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Safe Passage

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SAFE PASSAGE

A Thesis

by

JOHN MOLINA

Submitted to the Graduate College
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2017

Major Subject: Creative Writing

SAFE PASSAGE

A Thesis
by
JOHN MOLINA

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May 2017

ABSTRACT

Molina, John, Safe Passage. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2017, 197 pp, references, 13 titles.

Safe Passage is a novel detailing life in the RGV. The novel is a bildungsroman that follows a group of friends and their experiences in the RGV. The novel sheds light on a region that is rarely examined, and uses flashbacks and flash forwards to show what it is like to age in the RGV.

The novel deals with life growing up near the Texas/Mexico border and relates experiences from the group of friends mentioned in the previous paragraph. The novel describes political and police corruption, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, and assimilation along the Rio Grande Border. The novel is written in a gritty, realistic style that details life among the marginalized in the region. I write against the injustices seen in the RGV, and also about the honor and dignity that can be found among even the most desperate of circumstances. With this novel, I intend to offer a glimmer of hope to those who feel they have been left without a voice. I want to shed light on issues usually marginalized or ignored outright from the national and state media.

That said this is a novel that is not didactic in any sense. I present life in the RGV as I've experienced it. I'm not pulling any punches.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my dad and the rest of my family who have never wavered in their support for me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge my thesis committee who helped me shape this novel into what it is. I would also like to thank my friends for giving me stories to share with the world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
CHAPTER I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION	1
Part One	1
Part Two	102
Part Three	151
Part Four	177
CHAPTER II. SAFE PASSAGE	20
REFERENCES	191
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	192

CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

(Note: I do not use any semi-colons throughout this critical preface, as I believe they are for English writers to use, not American writers.)

Here's a list of books I didn't read through grad school: I have yet to read Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, considered by many to be the first novel ever written. I haven't read all of the ancient Greek works and I haven't read any philosophy by Nietzsche, Plato, Socrates or any of the ancient scribes that go by only one-word names. I haven't read all of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and while I read *Moby Dick*, I am ashamed to say that was about 5 years ago, when I'd read far less literary novels than I have now. I'm way behind in my Victorian Literature and I probably will never read any books by Jane Austen again. I have no regrets admitting that. Poetry, forget about it. If someone asks me to name any great poets of the 21st century, you'll likely draw a blank, embittered face as my reaction. There's a lot of great books I have read, and that shaped the manuscript that follows, but I found it necessary to admit my shame. Shame that I haven't yet read all the greats. Shame that I know I haven't read the entire Western canon of literature. I feel like a ticking time bomb, if I don't read all the classics I know my writing will suffer, and I know that I won't have anyone to blame but myself in that scenario. I will not allow myself to explode. I'm just getting started in this writing game.

That's the way it works though. Writing is a process. You don't get great overnight. It's similar to a quote I like to read by Jacob Riis. When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred tries without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it—but all that had gone before.

I use this quote for motivation when I feel my work is lackluster or when I look for an excuse to not write. It instills confidence in me. You read the greats, the legends--the authors everyone knows by last name and learn from them. You steadily chip away at the canon of literature until you've digested as much as you feel you can consume. And then you read some more. And perhaps it will not be the hundredth and first book—or even the thousandth book that you have read that will be the one to split the “rock” in two, but you continue to read with the confidence that one day you will breakthrough. That a light bulb will go off in your head and everything you've read will be so embedded into your conscious by then that you will be able to recognize the works of great literature in other writers. That you'll be able to steal their best stuff from them and incorporate it into your own work. If you're lucky enough and work at it enough, perhaps you might even see it in yourself.

I am not ashamed to say I have a lot of catching up to do when it comes to literature. I admit my failures and warn that you will find none of the influences of any of the above referenced classics in my novel. What you will find is an artist struggling to find a voice. Whose read too much Hemingway, and Faulkner, and whose ambitions are too lofty, arrogant even. Well, I'd be lying if I said I respected the opinion of those who haven't sacrificed to become the best writer possible. I write because I am on a mission. I have no time for those who haven't bothered to read anything that isn't off of Spark Notes.

I started reading books at a really young age. I relate these anecdotes to show how far I've grown as a reader, and as a writer. The books I'd read when I was younger aren't considered literary. I read every Stephen King book, The Harry Potter Series, YA literature like the works of Roald Dahl and R.L. Stine. I read all of those books before the age of 18, at which point I become immersed in the works of Charles Bukowski and Hunter S. Thompson, and (it cringes me to type this) even those of one Chuck Palahniuk. While I wish I didn't have to act like a literary snob and say all those books were worthless, they were worthless. In terms of making me a better writer, they were worthless. What they did do was point me in a certain direction so that when I enrolled in South Texas College, not knowing what to choose as a major, I chose English. It was there that I was introduced to a man who would go on to influence my works greatly: Ernest Hemingway.

The Rio Grande Valley is a strange place to grow up in. The RGV is comprised of small to medium sized cities situated along the Mexican border deep in south Texas. The RGV is predominantly Hispanic with some areas notably marked by poverty. Growing up in Weslaco, a

small city in the middle of the RGV, I didn't really notice any of those factors. Since the majority of my friends were Hispanic and I never experienced any form of racism towards myself living in the area, I assumed that the way I experienced life was the way that others did as well. The only form of racism I encountered was other Hispanic kids calling Spanish-speaking Hispanics "Mojos." I didn't think about it at the time, but I now attribute those racist epithets muttered by my peers as a form of class division, and perhaps a fear of one's heritage. The majority of the kids in my classes were from middle class English speaking households. The Spanish speaking kids in my age group usually came from poorer families and circumstances than the kids I grew up with. I would not reflect upon this until much later, in high school, when I made friends with some of those Spanish-speaking kids. I was content to live in my own bubble, sheltered from notions as complicated as class division or internalized racism.

