbed my forearm. 'The fuck is going on, Cole? You started with Mr. Miller this and Mr. Miller that and now you sounding like a damn married couple.'

I shrugged, made some noncommittal grunt, twisted my arm from his. 'Dunno. It's weird.'

'Son, that ain't good enough.'

We stood for a breath, the air pregnant with wavering trust, the shimmering hope of confession, the tactile dampness of mold spores.

I coughed and spit on the concrete floor. 'I don't know what to tell you, Paddy.'

He exhaled hard through his nose.

I said, 'I gotta go.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, I was hunched in the basement corner leveling fresh concrete when Paddy bellowed down the stairwell.

‘Mr. Miller asked you to go meet his wife for him. Said he’s caught up at work.’

‘Now?’ With my finger, I drew a heart in the grey mess.

‘Twenty minutes ago.’

Mine and Amy’s initials. ‘I’m in the middle of something.’

‘Not no more.’

Outside, Paddy was trying to talk to one of the day laborers. All I could hear was *pendejo* and *jefe*, though I wasn’t sure of the relationship between them. I passed behind the truck, avoiding him, but he called my name before I could sneak away. He put his hands up, saying what the fuck? with a gesture. He quickened his pace and headed toward me, saying we need to talk, Cole. I lowered my head and kept walking.

Delilah kicked her heel against the brick wall of the café, cigarette dangling like a Marlboro ad. I opened the door and motioned for her to enter.

‘Already ate.’

‘Oh.’

‘Don’t worry. You didn’t miss much.’

‘Oh.’

We stood facing each other, the occasional passing car rattling the empty cans and takeout containers scattered over the street. I ran my tongue along the inside of my gums, rocked from heel to toe. In a parking lot next to us, a woman tossed chunks of bread to the gathering seagulls. Her coat looked to be little more than scraps of discarded carpet.

‘We’re not on a first date, Cole.’ She lit another

cigarette, offered me one. My hand twitched and I shook my head.

‘Never said we were.’

‘Then don’t act like it.’ The hunk of cut-glass on her ring dead-armed me when she punched my shoulder. Chance had taught her where to hit. She nodded her head, indicating to walk.

We stopped in a Polish deli because she wanted a pierogi. When I asked if she’d just eaten, she told me that she was an empowered female and she could eat and fuck whenever she wanted. The shrunken woman behind the counter coughed, her face the same color as the jar of pickled beets.

‘Anyway, I told you the food wasn’t any good.’

Grease made her hands shimmer. The wind caught her hair and tossed it as if it was a clutch of snakes. She cursed under her breath, tried to brush it away with the back of her wrist but only managed to smear oil on her face.

‘Jesus, you’re hopeless.’ I gathered her hair and held it for a second while she shoved the rest of the pierogi into her mouth. Touching her, my body swelled, too large for my skin. I pulled a napkin from her pocket and wiped her forehead clean.

‘My hero,’ she said.

‘More like your hospice worker.’

She dead-armed me again.

Another block passed in silence. I stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk. Our feet clicked in opposite rhythms, my left and her right, my right and her left. This was how she used to fuck, inhaling when I exhaled. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Her orgasms would be so intense that the only way to keep her head from twisting away, she’d scream at me to bite her lip until I tasted blood. She called it circular

fucking. Don't confuse it with circle jerks, though. That's Thursday night. I never knew if she was joking.

Her voice chirped, startled me. 'Come back, Cole.'

'I didn't go anywhere.'

She lit a cigarette to hide a smile. Offered me one again.

'I keep telling you I don't smoke.'

She only gave a shrug, as if she knew some secret and might tell me if I earned the privilege.

'Del,' I said.

Her hooded eyes flickered, circled their way around me, looking for a crack. 'Yeah?'

'Why are you here?'

'What did Chance tell you?'

'He wanted to turn Baltimore into Endor.'

'Still hasn't let that go, has he?' She took a long inhale, tipped her head back and blew tiny puffs into the air. 'He's a business man. The housing market down here—'

I grabbed her wrists, bones twisting beneath my fingers. Her face broadcasted shock but breath fell heavy from her nose, shuddering like when we used to make out. I could hear my teeth squeak as they ground against each other. The tang of saltwater and fumes in the air. She pressed her body against mine.

'I don't want any part of your fucking drugs.' I tasted the words, felt every angle and corner. 'Do. Not. Bring that shit. Around. My. Family.'

And somewhere in the remote crevices of my skull, where shadows were liquid and silverfish burrowed, where ghosts wailed and hope was forbidden, we were already crushed against the side of a building, ravaging each other's body.

'And what if we just missed you?'

My hands shook from some internal vibration. I

dropped her wrists, took a drag from her cigarette, and instantly wanted to vomit on her shoes. Instead, I turned and kept walking, her heels clicking behind me. I tried to swallow but my throat wouldn't work. I tried to disappear but my heart wouldn't stop. Amy rolled along my tongue.

Her body radiated heat next to mine. It made the air shimmer like the seconds before an explosion. Her hand brushed mine and, in my head, I pulled away. On the sidewalk, though, it brushed mine again. She laughed, voice undulating and unspooling down the street like a ribbon made of dried skin. I tried to ignore her, focus on the cadence of my footsteps, the frequency of the sidewalk cracks, but the laughing enveloped my head and I had to look up. She smiled and winked, then laid her hands on my chest and I tumbled into the street.

The car's hood coolly kissed the side of my face. If the streetsides hadn't been full, if the guy hadn't been prowling the neighborhoods looking for an empty space, if the car hadn't been creeping along I would've been a splatter mark for some work-release inmate to remove. I only bounced off the guy's fender and had an empty beer bottle thrown at me. Delilah merely smiled on the sidewalk, as if waiting for her prom date.

'What the fuck was that?' I could feel the vein throbbing in my neck but my voice sounded shrill.

She knitted her fingers together. 'I thought we just had a moment.'

'A moment? You fucking psychopath!'

Her face drooped, a puppy reprimanded for bringing in a dead bird as a gift. 'I wasn't being mean.'

'You pushed me into a fucking car!'

'Jesus, Cole. When did you become such a faggot?'

I opened my mouth, closed it. I bit my tongue, worried

that the grotesqueness of the whole scene would cause me to laugh and I'd never be able to stop.

'You don't have to be such a dick,' she said. 'I was just flirting with you.'

Fingers splayed, I shoved my hand an inch from her eyes. 'You see this. I am fucking married. I have a wife.'

She cinched my fingers between hers, pressed her face to mine. 'What if I cut off that finger?' Onion and potato rode on her breath, flecks of emerald in her eyes. 'Would you still have a wife? Would you fuck me then?'

'Jesus, Del.' I stepped back, shook my hand from hers. 'You are certifiable.'

'What the fuck ever.' A glob of spit landed on my boot. 'I need to take care of something.' She whirled around and stomped down the street. My blood was bleach and head echoed with a thousand hammers falling yet I still had to consciously tell myself not to watch her as she walked away. I stood in the middle of the sidewalk, as if marooned. After a minute, I fished coins from my pocket and went searching for a pay phone.

Amy picked up on the fifth ring, thankfully; I was terrified of the answering machine.

'Hello, beautiful.'

'What's up?'

'I just wanted to hear your voice.'

'Oh. Thanks.' Scratching in the background, though I wasn't completely sure it wasn't in my head.

'You okay?'

'Sure.'

'You don't sound okay.' I laid my forehead against the booth, feeling the halo of condensation form on the cold glass.

'Did you sign up for a mailing list or anything?'