During my years at STC, I didn't take any of my classes very seriously. I disliked government and had forgotten how to do algebra. I hated the whole school experience, it just seemed like a way to try and make me into one of those corporate office types, and I knew that wasn't for me. When I began taking World Literature with a professor, one Dr. Carolyn Burks, I noticed that her classes and her selections in literature were different than any thing I'd read up until that point. She had us read short stories like Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." This was a type of literature I hadn't been exposed to. I was used to the plot heavy works of King and Palahniuk. The stories that Dr. Burks' exposed me to weren't black and white. There was no clear antagonist or plot. They were complicated at times. I began to appreciate the way these writers created characters that were more realistic to me than those found in the works mentioned earlier. There was nuance in them. They weren't straight up psychopaths like many of King's characters, or used as plot devices like

the works of Chuck Palahniuk. The characters in that first American Literature course I took changed the way I viewed literature.

When I read Ernest Hemingway's "The Snow's of Kilimanjaro," my interest in what writing *could* be changed. Here was writing that was real, authentic. Hemingway's protagonist was a damaged man going through problems with alcohol and women, something I could relate to. He felt that he'd failed at his career and had squandered his talents, again, something I could relate to. I'd spent most of my early years in college binge drinking and hanging out with what some might call "unsavory people." I'd gotten A's all through high school and to find myself struggling at a local community college while other friends did well at State University's made me a bit envious, if I'm being honest. To hear a writer discuss such similar shame in his story made me realize that perhaps writing was something I could do. Something I wanted to do. I didn't want to wait until it was too late and waste my talents, like Hemingway's protagonist. I wanted to get the most out of my life and my writing, so I distanced myself from friends and anyone who could get in my way. Once I transferred, to what was then, The University of Texas Pan American, I was on a singular mission: to become the greatest writer alive.

I was fortunate for the most part during my first semester at UTPA. I was able to enroll in a Hemingway course taught by a respected Hemingway scholar, Dr. Douglas LaPrade, whom I will get back to later, and took a World Literature course with Matthew Christenson, who introduced me to writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, both of whom would influence the manuscript I ended up writing for my thesis. I felt like I was at a real university, getting a proper English education. The only class that I found lacking was a creative writing workshop led by a thin professor with goofy hair and an "aw-shucks" way of speaking. He'd smile awkwardly and his hands twitched when he'd lecture, as though he were nervous

about the subject matter he was teaching. He looked like a deer in headlights. He'd act like a nice guy, but as he didn't have any published books, or any stories available he'd written for us students to peruse, he looked dejected and it rubbed off on the class. I think everyone was afraid they'd end up as bad of an instructor as he was if they lingered by him for too long. If any student tried to help a fellow student out with constructive criticism, they'd immediately be shot down: in his class everyone played nice. He wanted everyone to write with kids' gloves on. All we did that semester was write short, sad stories about the angst of life. But I don't blame him. He just seemed like a guy who'd grown up with a comfortable upbringing, it would be hard for someone like him to find anything interesting to draw on to formulate a compelling story. He hadn't lived the type of life those of us in the RGV had. Or any one who hadn't grown up living the suburban life. It was no wonder he couldn't write fiction. He never had struggled enough, been pushed enough to write about anything of substance. This comforted me, competitive as I am. I knew that in my life, I'd lived through some stuff that might get peoples' attention. I'd seen some really nasty stuff happen in the streets of my hometown. When I'd write about those stories, my writing instructor, he'd scoff and say it didn't seem realistic. I'd nod my head politely, listen to him talking like the beta male he is and tries to teach his students to be. He made no sense. All he proclaimed was gibberish. It was like talking to a child, listening to some of the stuff he'd say. Only he was a grown man.

This is where I will make a small confession. I am not unbreakable. Indifference hurts the writer. The artist doesn't offer this admission first hand, but in this case, I must admit, that for a while, this fiction instructor's ineptitude almost made me question what being a writer meant. Was it even an art anymore? Most of my peers enjoyed television shows and bragged about how they didn't read the books assigned in various classes. They considered a writing class to be as

follows: hand out snacks at the beginning of class. Ruminates for a while and get your mindset in order. Wipe your hands after you'd eaten the pizza someone had brought that day. After snack time, we'd start chatting about how great all of the classes' fiction was. I really don't mean to be mean. I've just had enough of the MFA program, and the university in general stifling my writing career. It is like they don't believe there are very many professors in The Rio Grande Valley who care anymore about their students' future. They have waved the white flag. And this fills me with sorrow.

All anecdotes concerning my first writing instructor have been a quick summation of my time with the stringy haired, hippie-type professor that "taught" me how to write. Before I continue though, I'd like to say for the record that I'm still baffled how this instructor, who didn't seem to know how to run a class, could be allowed to run a course in teaching students how to write? How? He couldn't write very well himself in my humble opinion. Before you think I'm being petty, understand, I have no reason to be. He liked my work and I got an A in his course, his only use in this preface is that I found him to be a poor writing instructor and one I could use to contrast with a writing professor that was actually good in both senses of the world. Good, in that he was on fire with his passion for literature. And good, in that he actually taught students about literature and writing. To end this digression, I'd like to stress how my first writing instructor didn't completely disservice his students. I'd like to say he wasted a whole semester of my time in learning how to write better, but he didn't. He allowed me to recognize competent professors from those that do the profession a disservice. No amateur should ever be in front of a classroom full of aspiring young writers and be given free reign to give their students terrible advice about writing. It's easy to influence young minds and teach only what one's learned from their own professors. At a certain point, a good writer—a good artist, should

be able to recognize this scam. I fell for various instructors tricks for years, including the scrawny writing instructor I started this whole digression about. I like to believe he showed his true colors towards the end and that my fellow grad student's recognized how hollow his words were when you'd knock on them for closer examination. That's just my opinion though. I hear some students say they like how easy his class is. Good for them.

If this introduction seems like it is not well put together, it is because I feel that this is the best means to tell the story of what drew me to writing. It is non-linear and events pop up seemingly arbitrarily because I didn't discover a magic formula that showed me how to write. There is none. You can't put words into a computer and have it chug out an algorithm of fine literature. Not even decent literature. It is impossible, even for a machine. Writers and true professors of literature that cared more about their students than their own success inspired me to become a better writer, and to take accountability for my work. True professors who were not afraid to share their secrets and pass the baton to the next generation of pupils whom they might deem worthy when the time is right. This preface is meant to show whom and what inspired me to finish a novel. To even dare to think my story was one worth telling. There are epiphanies in life and sometimes they don't dawn on you until much later. You think everything you've done has been for naught, that your work sucks. Maybe you weren't that great writer you pictured in your mind. Maybe I wasn't, but my second semester at UTPA showed me what it took to be a true scholar and what it would take to learn how to write quality literature.

I took on a similar work load my second semester at the university. I took an advanced creative writing course with Dr. Jose Skinner and a couple of literature courses. One of them was Contemporary Literature. I had my schedule set-up so that Skinner's class would be earlier in the afternoon and my literature course would be right after his. When I got to Skinner's class, I saw

this distinguished looking, grey haired man seated at the head of the classroom. He looked like an upgrade over my previous writing instructor so I was placated. Once he started teaching though, the familiar dread came in. He told us what we would be reading, which were short stories by authors whose last names I at least recognized, and then he went over everything he expected of us over the semester. It was a boilerplate type of class: Skinner took role, read the syllabus, asked us to introduce ourselves, and our majors. After that he stood up and talked a little bit about writing, which I appreciated considering that my last writing instructor hardly talked about writing at all. He assigned us a writing exercise for next class and sent us on our way.

On the way to my next class I noticed a man sitting on the bench where my next class was being held. He was wearing a professor's jacket, had a beret on, and was puffing on a cigarette. He looked intense, like he wanted to strangle somebody. I didn't dare look him in the eye. I walked into my class early and waited for class to start. All the students were excited, talking about their first week of school, which professors they were taking, if they'd gotten the books for their courses yet. I didn't talk to any of the student's because I found most of them silly. They talked about who the easier teachers to take were and if they had done well the last semester, and a few bragged about never having read a book their entire first semester of school. I was about to rest my head when the door swung open and in walked in that intense looking man. "Contemporary literature, right?" he said. We nodded our heads at him. Everyone in the class had stopped talking. He then explained how he wasn't going to read us our syllabus, that it was a waste of his and our time. He warned us though, "I'm not going to treat you like the other professors in this school do. Next week I'm going to bring a list of authors you *should* have read by now, and we're going to go through them. One by one, until we get to contemporary literature.

From there you'll pick at least six books, I don't care how many pages they are, if you want to read novels that are shorter than others, that's fine. Just read them." We all looked at him, a bit shocked by his candor. "I'm going to collect six reading responses at the middle and end of the semester. Everyone got it?" We said we understood. "All right, everyone out of here. I'll see you Wednesday." The class had lasted about 15 minutes and I felt like I'd been challenged and made to feel shamed for the first time during my first year at UTPA. What books were we supposed to have read? Why was the professor so angry? I looked at his name on my syllabus. Eric Miles Williamson.

In Skinner's class we work-shopped our exercises that were basically writing prompts. They'd offer things to write about like: write a story about a religious fanatic, or write from the perspective of a young infant. He was a bit cold during his classes, he'd offer help and encouragement, but it seemed to me that he never really committed to his students. Still, he was a massive upgrade over the writing instructor from the previous semester. He actually talked about how to write in the 1st person, the 2nd person, the 3rd, he lectured about voice and style. He actually gave us feedback and allowed us to critique each others work without fear of reprimand for saying anything "mean." He liked my work, but said I wrote too over the top and used too much unnecessary verbiage. At the time I had been reading a lot of Cormac McCarthy, so I thought that to write like him was a way to show how well read I was to someone who'd read literary books. At the time I thought Skinner was a fool for questioning my writing style, but he was right. The more books I read, the more I realized that Cormac was a combination of Faulkner and Hemingway. McCarthy is still a top-notch writer, but after learning about the writers that came before him, that *taught* him how to write, I realized that he wasn't the greatest literary writer of all time. He merely borrowed from the literary tradition and adapted it to suit

his own writing, as most great writers do. How did I learn about classic literary figures you ask? About how they stole from one another to make their own works better? Let me jump back to my second day of Williamson's class.

I saw him on the way to class again and thought we were going to be in for a hell of a lecture. He again looked pissed, and the cigarette smoke that left his mouth and nostrils made it look like he was literally fuming. I went to class not sure what to be prepared for. I noticed when I got to class that a couple of students faces I'd seen on the first day of class weren't there. I heard a couple whispering to each other that Williamson was tough, he made you read 6 books a semester, and how was anyone ever supposed to do that. It was too much of a workload. He came in right when class started and he handed us each a handout. On the handout were the titles and names of thousands of books and authors from various countries. They were even split up to show what century they had been written. When he walked up to the front of the class, it was the first time I'd seen him smile. "That right there, is what you guys should have been studying while you were studying here." It felt as if the whole class let out a collective gasp. "How many of you have read Shakespeare?" Half the class started to raise their hands, Williamson slammed his hand on his desk. "I don't mean *Romeo and Juliet* or whatever they taught you in high school. I meant how many have you have read Shakespeare outside of class." There were no hands in the air now. He shook his head with disgust. "All of you should be ashamed of yourself," he said. He must have noticed the deflated mood of the classroom, because he then said, "Don't feel bad. Don't worry, it's not your fault you haven't been taught the stuff you should have been learning. I'm going to show you guys what a real education looks like." And all that semester he did. Williamson would have us look at that list he'd given us on the first day of class and work his way forward. He talked about the importance of Shakespeare, The Bible, and Homer, and how

we shouldn't be allowed to continue our studies in English Literature without having read the basic canon of literature. A few members of my class rolled their eyes, they didn't care to study works that were thousands of years old. They wanted to read genre novels like I'd done when I was younger. They didn't care to learn about the literary tradition.