‘Not that I know of.’

‘You sure?’ Her voice had a frozen edge I hadn’t heard before.

‘I think I’d remember.’ I pulled the receiver away from my ear when she exhaled. Across the street, a little boy sat alone on a park bench with half an orange in each hand, vainly trying to put them back together.

‘Well, I’ve gotten three calls about refinancing our house.’

‘What house?’

‘Exactly. I just...’ The ice began to disintegrate, crackle, icicles dripping down her cheeks. ‘I feel like the universe is taunting us, you know? I mean, first the toilet, then the sink leaking, and with the exercises not working and class enrollment down because nobody cares about yoga when the world is collapsing...’ Breathily sobs punctuated her over-reactions. I caressed the mouthpiece, hoping she might feel it.

‘It’ll be fine, honey. Don’t worry.’ I waited for the long shudder that meant the tears were drying. ‘How about I come home early and make us dinner and we can write down everything that’s bothering you so you don’t have to think about it anymore?’ I learned that trick from her; she was good. If only I’d learned it earlier.

Okay, eked from her lips.

‘I’ll see you in a little bit. I love you.’

‘I love you so much, Cole. So much.’

We said goodbye and hung up. The condensation halo had grown too large. A single drip cut through the middle of my face.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was convinced I was clairvoyant.

The whole walk back to the job, I counted my steps. To keep things ordered. To keep my brain occupied. I rounded the corner. Chance leaned against Paddy's truck, hat tipped back on his head, sipping coffee from a Dunkin Donuts cup. At least he'd finally found one. He spoke to a man whose back faced me. Over the man's shoulder, he caught a glimpse of me, leaned in and spoke quickly, then patted the man's shoulder. He hurried away, but I caught his profile. Pale, unhealthy skin. Like caulk.

Chance gave a broad smile as I approached, extended his arms to welcome me. On the lapel of his suit, a handprint filled with dust.

'Cole. How goes it?'

I took his cup and sipped from it, coughed after I swallowed the burn of whiskey. With squinted eyes, I said, 'A little early, isn't it?'

'It's already three-thirty. Baltimore's supposed to be a drinking town, right?' He laughed and cupped his arm around me, squeezed my shoulders.

Shit.

'What's wrong?' I said, more out of a Boston reflex than actually wanting to know.

He kicked a pebble, a shard of glass. In a window upstairs, I saw Paddy. Watching us. He cocked his head, inquisitive.

'Chance, I know you. Something isn't right.'

He took a long drink from his cup and pulled me forward. 'Actually, brother.'

## V

Faux-wood paneling clung to the walls of the diner; masonite tables, a variation on the theme Depression-era Oklahoma, and though I'd never set foot on the bare concrete floor the hushed vertigo of memory swirled around me. The sunlight died somewhere between the grease covering the windows and cigarette smoke replacing oxygen. Time had stolen half the letters on the menu board, but I gathered it didn't really matter anyway. Chance said coffee and extended two fingers. I resisted the urge to wipe the bench before I sat.

He knitted his fingers together, like kneeling on a pew, like his sister did, and rested his wrists on the table's edge. The top lay empty but for a bowl of sugar cubes. An ant crawled across the top. I listened to breath roll in and out of my mouth, to blood crashing inside my skull, hoping if I ignored the taste of rust filling my throat that whatever fucked up thing inevitably about to happen might be avoided. I swallowed.

‘Cole, I need your help.’

Fuck.

I lit one of his cigarettes, felt my lungs grow heavy as if I’d swallowed all of the air in the café. His lips rose in a smirk. ‘I don’t have much money, but I might be able to do a side job,’ I said.

He pulled his head away from me. ‘What?’

‘To make some money. So you can borrow it.’

‘Christ, I don’t need money.’ He adjusted the lapels of his jacket, flicking away a piece of sawdust. ‘Do I look like I need money from you?’

He held up a finger to be quiet. The waiter dropped two chipped porcelain cups on the table, set a pot of coffee next to them and said something to Chance. I couldn’t understand the exchange, though if it was because they mumbled or because they were speaking Russian, I didn’t know. Either way, my hand found its way to my hip for the phantom gun I’d never carried but felt like I should’ve had and how I ever thought this was a smart idea was beyond me. Chance barked something at the waiter and he stepped away. The interior of the café tilted, sliding into the abyss. Maybe it was just in my head.

‘Do I really look like I need money?’

‘No more than usual.’

The cigarette made everything shimmer along the edges but holding it between my fingers, staring across the table through slits of eye, dictating the terms to which business would be conducted gave me in equal parts the feeling of power and control and nausea. Cigarettes. Acidic coffee. Chance. Old habits died hard, dragging you with them.

‘Why would you say that?’ He looked genuinely offended.

‘Well, you said you needed help, and I’m broke, and

Amy's fully-functioning uterus isn't the reason we're childless at the moment, though I'll be fucked in the ear of you think I'll let you be a surrogate for us—'

'Cole—'

'And the only other reason you'd bring me to a diner that's obviously a cover is to make a proposition regarding dealing, a.k.a. the thing about which I've explicitly told you numerous times to go fuck yourself.' I sipped my coffee. It'd been sitting on the burner too long. 'I'm out and I'm done and I'm not going back. Is that clear enough?'

'We need someone that we can trust.' His expression was granite, as if I was a mannequin that had been discarded in his booth. The waiter wiped the main counter, staring at us from the top of his eyes.

'What the fuck did I just say?'

He moved his palms towards the table top, pushed lower your fucking voice through his teeth.

'Well what the fuck, Chance? You and your sister exchange notes on how to piss me off? You're like the Jedi mind-trick of assholes.'

'We needed someone that we could trust and you were the first person we thought of.'

'How many times have—'

'Calm down—'

'Just give me the courtesy of fucking off and leaving—'

Our voices, our threats, weaving together like some obscene heirloom tapestry passed from one generation of cannibals to the next. His fists on the table made coffee slosh out of our cups. Wiping the same spot on the counter, the waiter continued to stare at us.

'You—' his eyes becoming a web of scarlet threads, straining to keep his voice under control, '—You. Fucking. Owe me. Cole.'

‘I owe you?’ I think I actually snorted. ‘I owe you.’ I bit back a laugh before it touched my lips. Shaking my head, I lifted the bottom of my shirt, showed him the wormhole the knife left when it exited my stomach. ‘I think we’re square on that.’

He ran his fingers over his mustache and laid his hat on the table, smiling like a dueler who just heard the other gun click. ‘No, son. That was for using my name. That was just business. This whole situation? This is for the fallout.’ He snapped at the waiter, pointed towards one of the windows. The waiter didn’t avert his eyes. Chance placed his thumbs together, raised the tattoos to my eyes.

‘Get your hands out of my face before I break them.’ My voice came out as little more than a squeak.

‘You ever seen these?’

I sipped my coffee, shook my head.

‘You know that in prison, a guitar string and a Bic pen are a tattoo machine? That in prison, fresh piss is considered safe to sterilize with?’

I shrugged.

‘You know how many stitches it takes to sew an adult male’s asshole back to its normal size?’

I stared directly into his pupils, trying not to blink.

‘Too fucking many. Again, we need someone we can trust.’ He took a gulp of hot coffee and laid a hand on mine. ‘We need family.’

‘Family,’ I said, my stomach boiling, caustic bubbles creeping up my throat.

Guttural exclamations mixed with the echo of boots as the waiter stomped to our table, waving his index finger at Chance like he was directing traffic. Chance regarded him with little more than a blink but the waiter kept yelling. It sounded accusatory. Another man in the far corner

watched the scene deteriorate, shaking his head. He scratched his face with what looked like a steel claw.