Skinner's class started to resemble my former writing instructor's more and more. He held tedious workshops where students would turn in 2 or 3 page short stories and have us analyze them. I didn't think he was inept like my other instructor had been, he just looked like he'd been dealing with bad writing for too many years now. He looked more like a writing professor should, and talked like one, but ultimately he wanted everyone to follow his Iowa model. He wanted every story to end with a Joyce-like epiphany. I learned later this was what students from Iowa were thought to write like. And their style was very bland for the most part. They were afraid to take chances, to fail. I left Skinner's class after that semester still confident in my writing abilities, but still did not have someone that I believed could elevate my writing to the next level. I was still missing a mentor.

As Williamson's course came to a close that semester, he asked us all to turn in the six book reviews and what we'd learned to steal from their authors. Let me explain the whole concept of stealing from other writers before I go any further with this preface. Williamson's main claim in his course was that all writers steal from other writers. He talked about Homer and the oral tradition, and how Homer likely pieced together various stories he'd heard orally and put them to paper. He'd tell us how Shakespeare would steal from Plutarch and was heavily influenced by other contemporaries like Christopher Marlowe. He told us about Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, Conrad, Joyce, Dostoevsky, Kafka. He told us about how the literary world

worked and how if we wanted to have any chance at success in it, we'd have to work as hard as he'd worked. He made us feel shamed and that was a good thing.

That semester when it came time to turn in book reviews, I turned in 3 books by Cormac McCarthy: *Suttree*, *Blood Meridian*, and *Child of God*. A review of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. One of Barry Hannah's *Airships*. And a short novel by Flannery 'O Connor entitled *Wise Blood*. All of those novels were like nothing I'd read. I left his class feeling that if I continued with the right work ethic and continued making my way down his list, I might eventually be part of the great literary tradition.

As I finished up my undergraduate career I kept knocking books off of Williamson's list, I took a course in Shakespeare and read *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *A Winter's Tale*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *King Lear*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Measure for Measure*. I learned to read Shakespeare without having to look at any notes to know what archaic words meant. Gary Schneider was my instructor in my course and he taught me a great deal in reading through the works of Shakespeare. He taught me to keep reading even if you didn't understand a word, and that to properly understand the works of Shakespeare, one had to have a historical perspective. I listen to his advice to this day. Whenever I'm about to start another play by Shakespeare I make sure to read the intros to get a better understanding of the play.

I got my Bachelor's degree in the Spring of 2014. I wasn't sure what to do after graduation, if I should continue my education or if I should look for work. So I spent my summer trying to write a book. It was hard work and I'd usually get stuck around page forty or so. I had no idea how to keep a story moving forward and how to create interesting conflicts. I'd been reading a lot of Faulkner and trying to apply Hemingway's iceberg theory to my own reading

which proved to be a disaster. LaPrade and Williamson had both explained Hemingway's iceberg theory, and I found it fascinating, but I often left too much out. I was writing my characters too reserved and left too much for the reader to figure out for themselves, which works if you're a great writer like Hemingway, but I was unable to apply it to my own works at the time. I also developed this weird writing tic through Faulkner that caused all stories to have characters with southern dialects. It was ridiculous in retrospect. I was trying to be like Faulkner and McCarthy and write page long sentences when I didn't even properly understand grammar. I was having fun working on my writing though. It was a form of therapy for me, as I was having trouble in my personal life. Writing was my escape. That fall I applied to the Creative Writing Program at UTPA. I was accepted and started to apply for classes. I saw that Williamson was teaching one on Form and Theory of the Novel. I signed up for it and wondered how much more Williamson could shame me. I'd been working my way through his list and was confident he would respect me and admire my writing.

Williamson did not respect my writing. He'd given us the assignment of reading a book a week while in his graduate course, and also required that we turn in a "respectable" amount of fiction for a grad student. I turned in 30 pages of a story that used high diction and elevated language with characters that spoke in southern accents just before Spring Break that semester. When we reconvened for the next class, Williamson looked pleased. He handed out fiction back to students and would let them know what he thought of their work and how to make it better. He said to one student that if he was going to try to imitate Kafka, then to be as absurd as possible. He told another student they had written fine work. And he told one older man not to change a thing, that his fiction was working. As he handed out papers back to students, he kept giving words of encouragement. I sat there, sure he'd saved my master work of writing for last. I

pictured myself as the new Faulkner. What he eventually said to me was, “Who’s the writer that wrote everything in a southern accent?” I raised my hand. “Don’t do that anymore,” he said. “You don’t talk in a southern accent and neither does anyone in this room. Do you know people that talk in southern accents?” I shook my head. “Then don’t write the way you do,” he said, his voice full of disgust. “Start this over and come back to me.” He had one last thing to say to me before I left his classroom, “And fix your formatting. No publisher is going to accept anything formatted like that.” I walked out of the room with my head down. I was embarrassed. I’d done everything I could to try to earn the approval of Professor Williamson and had failed terribly. I spent that whole night pissed off. I was determined to write something that would earn his respect.

The rest of my graduate teachers raved about my writing, patted me on the back. Told me how good I was. In my creative nonfiction course I started writing stories about my friends and the stuff we did growing up. My teacher, Dr. Braithwaite, encouraged her students to write about whatever came to mind. To not be afraid to write about illegal stuff that could get you in trouble. So I did. She thought the stories were too macho, and some of them she found unbelievable, but she respected my ability to create “scenes.” She was a good writing instructor and I credit her for helping me get the courage to write stories about my own upbringing. It was through her advice that I began to formulate a story I thought might impress Williamson.

As I neared graduation, I was advised to start looking for a thesis director. I’d taken another class with my first writing instructor and it was much of the same stuff I’d experienced as an undergrad: No harsh comments, bring snacks to class, everyone wrote well. He’d leave comments on my paper that made no sense to me as a writer, but I’d make changes to suit what he was trying to mold me into—A nice East Coast type of writer who writes about existential

angst and how bad suburban life is. I was not interested in any of that. I wanted to write real work. I'd read Williamson's novel *Two-Up* that semester and saw how he applied the literary techniques he'd taught us in his own class in his work. Between him and my first writing instructor it was no contest. I wanted to work with Williamson.

I found that getting a hold of Williamson was tough. I'd emailed him numerous times, had tried to catch him outside of his classes—all to no avail. When I finally did get in touch with him, it was actually an accident. A student in my fiction writing workshop happened to hear me mention Williamson and asked if I'd been able to get a hold of him. I said no, and asked him if he had. "Yeah, I did. He kind of scared me off to be honest with you, he sounded like he was crazy." I asked him to explain what he meant and he did. "What's his number?" I asked, after some contemplation. He gave it to me and I dialed it to save it on my phone. I wasn't ready to talk to him just yet. During class, I happened to be looking through missed phone calls when I noticed I'd accidentally dialed his number. I immediately hung up. I got a call back about thirty seconds later. I walked outside of the classroom to talk to him. "This is Eric Miles Williamson," he said. "To whom am I speaking to?" I explained that I'd been in his Form and Theory course and was in need of a thesis advisor. He told me he was interested and to bring my work by when the semester was over.

I called and texted the majority of that summer. He would respond sparingly. He would say he would be available one day and then he wasn't. I began to gradually accept the fact that Williamson didn't want to work with me and I'd have to work with my first writing instructor for my thesis. I'd just about given up hope when he invited me over to his house one day out of the blue. He said he was having some writer friends over, and if I wanted to work with him, it would probably be best if I met them. He also asked me to bring my manuscript. I got into my car and

drove the forty minutes to the address he'd given to me. I drove up next to this house that had a beat-up, hundred-year-old looking van in the driveway. I wondered if I was at the right place. He came out with his hair all over the place, he looked like he hadn't slept in a few days. With him was a man I would later come to know as Joe Haske, and they both told me to take a seat. I'd brought everything I'd worked on since my last class with him. Short stories, excerpts from a novel I was working on. He told me to hand them to him and he read through them with a scowl on his face. "You're still doing the same shit," he said. "You're writing in this elevated tone that no one speaks like." We hung out for a couple of hours and I started to tell him some stories about my friends and myself. Him and Haske laughed, and Williamson said, "Why don't you write like that in your stories?" I shrugged and said I didn't think they were very literary. "Have you read my books?" I told him I had. "What's different about the stories you're telling and what I write about?" Is my work not literary?" I assured him that wasn't the case and then Williamson told me to trash all of my work. Haske said maybe it could be improved, but Williamson wasn't having it. "This is the deal," he said, after trashing all my work. "I want you to write in first person from now on, and write about stuff you remember from growing up, those are always the easiest stories to tell. I want you to write a page a day, no questions asked. And you read whatever I tell you to, no exceptions." I agreed and drove home excited about finally having secured a thesis director whom I felt could take my work to the next level.

My manuscript is about a group of kids from the Rio Grande Valley. I borrowed the voice of my main character Jacky, from Dagoberto Gilb's *The Flowers*. I wanted to capture the accent of those from the Rio Grande Valley, and felt that Gilb's protagonist most closely resembled the accent of the Valley. This book is also heavily influenced by Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. The subplot of the novel focuses on a doomed romance,

and I drew from Hemingway to capture that feeling of unrequited love. Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* protagonist helped me shape Jacky's mindset. Lowry's protagonist is perpetually drunk and can't remember what (or if) he said anything at all. I found this technique fascinating and tried to apply it to show Jacky when he is under the influence of alcohol, marijuana, and Xanax. The works of Faulkner gave me an idea on how to handle multiple characters and perspectives, although that influence may not be apparent on a first reading. Williamson and Haske recommended some great books to me that all helped shape my novel. Without their help, this version of my novel would not exist. I thank them for that.

I've been working with Professor Williamson for close to a year now. I've shown him various versions of my manuscript and he's given me advice on literary technique, form, style, tone and voice. He's been a fountain of information. If you bring up a writer for instance, he immediately lets you know his opinion of them and whether he deems them worthy of his list. He also told me ideas that only a writer would think of. One time in his backyard he asked me to close my eyes and listen for sound. He asked what I'd heard. I listed everything I had heard to that point and he said, "You almost got everything, listen again." I did and still heard nothing. "The air-con unit," he said. "The reason you can't recognize the sound is because everyone always has their air-cons on in the Valley. If you want to be a real writer you have to listen to what other people aren't listening to, to see what they can't." It's small nuggets of advice like that that help me to become a better writer. Williamson has told me frequently that my work sucks and has shamed me on numerous occasions. He's made me angry on numerous occasions. He even made me consider giving up writing at one point. Through it all though, I've learned a great deal about literature. How serious an endeavor it is. I can hear him yelling at me sometimes

while I write in the evenings. I wake up in cold sweats knowing I need to read and write more.
I've developed a form of PTSD because of him. And I truly wouldn't have it any other way.

CHAPTER II

SAFE PASSAGE

“The Valley was desert, and it will be desert again.” --William S. Burroughs

“Death they knew, better than the law, and their memories were long.” -- Malcolm Lowry

Part One

I heard this story from a friend and it involves a pit. Not a deep pit, this pit was maybe 7x5 feet. It took the entire day to dig, which isn't easy to do when you live in the Rio Grande Valley where the heat burns all year long.

His name was Sergio. He'd gone on yelling and yelling about his dad and how everyone owed him something. He had short hair, he was skinny, and he was respected. But, then he ripped off the Aguilar's. They took no shit. They reaped what they sowed. And what they sowed that night still makes me smile.

They stripped him naked. He clutched his shriveled balls and blew out the 70-degree Texas air. His eyes accepted he would die. He begged though. He did beg. It makes me happy. I knew he'd get on his knees and cry for his life, as if anyone cared. He was naked. So he had to tell the truth. There was no room in the world for un mas puto. He had to quit acting like a bitch.

Looking down into the pit, my friends—the Aguilar's—shoot at him. Made him dance like he was a stripper. They kept it up all night. He pissed himself after the first shot. Pussy.

They weren't aiming to kill, they were aiming to teach. You fuck with someone's girl or fuck someone on a drug deal this is what happens. This is Weslaco, not Mexico. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. You act like a bitch in this city and you'll be treated like one.