The waiter towered over Chance, who uttered a few phrases between sips of coffee. The waiter leaned down to our level, yelling in Chance's face, slamming a pot of coffee on the table. I was shocked it didn't break. Chance ground his teeth together. He and Delilah always did that to calm themselves but it never really worked and this too would end poorly.

It happened before I saw it happen. The waiter thumped his hand on Chance's shoulder, finger wagging in his face. In one fluid motion, Chance set down his coffee cup, wrapped his fingers around the pot of hot coffee, and shattered it against the waiter's face. Glass and blood glittered like crystalline confetti. Steaming liquid covered the floor, a Rorschach slash and all I could see was horror. The waiter stumbled back, blood streaming from his forehead. Chance looked at his hand, removed a shard of glass, said, 'I shouldn't have done that.'

He dug in his pocket, dropped two crumpled bills on the table and grabbed my arm. We left in such a rush that he forgot his hat.

One hundred-twenty dollars for two cups of shitty coffee.

\* \* \* \* \*

The three of us, we grew up in good houses. Working-class, comfortable. There wasn't much we wanted, nothing we needed. Their dad worked for the State, roads or highways or something. Their mom was a secretary at a law firm. She wore sequined shirts and hair pieces that looked exotic but were really bought from knockoff

vendors in Jamaica Plains. My parents were the same. Equally average jobs, equally anonymous.

We re-enacted *Star Wars* in their backyard, built fortresses with couch cushions. When we played baseball, Chance was always Carlton Fisk, Delilah was Yaz and I was Brooks Robinson. The Orioles were our rivals but I liked his name. We poked dead animals with sticks, trying to scare each other, and played hockey on the frozen streets of winter.

And with each step of my walk home to my beautiful wife, every time my foot slapped the concrete, every gust of wind that bit at my ears like metal-toothed mice, I tried to understand why I allowed myself to be swept along by the current of Miller, why I deemed it okay to shatter the promise I made to myself when I met Amy, why Chance was now decorated with Russian prison tattoos and fluent in the language.

Fuck me.

Amy smothered me as soon as I entered. She smelled of sweat and baby powder and it turned my knees to smoke.

‘Jesus, you asshole,’ she said, the bite of hops riding her breath.

I mumbled something into her neck.

‘I thought there was an accident or something. Did you forget how to use a telephone?’

‘No, sorry, it’s just—’ my world collapsing, everyone I’ve ever known attacking at once, my boss and supplier of our livelihood becoming increasingly belligerent because I keep flitting away at the constant beck and call of two affluent sociopaths that have reattached themselves to my side like tumors, ‘—this job has been really involved.’ I took a swig from her warm beer. ‘I’m sorry I missed dinner.’

She batted away my apology as if it was a piece of dust and this was part of the reason I fell in love with her. She said she was just glad I was okay, then pinched my nipple and asked me to remember the phone next time.

In the kitchen, she sung softly to herself while stirring the pot of soup, took delicate puffs from the joint that she'd balanced on a bottle of mineral water. I shared her joint and grabbed a beer from the fridge, then collapsed into a chair and ground my palms into my eyes. She set a bowl of noodles and vegetables in front of me. Slivers of scallions and ginger floated on the surface. The scent of Chinese pepper. She told me about her yoga class, about the woman who farted every time she did downward-facing-dog, but was too old to hear or smell it.

'You get any more of those calls?'

She shook her head, sipped from my beer. 'Still don't understand why we got them.'

'You used to belong to one of those CD mailorder clubs, right?'

'When I was seventeen.'

I shrugged, slurped soup. 'Fascists have long memories.'

'Fascists? Really?' She tucked her legs underneath her thighs, sitting Buddha-style on the chair. For some reason I found it incredibly cute.

'You cannot run one of those companies and not be a fascist. It's a moral impossibility.'

'Fascism is your answer for everything.'

'Fascism, Communism, Taoism. It's all the same.'

My soup spilled when she smacked me. As I blotted my lap with a napkin, she took my hand and brought it to her lips. 'Are we okay?'

My skin felt amphibian. Some blade of guilt stabbed

between my ribs, but without any reason. I hadn't done anything wrong. A quick snap, a synapse in some remote crevice burning out below the echo of Chance's voice, a tiny twist of smoke and silverfish scattering, hiding in the shadows Amy would never see.

'Of course. Why?'

'I was just making sure. I mean,' she began to stammer, search for words and blood sloshed through my veins, 'with houses and babies and all.' She trailed off; the flick of her wrist addressing all the minutiae of our quaint little life sent fissures through my heart.

'Amy.' I took her hand in mine.

She stared at me as if looking through me, measuring auras or thoughts. 'Then where have you been?'

The tiny crackle of icicles forming, falling, breaking inside my skull. One winter, when I went to Nebraska with Chance's family, I stood in the middle of a corn field. Snow and ashen sky, punctuated by the occasional silhouette of a silo, like the spike and valley of a dying EKG. I'd never been out of Boston and the space was too open, so empty that it crushed me. Chance's parents found me an hour later, sky and skin the same color.

That field, compressed to the internal dimensions of my skull.

'At the job.' I told myself that if Chance's parents were right, and there was in fact a God, that he would've struck me down at that moment. Not for lying, but for deception. For wanton reminiscence.

'You've felt really distant.' She tapped a finger on my temple. 'I know that having a, um, schedule for making love,' she laughed at her own embarrassment and I wanted to punch myself in the face, 'isn't excessively romantic, but—'

I spilled my soup when I leaned across the table to hold her. 'I'm here, Amy. I'm here.'

She yanked me closer, smashing her face against mine.

She pulled down her yoga pants and brought me into her on the kitchen table. Her leg kicked out and knocked off the beer and soup, and as they shattered on the floor, I wasn't sure if it was sweat or a Russian waiter's blood dripping down my forehead.

Where are you, Cole? Where are you?

## VI

I pulled the hat low over my face and canvassed the house before entering. The promise I'd made Chance stuck to my skin as if covered in tacks and though he could find me whenever he wanted, I still tried to avoid him if possible. I spent almost a week undercover. Each time Paddy tracked me down, he brought the Inquisition with him, sliding probing remarks between dry wall tape and layers of plaster. After four days of comments seeking out soft tissue, he finally broke me down.

Crouched inside a cabinet, one of my hands held up a garbage disposal while the other tried vainly to put it back together. I heard the clomp of Paddy's boots and attempted to ignore him while matching threads with a screw. They stopped inches from my knees, towering over me.

'How's it going, Picasso?'

'Fine.' I continued fixing the disposal, readying myself to weather his barrage of inquiries, but they never came. For ten minutes, he stood quiet in the same place. Not shifting

positions, not asking questions. Not even scratching his nuts. I wasn't sure which was more disconcerting: the silence or the static.

'Anything I can help you with?' I said. My skin itched and I just needed some type of sound. Still, he stood quiet. I slid the last washer in place, fumbling with the nut a few times. Finally, I slid out from under the cabinet. His face looked carved from granite, his expression as if he'd just watched a truck run over his pet turtle. Somewhere inside my chest, I felt an echo, a drop of regret plinking into the acid in my stomach.

I let go a long sigh. 'We grew up down the street from each other. In Boston.' I shrugged, made the you fucking happy now? gesture. He barely blinked.

'We used to be pretty tight. Really tight, actually.'

He might've grunted or it might've been some internal vibration.