When they finally pulled him out, they bent him over. Spread his asshole wide. They shoved a broomstick in there. I heard he didn't scream at first. After about 8 inches he howled. Damn. I want to taste his salty tears and shake my friends' hands. I'm proud of them.

True Wesloco's.

We were parked in the middle of an orchard, smoking weed and drinking 40 Oz Mickey's. Every now and then we made we sure we didn't see any cars passing along the dirt road on the other side. We were all sweating like we imagined our migrant parents used to when they told us their stories of going up north for work. Our faces were covered in sweat and our eyes stung from the constant drivel of moisture going down our faces. Our arm hairs were matted down like a mongrel dog's. But we were all smiling. I was trying to get some shade behind one of the trees. It was windy and our joints kept going off. It was impossible to keep a bowl lit.

"This heat, man," Joey said.

He was leaning against his Camaro and taking drags that would swirl from his mouth like dry ice. We'd pitched in for an Oz earlier and each of us had a joint in our hand. We ditched class and were waiting for school to get out so we could see if any girls were down to party. They liked guys with cars. Even though we were only freshman and sophomores, Joey's Camaro gave us a chance to compete with the older kids. We knew all the fields where cops wouldn't

bother us. All we needed was some fun girls, who didn't care if we partied in a hot, dusty field or an air conditioned house.

Fuck the rich cheerleader bitches. They only partied in some mansion jocks from the south side of town had. Our girls though, they just wanted to get trashed and we were happy to oblige. It was close to four and school was almost out, so we packed into Joey's car. It was tight, but we all fit. It was Knox, Charlie, Kenny, and myself jammed in that Camaro like we were about to be crossed over from Mexico by a coyote. We drove out of the orchards with a trail of dust behind us.

We picked up Brooke and Lynn from the Boys and Girls club across the street from school. They were freshman who liked to mess around. Lynn had giant tits and a round ass. Most importantly she could suck a dick. I dated her before she got a train run on her by 10 seniors during spring break. There were pictures of her with cum all over her face. After that it was over for me and her. We were still cool to mess around, though.

Brooke on the other hand was gorgeous. She was the one we wanted, but she only went for seniors. There was a rumor she was fucking some older boys at the university. Lynn got into the car and sat on my lap and Brooke took the passenger seat.

Kenny and Knox got dropped off because they always fucked it up with pussy. Kenny was a complete idiot when it came to girls. He had this was of staring at them like a creep and making stupid comments like 'you're just too pretty.' Knox was too much of a threat. He was smooth and girls liked his pretty face. We liked him because he could get roomfuls of girls to party, but the prettiest one always ended up fucking Knox. I wasn't having that today. It was Joey, Charlie, me, and the two girls. One of us was going to get fucked over, but we were fine

taking our chances. I tried not to let Lynn get me hard, but she kept moving her ass around my dick. She'd look back at me and smile.

“What’s the plan for today?” Joey said.

Lynn stopped grinding on me and Brooke looked at Joey like he was a fly she wanted to swat.

“You guys said you would party us out, well party us out,” Brooke said.

She reached into her designer purse and pulled out a twenty bag of coke.

“We need more of this,” she said.

She took off the twist tie and used one of her long purple fingernails to take a bump. She snorted the coke fast as a bullet. Her eyes dilated and she leaned her head back against the headrest. We were passing fields and canals. The heat outside looked suffocating.

Brooke took another bump and passed it to Lynn. Lynn used my guitar pick to take a bump and then she rested her head against my chest. Joey and Charlie were both looking at Brooke. Charlie asked for a bump, so she gave him a small one and told him to rub it against his teeth.

“Feel better,” she said.

“I do, I really do,” he said.

We passed a row of palm trees and took a left to our dealer Whammy’s house. The neighborhood he lived in was made up of shanty houses. Packs of strays roamed the streets and

there were steel and wood fences every couple of yards. We pulled up to Whammy's. Brooke turned around and I saw her big hazel eyes.

“You want to take a bump, Jacky?”

I smiled and said sure. Lynn rubbed her ass against my dick a little faster than before. She smelled like sweat and perfume.

Whammy wanted to fuck Brooke. He took her to the side as soon as she came in and offered her a free 8 ball. She asked what was in it for him. He said she didn't need to do anything except let him get to know her. Joey and Charlie were motioning with their heads to me that we needed to leave. Brooke looked at Whammy a while longer and said okay. Whammy was about to take her to another room to snort some lines when Lynn asked if she could come. She was sticking her chest out and was moving her tongue around the inside of her mouth. Whammy said, sure. He led them both to the room and we could hear them snorting and laughing.

“Great fucking party, Jacky,” Joey said.

He had a Mickey in his hand that he chugged while staring me down. Charlie was rummaging around Whammy's cabinet drawers looking for something to steal.

“Ah ha,” he said. He pulled out about ten dime bags of coke in a Ziploc bag.

Me and Joey looked at each other. We could hear the sounds of sucking and snorting through the thin walls.

“How long you know this guy, Jacky?” Joey said.

“Not long enough,” I said.

Charlie put the bag in his pocket and he walked toward the door.

“What about the girls?” Joey said.

“They sound taken care of,” I said.

“And Whammy?” Joey said.

“Fuck him, he shouldn’t have pulled that shit,” I said.

Charlie opened the door and crept out. Joey ran with his knees lowered to the car. I walked out and sat in the passenger seat. The wind blew hard. Thick pebbles of rock struck the car as we pulled out of the driveway. It was hotter than usual and when I took a bump I felt a dry sweat crawl down my skin. I felt the drip of the coke as it went down my throat. It made my whole body numb.

I kept thinking how Lynn and Brooke really fucked us over. Now we were fucking Whammy over. We snorted half the coke and sold the rest to friends. We made sixty bucks that day and got wired as shit.

Good times. The next day at school, me and Joey were cornered by two jocks. Brooke and Lynn were with them. One of them had his hand on Lynn’s ass and the other stood between Brooke like he was were her bodyguard. It was after lunch and they caught up to us on our way out of the athletics building. Their hair was styled with gel and they wore V-neck sweaters. They gave us each a movie star style smile and stood tall over us. It was pretty damn hilarious. They kept staring, but me and Joey didn’t look away.