I continued. 'But some bad shit went down, a while back. I haven't seen them since. Until now, I mean.'

He took a step forward, trying to create a sense of kinship through proximity. 'Keep going.'

'Dunno,' I said. 'It's strange seeing them here. Strange seeing them now. Things are a lot different for me now than back when we were close.' I tossed a spare bolt into the sink. 'You know what I mean?'

'Ain't no one perfect, Cole. We all done some shit in our time.' He shoved his hand under his shirt. The scratching of nails on stomach hair was audible. 'Ain't how a man does things that makes the man. It's how he deals with what he's done.' He tilted his head back, almost proud of his profundity.

The house groaned and creaked around us. The apex of joists pulling away from each other, the concrete

foundation settling atop its fissures, the floorboards separating the rooms into hundreds of solitary islands; around us, the house spun in a constant cycle of self-destruction and reassembly.

I spit on the floor and raised my eyes to Paddy. ‘His dad molested me.’

If that fazed him, he initially did well to disguise it, showing little more than a blink and a quick exhalation through his nose.

‘I never knew for sure, but I always suspected that Chance and Delilah knew. It happened for a while. Sometimes when they were home, sometimes when they weren’t. But it was always kind of, I don’t know, convenient, I guess. Convenient that we were alone and out of earshot.’ Words poured out of me and, almost like an out-of-body-experience, my brain registered only shock at the lack of control over my tongue. ‘Eventually I threatened to tell his wife. That got me this.’ I lifted my shirt to show him the wormhole through my gut.

‘He tagged you with that rebar?’ Paddy’s voice wilted with incredulity.

In a shadowed corner of my skull, probably the same place from where the words oozed, a single cackle echoed. I nodded my head, muttered yeah.

‘Goddamn, boy. Goddamn.’ He stepped forward and hugged me. The gesture struck me as the most wholly inappropriate reaction to my fictional molestation. At least he wasn’t sobbing. He pulled back, clapping my shoulders with his hands. ‘Friend or not, he always seemed like a weird fucker to me. Now I ain’t gonna say if you ever need anything, you can talk to me and I won’t say shit, because you already know that.’

I shook his hand. ‘Thanks, Paddy.’

‘So you can talk to me, you ever need anything. My lips are tighter than a nun’s asshole.’

I just nodded, because I had no idea how to respond. From outside the front door came a flurry of hurried Spanish. He hooked his chin in that direction, said, ‘Think that means I gotta mosey.’

‘Thanks for talking. I feel better.’ If there was a God, he should’ve collapsed the upstairs flooring, hurtling a joist into the crown of my skull.

‘You’re a good man, Cole.’ He laid his hand on my shoulder again. ‘You’re a damn good man.’

I just nodded, because there was no appropriate way to respond.

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Two days later, I hobbled from side to side across the basement, limbs stretching like frozen rubber bands as I leaned wooden studs against the concrete walls while framing the room. To stay inconspicuous, I went to one of Amy’s classes, which had left me all but immobile. We could’ve almost made the basement completely soundproof with another concrete wall: Typical Paddy, his Spanish wasn’t what he thought it was and he told the guy to order cuarenta bags—forty—instead of catorce—fourteen. The extra ones lined the walls. I’d assumed that Paddy made an offer the laborers couldn’t refuse, because the top two floors only needed cleaning before they’d be livable. Impressive for a few days of work. Knowing how anal-retentive Chance was, I even had Paddy lay three extra coats of floor varnish to avoid undue scratching. Me, Paddy and the brother-in-law of Santo Sangre were the only souls who came by the house, and them mainly for

appearances. Will Watkins got the rest of the crew for another job.

The echo of the nail gun was Delilah clucking her tongue. The tink of steel on tin was Chance breaking the coffee pot. The grunt of the router was guttural Russian. I felt an irrational longing to share a beer with Paddy. I stretched my sore arms, laughed at the mental picture of Amy mocking me.

‘Hey.’

A frigid spike in the base of my spine that spread to warmth, then went supernova inside my skull. I set down the nail gun, in the event I was tempted to use it.

‘Hey, yourself.’

Black Mary Janes covered with dust, black tights with striated lines. The edge of a black skirt peeked below her pea coat. She looked like a vixen undertaker, or the member of some sexually bestial cult. Either way, I was glad my work pants were heavy and she wouldn’t notice anything.

‘You guys did a really good job with the house. It’s beautiful.’

Amy would say the same. After all, I used her design sensibilities. I just nodded my head, thanked Del.

‘I never realized how big this basement was, either. You could live down here.’ The tone of her voice held a baiting edge and after seeing the bags of cement along the walls, I only wanted to offer her a taste of Amontillado.

She traipsed around the basement, an unassuming predator circling. A few times she picked up tools, played with them like a child might, then set them back on the ground as if they were porcelain. I couldn’t help but watch and wonder which of us was the moth, which one the flame.

‘My brother tells me you’ve come to a decision.’

I swallowed, snapped my fingers as if striking a phantom lighter and why the Hell was I doing that? ‘Yeah, appears that way.’

She smiled, picked up the nail gun. ‘Can I try?’

‘Are you going to cut off my wedding finger?’

Two steps forward before I could blink, her warmth tactile on the back of my hands. She smelled of static electricity. ‘You can’t cut something off with a nail gun.’

I placed the frame’s bottom beam on the floor and took the pencil from behind my ear to mark the fastening spots but before I could crouch next to it, she’d driven two dozen nails into the board.

‘Where the fuck did you learn to use a nail gun?’ I asked it before realizing I didn’t want to know.

‘I’m glad you’re coming with us, Cole.’ She laid the gun on a sawhorse and stood in front of me, so close I could feel the tiny vibrations between her cells, feel the exhalation of her pores without touching. ‘Really glad.’

‘And why is that?’ The dank air pressed heavy on my skin. The basement walls shivered.

She breathed a quick laugh. ‘You haven’t listened at all, have you?’

I arched an eyebrow, fought the urge to check behind me because that would give her the power, and Delilah needs power like a child needs attention, like a dictator needs fear.

‘I told you we missed you,’ she said. ‘I wasn’t lying.’

‘You missed me, so you came to Baltimore to try and ruin my life. To ruin my marriage.’

‘Marriage is just a legally binding contract.’

‘Not to me.’

‘There are things that run deeper. And besides,’ she offered me a cigarette and I actually declined, ‘you could’ve told us no.’

‘Really?’ I opened and closed my mouth like a dog chewing air. ‘How many times did I say no?’

She shook her head. ‘Saying and telling are two different things.’

‘So you came to Baltimore for me. Not because of Endor, not because of housing.’ I didn’t know where Paddy was and fought to keep my voice down. ‘And certainly not because Chance is Russian fucking Mafia.’

‘All incidental. And he’s not really in the Mafia. You know how he likes to play.’

‘You came here for me.’ The words were bleach and honey in my mouth, or maybe it was just the crushing sensation of nostalgia, of belonging, of being near someone who knew everything I’d done and would still hold my hand if I was ill.

‘You’re family, Cole,’ she said. ‘No contract changes that.’ Her lips parted, just enough for breath to pass between them, for her exhalations to carry the strands of memory and seep through my cavities, absorb into my bloodstream, assimilate to my body.

My mouth began to move without my brain as governor. ‘The night we stole the swan boats in the Common, and Chance rocked back and forth to make you sick, and when you tried to tackle him and he moved and you fell overboard, I remember the way your hair shimmered. It looked like the girl in that movie we used to watch. Do you remember her name?’

‘I have no idea,’ she whispered.

‘She was covered in the dust of jewels, and enchanted everyone who touched her.’

‘I don’t remember that.’ Her voice was distant, lost somewhere beneath the murky Boston water.

‘And I remember holding your hair back while Chance yelled at you because you were puking out the window of his car—that Honda he bought, the one he waxed every morning—because the guy who worked the counter at the duckpin place under Fenway gave us free beer after you showed him your tits.’

Her smile spread like a stain. ‘I do remember that.’

‘I was jealous,’ I said. My arms tingled as if I’d slept on them for weeks. ‘Riding in that car during the summer, with the windows down and Run DMC blasting, hurtling from one disaster to the next.’ I trailed off, something like tar boiling inside my stomach, threatening to bubble up my throat until it consumed my mouth and spilled over, making me a shadow, nonexistent. I was either about to vomit or kiss her. I said, ‘I miss home.’

She blinked and a single tear made a wet streak through the dust on her cheek. She brushed her lips on my ear and set my flesh to flame.

‘Come home, Cole,’ she breathed. ‘Come home.’

She moved her mouth from my ear to my cheek. Needles shaped like lips, arms wrapping around my shoulders. I shuddered at her momentary touch. She walked upstairs, footfall above me. The house was silent but for the thrashing of blood in my ears. The walls wavered, a mirage, fumes. The studs bent and contorted, groaning under the weight of whispers. The cement floor I’d spent two days pouring and leveling, it wept. Clouds swirled over the city in dizzying patterns you could feel without seeing: the horsemen come early. Footfall above me again, faster this time. She was hurrying back for more, racing back to finish off the scraps. To my side I saw the

nail gun and the phantom whump of driving imaginary nails echoed in my skull. Her temple or mine.

‘Holy shit!’

Amy’s voice, slicing through the air.

I blinked.

‘Holy shit holy shit holy shit!’

Arms extended like a heron about to take flight, she hurried across the floor. She wore a grey skirt and black boots that licked at her knees. Usually, she never wore them unless we were role-playing.

‘It worked!’

I mumbled something as she wrapped herself around me, crushed her face against mine. I tasted the salt of her tears.

Breathing ragged with sobs and giggles, tiny flecks of spit touched my ear as she whispered.

‘I’m pregnant.’



## ACT THREE

### VII

‘I don’t think this is going to work,’ Amy said.

‘Nonsense. Trust.’ I repositioned the glass on her stomach, pressed my ear against it and closed my eyes to sharpen my hearing. My hand rested on her chest.

‘Can you hear it?’ Her voice floated like moon light.

The ocean thrummed in my ear. Amy’s breathing, a soft breeze blowing tall grasses along the dunes. She stroked the back of my hand, fingertips tracing tributary veins. My body seeped into hers, cell by cell. The streetlight filtered through our curtains, casting the glow of a retiring sun.

‘Can you hear the heartbeat?’ She reverberated, muted and infinite.

‘Not yet.’

She took away the glass and laid my head on her stomach.

‘Keep listening.’

‘What if he’s trying to talk to me and I just can’t hear him?’

She ran fingers through my hair, tucked it behind my ear.

‘What if he thinks I’m ignoring him?’ I said.

‘Why would he think you’re ignoring him?’

I didn’t answer.

‘And how do you know it’s a him?’

I shrugged. ‘Has to be.’

She cocked her head, face shaded like a Picasso painting.

‘I can’t raise a girl. I’ll kill anyone who says anything to her, and I don’t think the universe would want our undaughter to grow up with a father in jail.’

She breathed, laughed and patted my head. I took a marker from the milk crate she used as a night-table.

‘If you keep twitching, the lines won’t come out right.’

‘It tickles.’

I told her to hold her breath, then. Without looking, I could feel her eyes, her slight, bemused smile. After a minute, I told her she could move again. She twisted her head side to side, as if she was at a gallery.

‘Why did you draw a sea monkey on my stomach?’

‘It’s not a sea monkey. It’s our baby.’

She pressed a finger on her skin, her lips warm against my forehead. ‘Cole, I don’t want our fetus carrying a light saber while in my womb.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s red marker, but he’s still Jedi. We could never raise a Sith.’

She shook her head. ‘Keep trying.’

‘What if another fetus tries to fuck with him?’ I bit my lip, raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, now I’ll always know where to find him and he’ll never feel abandoned.’

Laying my head back on her stomach, she told me to keep listening.

The apartment hummed in silence, our breathing the metronome for the night. Outside the window, bats squeaked in the alleyway. Cats tiptoed across fences, mewling to the others. Someone in the city was dying at that moment, someone coming home for the first time. Someone was screaming in orgasm and someone was shooting tar into their arm. The earth spun around its axis but my world existed only within these walls. Soon the rise and fall of Amy's stomach became rhythmic and I knew snores would soon follow. I kept my head as close to my child as possible.

She'd convinced me to go to a doctor soon after the wedding. It'd been fifteen years since I'd seen one. I'd been excessively tired and she'd worry about one disease or another. During the physical, he asked about my scar, which led to X-rays, which led to consulting a fertility doctor because Chance's fuckwit enforcer had shaky hands and nicked one of my tubes when he stabbed me. The doctor told me how lucky I was that there were no further complications, that rebar could be some nasty stuff. Amy squeezed my leg and I could only purse my lips and nod. The image of her in the doctor's office flash-burned across the panorama of my skull alongside the broken fingers, the splintered ribs, the repercussions of Miller I could never outrun. Cue her post-coital workout routine and cyclical ovulation sex, and as the sun finally began to sear darkness from the sky, I couldn't help but feel we were nestled inside of a miracle.

I slipped out of bed without waking Amy and started coffee for us. My eyes burned from a lack of sleep. Her yoga bag covered half of an envelope, the return address

with our landlord, who was probably wondering where the money for this shithole apartment was. We had to squeeze our showers in between everyone else in the building because there wasn't enough hot water to go around. Our toilet rocked in place and was about to fall through the floor. Half of the place should've been condemned or demolished. How could we bring a child into this mess? How could we afford anything else?

'I will not go back to him.' I repeated it as a mantra. 'I have a family.'

The air outside had rows of metal teeth and my breath was visible. I hurried to the mailbox. A car door slammed. I was half-tempted to wrap Amy in blankets and huddle us on the next bus to Mexico. At least our money would've lasted longer. Rapid clicks to my side. My fists tightened, the way a dog's mouth waters at the sight of meat. By instinct.

'Cole.'

'Why are you waiting outside my apartment?' I said. Chance squeezed my arm. 'Even the hoppers aren't out yet.'

'Yeah, that's great. You're a riot.' He sipped from his Dunkin Donuts cup. 'Someone fucked up. Get changed. We need to go. Now.'

'Chance, it's seven in the morning. I'm not going anywhere.'

'They ran into a problem with Customs in Philly and moved the drop-point down here. Shipment will arrive in an hour.'

'Look.' I took a deep breath, nervous to speak and cursing myself for being nervous. What kind of father was scared to defend his child? 'Amy's pregnant. I'm staying with her.'

His face slackened, eyes turning slightly downward. I wondered if he was about to have a stroke when he wrapped his arms around me, repeating congratulations in my ear and thumping my back. He pulled away, held my arms and said how happy he was for us.

‘Okay,’ he said and my body felt ready to melt into a tropic pool. ‘Then I’ll see you in twenty.’