“You owe the ladies some money,” one of them said.

Me and Joey moved up closer. Brooke and Lynne moved behind the two jocks. Joey comes from a family of tough Tejano musicians. He played the drums everyday, so his arms were huge and he moved faster than any six-footer I'd ever seen. The two jocks were about the same size as Joey. I stood about 5 inches shorter, but I was stocky. I liked to fight. I was good at it, too.

“Ladies? The only fucking ladies I see is you two pussies,” I said.

The jocks moved forward and put their faces up next to ours.

“What you want to kiss me or something, faggot?” I said.

They pushed me. Joey was staring hard into the other jock's face. The one who pushed me puffed his chest and looked around proud that he'd been able to nudge me. I got into his face and shoved it with my hand. He acted like a semi-truck hit him. His face twisted and he fell backwards. The other jock took a swing at Joey, but that was about all he did. Joey pummeled him like he was banging out some heavy rhythm on his drums. He kept hitting him till the school security guard came and broke up the fight. The guy I shoved never even bothered to get back up.

“Pussy,” I said, “get up pussy, get up.”

He stayed down the entire time and Lynn looked at me like I had an eight ball of coke in my hands. Of course the jocks said we started the fight, so we were trotted off to detention to spend the remainder of the week. I didn't give a shit, I liked to read anyways and that's what I did for seven hours every day for the next week. Joey just didn't show up for about two weeks, and when he came back, the school acted like nothing had happened.

It was a Friday and that meant Mexico. Progreso was about a half-hour drive from Weslaco. Even though we could drink, smoke, and chase girls all over the Valley, Mexico was paradise. Once you paid the two-dollar parking fee, you really started to get the sense that you were leaving home. There were guards with assault rifles posted at the American and Mexican border, but they didn't give a fuck about us. They'd grin at us when we staggered in and out of Mexico. Once we got on the bridge that separated the two countries, it was another culture, a culture that had once been ours.

Crossing the bridge, you could see the dark blue of the river. There were ripples and reflections of the moon that shone in the night. You could hear the sound of kids yelling for change, their mother's beside them holding buckets with mop sticks. The place stunk. The stench of grease, dirt, sweat, sex, and exhaust. It was all a part of the squalor that made up Progreso.

Friday nights in Mexico were where half the high school went to party. You'd catch the jocks who hated your crew and they'd smile and raise their drinks. Across the border we could all get along. We'd toast back and walk to our favorite joints. Usually our first stop was the pharmacy. We had a favorite that was two blocks into the city. At night, lamps reflected orange onto the streets. There was always the loud rhythm of cumbias and rancheros playing.

If we got really lucky we'd run into this sunburned, thin gentleman who played flamenco guitar like he'd seen some vision of heaven. He wore a black tuxedo and pulled his gray hair in a ponytail. There was always a ritual silence before he played. He crouched and played the rhythm sections with the palm of his left hand. His fingers moved up and down the neck of the guitar, playing scales that spoke to the soul. The other hand carefully plucked two or three melodies at once.

He never sang. He didn't need to. His music was full of sadness and loss. It sang the ancient history of Aztecs and Mayans. It wailed out against the kidnappings and violence that made the newspapers everyday in the country. His songs reached a meaning that was hard to pinpoint. The grace in his playing brought a sense of honor to all of us. In our drunkenness, along the lamppost's orange reflections the streets took on a mystical feeling.

It was easy to get girls in Mexico and that didn't even include Boystown, a neighborhood that was rumored to put every Red Light District in America to shame. We never wanted to go that deep into Mexico. That was where the real Mexicanos hung out, not just those looking to make enough change to feed themselves for the day. The clubs were enough for us. They were always small two story buildings. Some didn't even have a roof. They played music all night and shots costs a dollar a piece, beers 50 cents. The buildings had murals of the desert or Pancho Villa riding on horseback, his revolver up in the air.

Strobe lights lit the dance floor and girls writhed against each other like serpents making trails in the sand. If you walked up behind one and put your hand in the air, she'd dance with you all night. Even the prep and jock girls would grind on you like they didn't recognize you from school, like you were some fucking Don Juan. And the shots kept coming. Waiters dodged young, drunk Americans. They'd balance trays full of beer and shots as gracefully as a ballerina.

Charlie hustled from bar to the dance floor bring drinks and chat up as many girls as possible. Joey always sat and drank with a somber look in his eyes. Knox bounced from one table to the next, hitting on girls and taking shots from every table he came up to. The guys at the tables looked mad, then smiled at Knox's belligerence. The girls all smiled and some of the ones

he'd been with before would look away from him and become very interested in the guy to their left.

The music blared on those nights. The clubs played American top 40, old school cumbias, and rancheras. Teenagers danced and the alcohol was guzzled down glass by glass, until the bars closed at three a.m. The Mexican breeze carried the smell of beer, piss, and vomit through the early morning streets. On the way back, clusters of pockmarked Mexicans who looked thousands of years old followed us. Their calls were like the loud and heavy Sunday church bell. They'd shout for money, food, or alcohol. On nights when we were feeling good, we'd usually leave a couple of bucks in one of their baskets. After we gave money to one of the beggars, the rest clamored over them. It wasn't fun to listen to.

I'd been staying at my buddy Krause's house since I'd been kicked out of my place. Krause was a crazy white boy who sold coke and snorted it. He lived with his mom and his sister, two pretty women with blonde hair and blue eyes, which you didn't see often in the Valley. They even talked with country twang. Krause would have gotten his ass kicked many times throughout high school, but he'd made friends with all the gangsters and jocks when they'd give him late night calls looking for coke. He was tall and thin. He had dirty blonde hair that he wore long and uncombed. He dressed in black death metal band t-shirts and camo shorts.