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A torrent of whispered curses as my hands led me around the room, finding clothes without waking Amy. I saw a story once, about how mothers in dire circumstances follow their subconscious’s lead, lifting cars and other superhuman sorts of things. I wondered if this situation applied, at least maybe in my extraordinary ability to make the wrong decision by following some vulgar sense of loyalty. Amy shifted in bed, letting go a long exhale I thought to be her unconscious objection.

I leaned down and kissed her stomach. Her lips bent into a slight smile, made a few sleepy noises.

‘I love you,’ I said. ‘And I will be back. I promise.’

I kissed her hand, left a note explaining work had called early and went outside.

The setting-sun light that had made Amy so beautifully foreign gave Chance the complexion of a corpse.

‘This is stupid. This is so fucking stupid. I shouldn’t even be here,’ I kept saying as I hoisted myself into the passenger van. Delilah squeezed between the two of us like we were on some grotesque road trip. Tinted windows left the back in permanent midnight, the slight texture of

carpet on the floor. No seats, no belts. In the movies, this van would be a pedophile's pride and glory. The whole thing felt very conspicuous for only picking up a few bricks.

Chance looked out the window. 'If it makes you feel any better, I can tell you I would've shot you and your wife if you hadn't come.'

'What the fuck?'

He reached over to me as if he was Clark Fucking Griswold. 'Coffee?'

We cut past the early-morning joggers tracing the perimeter of Patterson Park, people in suits and mackintosh jackets walking dogs, a few club kids stumbling home. The sky slowly turned the color of watery blood. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. Chance headed down Eastern Avenue, turning right on a one-way street. It struck me as familiar, then disconcerting when I realized this was the same place I saw Del for the first time in two years. That was three days ago or it was five months. The concept of time did nothing for me anymore. Every minute with Chance was a moment lost with Amy and the baby. He pulled over and Del climbed across me and out of the van before it even stopped.

I pointed at the house she ran into, said, 'What's this?'

He grinned and I could see where gum overtook teeth. 'You haven't been out of the game for that long, have you?'

Normally, I would've advised them to have the foundation repaired. Stress cracks from settling webbed the corners. The concrete around the edge of the porch pulled away from its base, leaving a quarter-inch of air between it and the formstone exterior the color of dirty sand. Walking up the stoop, I could see that the windows

were single-pane and would triple the electric bill. That aside, though, it was a pretty typical Baltimore rowhome, and I hoped they'd be stricken with asbestos poisoning.

The interior had been drawn from stills of a post-apocalyptic horror. Dust motes thick as napalm, with wooden crates for seats and industrial cable spools for tables. Some type of large rodent had gnawed a hole through the back rest of the recliner in the corner. Initially, I was rather shocked. Back in Boston, Chance would never have settled for a place like this. After considering it, though, he was as coming as ever.

I picked up a newspaper. The headline read *Braves clinch World Series*. The date in the bottom corner disintegrated with my touch.

'This is cozy,' I said. 'Can I go home now?'

Chance settled himself onto a box, nodded behind me. 'Now we get dressed.'

I turned around. Delilah held a pile of black in her arms. It looked like an exotic bug. Parts were shiny, others dull with the texture of fabric. Hard angles and flowing lines. She kneeled next to the cable spool. The objects fell with a clatter.

Shotgun. Revolver. Black vest. Hunting knife and sheath. A circle of something like garrote wire. Glimmering pieces of metal. Two bullets rolled off the edge, the ting reverberating like a church bell across a graveyard.

'You've got to be fucking joking.'

Delilah held up two vests, weighing them with her hands. 'If I gave you this one—' it looked like a child's life jacket '—then I'd be joking.'

Chance grunted his approval.

Hundreds of thousands of silverfish poured from the

recesses of my skull in a cascading stream of pinchers and chitinous exoskeletons. They filled my body and I was afraid to look at my arm and see skin molt and slough away like old paper.

‘Chance,’ I said. He whistled as he tightened Delilah’s vest. ‘Chance,’ I said, louder, my voice wobbling.

She let go a quick gasp, said too tight.

‘Chance!’

‘What?’ He spun and faced me, jaw moving, teeth grinding.

I measured my breaths, fought to keep my voice from cracking. ‘I’m not doing this.’

He patted my shoulder. ‘Sure you are.’

‘No, Chance. No, I have a wife. And child. I can’t do this.’ I dropped the vest and it crushed my toe.

He only shrugged. ‘Too late, brother. It’s already done.’

‘I have a family. I can’t abandon them.’

Delilah snickered as she wrapped her hair into a bun, slid a gun into her belt.

He cupped my chin with his hand, face two inches from mine, staring into my eyes as if trying to consume my soul. ‘You’re doing it with family, Cole. I know you won’t abandon us.’

‘Not you, you asshole. You know what I’m—’

My last words choked into the air. His hand against my throat against the wall. I felt a body-shaped indentation behind me. Bitter coffee on his ragged breath. His face, contorted and blister-red. Something in his cheeks, by the corner of his eyes. I imagined I heard subcutaneous tears pooling. Maybe it was just oxygen deprivation.

He dropped me and turned away. I crouched against the wall, trying to appear unfazed.

‘You’ll be fine,’ he said.

‘Why guns?’ I slumped down to the ground, moving the vest away with my foot.

He whirled around and before I could move there was the barrel of a revolver three inches from my right eye. The hollow click of the hammer cocking.

‘Because,’ he whispered. ‘When there is a gun in your face, you tend to listen.’

I swallowed and it shattered my eardrums. ‘When have we ever used guns for a pick-up? You bring guns to drugs and people die.’

The hammer uncocked. He smiled, licked his teeth. ‘Drugs are old news, brother. Get with the times.’

‘What the fuck are you talking about?’

Delilah sauntered over, picked up my vest and laid it over my knees like a crocheted blanket. Whispered, ‘Might want to wear this.’

‘Chance?’

‘Cole, hey,’ he said. ‘The easiest way to get busted is to move drugs.’

‘Then what the fuck is this?’ As soon as the words left my mouth, as soon as they were tangible and in the open, I knew that his answer would be one I didn’t want to hear.

‘People are our business now, Cole.’ Flak jacket zipped, revolver in waistband, skinning knife lashed to his thigh, Dunkin Donuts cup in hand, he nodded and said, ‘We deal in people, now.’

## VIII

'Doughnut?' he said. Melting chocolate pooled in his palm.

'Fuck off and die.'

'I'm just offering. Now's not the time to get the munchies.'

'Chance, he said he didn't want one. Or were you just being difficult, Cole?'

'Both of you can suck my dick.' I stuck my hand inside my pocket to keep it from shaking, sucked on a cigarette like it was life-support. The sun beat down on us with invisible fists. 'Let's just get this shit done with so I can go home and never see you two again.'

Delilah stuck out her lip. 'Come now, you don't really mean that.'

Chance held her forearm, said it was time to move. When she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, I repressed the urge to crush the cigarette in her eye. They entered the building while I banged the back of my skull against the cinderblock wall, whispering stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid.

We'd pulled the van into some shipyard junk depository in a neighborhood I'd never seen. Rusting shipping containers ringed the perimeter. Propellers, rolls of fencing, several salvaged cars and an anchor lay strewn around the yard. I half-expected to see some inbred yokel in overalls hobbling out to give us all what-for while his dog slobbered and gnashed teeth at us. Which would've been fine—preferable even—given what we really encountered.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The stunning silence of a forsaken lot repurposed for trafficking humans. One cinderblock bunker situated in the middle of all this debris, the green shimmer of water visible in the space between the container fence. Not a soul breathing, hiding, scurrying or dying. Just the three of us.

He'd parked alongside the bunker, rear doors facing the water. They sorted out their gun situation, then told me to stand at the front door and laid a shotgun in my hand like it was a Faberge egg.

On the other side of the door I heard the dull murmur of voices. Some I could understand; others were foreign. They all sounded jovial, or as much as Russian could be. Delilah's laugh cut through the guttural noise. A truck drove past the front gate. I held the gun behind my back.

The sun crawled over us. I wished it would scorch me to cinder. I wondered what Amy was doing. If she was debating which cereal would be healthier for the baby. If she was standing in front of the mirror, cheeks puffed and shirt bunched below her bra, looking for any change in the slope of her belly. If she was on the phone with Amanda, the yoga studio's co-owner, discussing baby yoga, all while I stood in front of a reinforced door holding a shotgun as two old ghosts I thought I'd severed from my life discussed

the transaction terms of human lives. The sun crawled over me. I wished it would scorch us to cinder.

A loud crack inside, like when a book falls from the table and lands perfectly flat. Harsh tones, yelling, arguing. Cadenced Russian that sounded defusing. I tasted pennies, the bitter tang of fear, in the back of my throat, looked at the watch I wasn't wearing to see how long they'd been in there, how long I'd been daydreaming. The shadows had contracted, and I ventured that I'd lost at least twenty-five minutes inside my skull.

More yelling inside, and it wasn't until Delilah's voice rang out that I felt the metal claws of anxiety in the back of my thighs. Crashing noises, like a tabletop swiped clean in anger. Voices straining to stay calm while others snarled. I reached behind me and cocked the shotgun, then immediately tried to uncock it but found I had no idea how. Chance's voice tearing at another man's, his words alien and ferocious but somehow enchanting.

And then a bang.

An inimitable bang followed by Delilah screaming. Before the synapses could connect and tell me that rushing into this situation would be detrimental for not only myself but also my family, I reached for the doorknob, gun raised. It burst open from the inside, knocking me backward.

'Start the fucking car,' she yelled.

I stood still, leaning on the shotgun as if it was a crutch. Chance's arm was an albino snake wrapped around her neck. Her face, flecked with blood.

The ground shattered before my feet. She cocked her gun again. 'I said start the fucking car.' Her voice cracked.

Chance's leg, shredded above the knee. His calf dangled by a rope of muscle. When she pulled them along, it

swung like a pendulum. Church bells rang out somewhere, announcing it was eleven o'clock in the morning.

I ripped open the back doors then started the van. Del hadn't yet shut the door when the other men appeared at the hood. I stomped the pedal like it was their skull, Del screaming at me, asking what the fuck I was doing. She fired a few shots as they grew smaller in the rearview, and the whole scene became cold, non-existent. We were in their basement, twenty years ago. Chance and I were playing video games while Delilah yelled shoot 'em shoot 'em shoot 'em. I had no sensation on my skin. The air was heavy, embalming.

Delilah's voice was a stream of consolations in the darkness, assuring Chance that everything was going to be okay, that he'd be fine. One arm at a time, I pulled off my shirt and tossed it back to use as a tourniquet. I saw only teeth and the reflection on her eyes.

I blew through a red light without thinking and it wasn't until I heard squealing brakes and the whine of a horn that realization came crashing down on the point of my skull: I could have died. I could have widowed my wife, abandoned my child. Because of some misplaced sense of devotion, of family, I could have ruined not only my life but the lives of those whom I loved most. Because I couldn't hold the present tight enough, I almost stomped out the future.

Somehow, we'd gotten back to the job site. Moths to the flame. I shut off the engine. The house was empty, full of ghosts. Delilah whimpered in the back, helping Chance down to the ground and around the side. His skin was the color of caulk. Hers was yellow.

I dropped the keys on the floor of the van and hung his other arm over my shoulder. An involuntary glance above

us, half-expecting to see Paddy watching our sad procession. These two, they were no longer family. They were nothing more than harbingers of death. They were people who invited you into their home and hugged you to get in position to slide their knife between your ribs cleanly, in order to keep blood from falling to their carpet.

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Chance slumped against the wall, the bottom of his leg resembling some morbid tropical flower. The tourniquet had staunched the bleeding, but barring any medical attention, he would die before the sun set. Part of me wanted to sit next to him, to smooth his hair and laugh about pushing Del into the Commons Pond, to make peace with my feelings toward him. The other part begged to sink the claw end of a hammer into his temple.

Del skittered around like the room like a hummingbird on meth. She'd already ransacked the upstairs, looking for something to help her brother. Her face hung almost as pale as his, though hers was horror and panic where his was a body running dry. I crouched before Chance, holding his hand, watching his breathing run shallow, eyes fluttering like they held a thousand butterflies behind them.

'Open your eyes,' I whispered. 'Open your eyes and release them.'

Static-white dots clouded my vision when she smacked the back of my head.

'Fucking help me find something. Jesus, you're worthless.'

A thin blue slit appeared between Chance's eyelids. His lips quivered. I leaned towards him. 'Don't worry. She can be such a cunt, sometimes.'

And before I could bite it back, before I could gnaw on my hand or swallow it to the pit of my stomach, a thunderclap cry escaped my mouth. Tears coated my face. I began to dry-heave, I cried so hard.

Delilah's boots were a terrified heartbeat. Her voice, a stiletto through my eardrum. 'Is he dead? Is he dead?'

'No he's not dead, you fucking cow!'

She tumbled to the floor, holding both of us between trembling arms. Chance lolled his head forward, touching his forehead with ours. I tried to control my breathing so an errant sob wouldn't give anyone a concussion.

I squeezed them until I thought my head would explode, then whispered to Delilah: 'Check in the basement.'

'What?' Her voice, ragged with tears.

'I cut my hand the other day. There are supplies in the basement.'

She jumped up as if electrified and hurried downstairs.

I kissed Chance's forehead, said, 'I'm sorry, brother,' then followed Delilah.

She searched even more frantically than upstairs, throwing tools as if she was in a cartoon. A hacksaw landed by my feet, and if I believed in Providence, I'd say it was one sick fuck. To think of using a saw made me ill. The nailgun she loved so much was on the other side of the room; the revolver tucked into her waistband shimmered like oil.

She was rifling through the toolbox, scattering nails and screws, and didn't hear me pick up the wrecking bar. I opened my mouth to make some apology, eulogy, something to justify my actions but when she turned around, only a single synapse fired and it resonated inside my skull.

Swing.

The first time it felt like hitting a melon or biting into an apple, yet was markedly different from ribs and fingers. She fell to the floor, arms and legs akimbo. She almost rolled over but I closed my eyes because I couldn't handle seeing her watch me again, seeing that look of recognition, and just swung and swung and heard metal strike concrete and swung and swung and swung until my face was sticky.

I faced the direction I thought was the steps and cracked open my eyes, relived that I was correct. I peeked downward. Blood covered my shins, legs, hands, boots. I didn't look behind.

Upstairs, Chance's breathing had become weaker yet. Flecks of spittle at the corner of his mouth. I kneeled again, body operating on auto-pilot, like I was one of the videogames we'd played for so long, and picked him up as if he was several bags of cement. Walking to the basement took more than five minutes, each step an exercise in fine muscle mechanics. As we got to the bottom, I closed my eyes again so I wouldn't see what was left of Del. His exhausted gasps said it wasn't anything good.

I underestimated.

I thought the penultimate step was the last, and as my foot tried to plant on damp concrete, Chance and I tumbled forward. His grunt was little more than an exhalation. My eyes opened by reflex. Del's head looked like a watermelon after a shotgun blast, her body blackened by bruising and blood.

My body moved, though I wasn't sure who controlled it. It walked across the basement, avoiding the slick of blood next to what had been Del's bright shining face. It picked up the nailgun, then crossed the room again, kneeling by Chance. The silence in the room was crushing. It kissed his forehead, said, I loved you, Brother, I loved you both.

But I love her more, then pressed the tip against his temple and pulled the trigger. His eyes twitched, breath skipped like a scratched record, then stopped. My body cupped his, then grabbed Delilah's heel and pulled her in.

I remembered the feeling of their skin on my face. I remembered brushing their hair back behind their ears. I remembered telling Del that I found out who the girl in that movie was, the shimmering one who she looked like. I remembered hearing what might've been insects gnashing inside my skull or shuffling footfalls on the floor above us. I remembered squeezing their fingers between mine, and how we were connected, like a circle, like an ouroboros. And, surrounded by my dead family, drowning in the rising tide of blackened unconsciousness, I remember hearing Paddy's disembodied voice.

'Oh, Jesus. Jesus fuck, Cole.'

## IX

A grunt, whispered cursing. Stomping on wooden stairs that echoed off damp concrete walls. I lay on the couch, trying to grab a quick nap before I had to go back to work. Amy came through the door, carrying two cans of beans and corn, crossing from the basement to the living room. I could see her pregnant belly around the corner of the wall before I could see her face. She hadn't really shown for the first four months, then ballooned the last two. We speculated how far a body could actually expand before exploding. I refrained from making any jokes about Alien.

'That basement is a death-trap,' she said, rubbing the back of her head.

I pressed my palms against my eyes, saw Chance's crumpled body, Delilah's ruined head in the carnival of dots that formed. 'Why's that?'

'Every time I go down there I hit my head on the ceiling. It's always damp. And it gives me the creeps.'

I sat up, looked at her. 'It's the basement of a rowhouse that was built in 1896. People were shorter back then. And

this whole neighborhood is haunted anyway.’ I followed her into the saffron-walled kitchen, wrapped my arms around her belly, holding our child. ‘Are you asking me to fuck up Casper? Because I will. I’ll protect you.’

She swatted me with a towel, told me that she put my lunch in the fridge.

I couldn’t argue with her. Since we moved in four months ago, I’d felt the hint of a presence in here. Especially in the basement, especially around noon. I hoped that I hadn’t cursed our house to eternal haunting. And I didn’t mean to make it feel so claustrophobic, but we had to pour another seven inches of the extra concrete in order to bury the bodies, to make sure they’d stay buried this time. For once, I’d been glad that his Spanish sucked.

I gathered my stuff and kissed Amy’s cheek, whispered to her belly for a minute, then left for work.

The seasons felt schizophrenic. There was an iced-over winter, with winds that could shear flesh from bone, which was immediately replaced by a summer that left the streets warped with heat vapors. I drank a whole water bottle walking to the job site. At least the work was inside.

In a typically-Chance move, he’d coerced some lawyer to have the house put in my name, on the chance that his flagged any unwanted attention or that anything untoward happened, like someone discovering a basement full of trafficked humans. The fucker even paid for the place up front. I’d hired my own lawyer to have it sorted out, to make sure that Amy and I owned it outright, and had been working off our debt for the last three months, remodeling his kitchen and basement. Fate had a fucked up sense of humor. The job would’ve been easier with some of my old help, but I thought it better to keep this private. It allowed

me to hide from the shadow of Chance that followed me all over the city.

After I packed up my tools for the day, I headed down to Santo Sangre to cool off. It was the same as ever, as if you could blink and time-travel to any point within fifteen years without feeling disoriented. I stood by the door, then saw Paddy at the far end of the bar, hunched over his drink like it was a sacred oasis. I took my drink and slid into the stool. He didn't look up at me.

'Hey.'

He grunted.

'How's the crew doing?'

He grunted again.

'You guys getting a lot of work?'

He took a swig from his glass. I took one from mine and swished it around my mouth, feeling the bubbles pop on my tongue.

'You going to use actual words or just communicate like a gorilla?'

Slowly, he turned to look at me. His skin hung slack from his skull. He looked tired, like a man ready to surrender.

'I told you I want nothing to do with you, Cole,' and his head dipped to the bar again.

'Yeah, I know that, but I thought we were square.'

'Ain't nothing square.'

'I mean—'

'I mean, ain't nothing ever happened, so nothing to square, so nothing keeping us talking.'

'Paddy.' I trailed off, not having the slightest idea of what to say. How to say anything.

He dumped the rest of his beer down his throat, wiped his mouth with a shirt sleeve.

‘I’ve done some things in my day, but that shit.’ He just shook his head.

‘I thought nothing happened.’

He jabbed his finger in my chest. ‘You got some goddamned voodoo on your back, boy. I can feel the room shiver when you come near. So please, Cole, I’m asking you again.’ He dropped a crumpled bill and some coins on the counter. ‘Stay. Away.’ He shuffled away from me, ignoring the *senoras*’ catcalls. I waved at Consuela for another drink.

Halfway through my third, the stool next to me scraped along the floor. I didn’t bother to look up. Someone asked for tequila and a beer. His voice was heavy, sounded like gravel in a washing machine.

‘Can always tell how a neighborhood is by bars.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Is best way to see people. They are at less guarded.’

‘Totally.’ I tilted my glass to catch a glimpse of him the reflection, but saw only distorted shapes.

‘I buy you drink?’

I looked up, a cold fist kneading my stomach. The man was a ghost, no one I recognized, but carried the air of someone who would recite TS Eliot before shooting you in the kneecap. His wrinkles were deep enough to hide a small housecat.

‘You are Cole, yes?’

With a quick glance, I checked behind him for anyone else I didn’t recognize. The bar was as it ever was.

‘I’m—’ the name Chance wavered on the edge of my tongue, ready to roll out but I bit it back.

‘Yes,’ he said before I could respond. ‘Yes, I know you name. You friend of Mr. Chance and his wife.’ He pushed a shot of tequila to me. It wasn’t until he motioned to

drink with him that I realized he had only one hand and a frozen blade of terror struck my chest.

‘I thought you were supposed to drink vodka.’ I gave a weak laugh. I knew this man.

He shrugged, said, ‘When in Rome. Or now, Mexico City.’

The drink was sweet and singed my throat going down, but still my icicle body felt ready to shatter. In the gentle afterburn of liquor, I smelled the salve that Amy rubbed on my scar. The desire to be home with my family was so strong I could taste it. I began to stand but he cupped my forearm with his claw and pressed it to the bar top. He gave a grandfather’s smile, shook his head.

‘Mr. Chance left some arrangement unfinished.’

Amy.

‘Please, Mr. Cole,’ the man said to me. ‘We must talk.’

Amy Amy Amy Amy.

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## Author Bio

Nik Korpon is the author of *Stay God* (Otherworld Publications.) Anthony Neil Smith deemed Korpon one of the darkest new voices of the pop culture apocalypse and Donald Ray Pollock called the novel ‘an intense story of love and treachery on mean and merciless streets.’ His stories have ruined the reputation of *Out of the Gutter*, *3:AM*, *Do Some Damage*, *TripleQuick!*, *Cherry Bleeds* and more. His book reviews have appeared in *The Collagist*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Spinetingler* and the *Outsider Writers Collective*. He lives in Baltimore. Give him some danger, little stranger, at [nikkorpon.com](http://nikkorpon.com).