His house looked like something out of some horror film. It was across the street from a VFW that had a real life antique tank on display. Weeds and trees with branches like tendrils hid his house from the view of neighbors, it was a great advantage to us. The house was strange in that it occupied a single plot of land that was about five hundred feet from a semi respectable

neighborhood. In that neighborhood, there were inflatable swimming pools and kids racing down the streets in sleek bicycles. They looked happy. On sunny days it looked like the suburbs.

There were many great nights at Krause's. His room had a cot, a 3-foot tall bong, and a cd and DVD player that we used to occupy most of our days. There were no actual doorframes in his house so if you walked around you could see what everyone was up to. His sister usually snuggled with various boyfriends and his mom worked nights as a hotel cleaning lady, so there wasn't much to see. I might have looked at his sister once or twice.

Krause and me smoked weed all day. A couple of times his mom had come home and asked for a couple of hits and we'd get her stoned enough that she forgot the shitty hours she worked. His sister always asked us for weed, and she'd do it in her panties. Krause didn't seem to mind, but I tried very hard to keep my eyes above her shoulders on those days. She was thin with full lips and soft looking skin. She had a way of staring at you that made you unsure whether she was just fucking with you or whether she really wanted to hook up, if only for the night. I thought I saw her looking at me but she would laugh while smoke swirled from her mouth and nose, making it hard to tell what she was really looking at.

One night she came in real late. She wasn't in her panties, but short gym shorts and a green bra. Krause was passed out and she asked if I'd keep her company outside. In her hands she held a bottle of Jim Beam, a bag of coke, and a joint. The holy trinity. We went outside into the backyard and sat on a wooden bench. Birds sang a song that sounded like the wind and I felt her move closer to me. I never really spoke with her alone, but I was too fucked to care. In the breeze of the night her hair blew sideways across her face and when she brushed it from her face she'd smile at me as if sharing some intimate secret.

She talked about her boyfriend, another boyfriend, and a friend that she wasn't sure was a boyfriend or not. All the while I asked her to pour shots. She handed the bottle to me and her fingers brushed against the top of my hand. In the moonlight her eyes were greener than grass ever got in the Valley, where the sun dried plants up and turned them pale until they withered away and died. After listening to her talk for what seemed a couple of hours she looked at me.

“What are you doing hanging out with my brother so much? You seem like a smart kid, I mean, don't your parents make a decent living?”

I gave her a look that I give when I'm mad, but she kept talking. The wind outside was picking up. It was fresh and cool. I told her I'd rather not talk about my family. She nodded her head and kept asking me about them.

“I mean, aren't your brothers up in Austin at the University? Why are you here? I'm not saying this in a bad way, we like having you around Jacky, I'm just asking for myself.”

I took another chug from the bottle and she lit up a joint.

“I don't know,” I said.

She bit the bottom of her lip like she wanted to ask me more questions.

“I don't know,” I said.

She was staring at me like I was lying to her or something. I felt good in the breeze. The warmth of the Beam coursed through my veins.

“I don't know,” I smiled and said.

She took a deep drag of the joint and blew the smoke in my face. She looked angry. I didn't want Krause's sister mad at me while I was staying at his place so I elaborated.

"I don't know, really. I don't know."

After that she looked at me like she was in a church wanted to convert me. I'd seen that look before. I asked her what she was still doing down here? The bench creaked and she laughed. She laughed like she was some kind of witch. In the dark of night, she started to look a little like one, too.

"You think I want to be down here?" she said.

She was still laughing, but I could tell this was one of those questions that doesn't really have an answer, so I didn't say anything. It was quiet for a long time after that although neither of us were tense. I heard Krause's door opening and he came outside in his boxers with a pizza in his hands.

"Why didn't anyone wake me up," he said.

I looked at him and the bottle, the smoke making halos around his sister's head.

"Shit, I don't know man," I said.

He laughed and his sister laughed her regular laugh. I smiled while Krause walked towards us and pulled up a chair next to the bench.

"Pass that shit," he told his sister.

We smoked until the sun came up and then Krause's mom dropped me and him off at Weslaco East. That was how it was for a good six months.

My friend Aaron was a jock, but he was a cool motherfucker. He only played because that's what they did in his family. Plus, that's how he got girls. We were all at Krause's house after another shitty day of classes. The shade of the trees gave us some protection from the sun. Knox and Charlie were drinking Mickey's. Me, Aaron, and Krause talked business while passing a joint around. Aaron was dressed in a Polo shirt. His hair was cropped short on the sides and his distinct comb lines in his gelled hair gave the impression he really took his time combing it. Besides Knox, none of the rest of us combed our hair and we sure as shit didn't use hair gel. Still, Aaron had a truck and liked to smoke weed. He was cool enough to overlook his stocky shoulders and preppy clothes.

"It's not that hard, I've done it myself a couple of times," Aaron explained.

Krause asked him about crossing roach pills from Mexico and now he leaned closer to Aaron. He asked Aaron about the profit.

"Well, they come in packages of a hundred, ten lists, each list has ten pills and you sell each of those for two bucks or if it's a friend and they want to buy more you can hook them up if you want."

Krause looked at Aaron with a wrinkled forehead.

"I mean, you don't have to hook them up, but people like it when you do. So, for the complete package—assuming you don't hook anybody up, you get two hundred dollars. They're priced fifty a package so that's a profit of one hundred fifty bucks."

"Hey, what the fuck, man?" Krause said.

Knox and Charlie had left Krause's enclosure and were talking to one of his neighbors, a senior named Claudia who Krause and I looked at when she'd wash her car. Aaron's feet shuffled and his eyes darted around a little bit like we were about to do a beer run or something.

"Relax," I told him. "Krause isn't talking to you, he's mad at fucking Knox and Charlie."

Krause left his mini-jungle with his t-shirt off and yelled at Knox and Charlie to get back inside of his property. Krause's hair had grown past his shoulders and he looked like a crazed hillbilly, yelling in the street like he was.

"What the fuck?" Krause said.

He was just outside of Claudia's lawn, on the street, and he was shaking his head. Knox laughed and leaned in close to Claudia, his hand brushing her thigh. Charlie stood looking at her. I knew that Knox knew Claudia through his sister, so I didn't see what the big deal was, but it wasn't my house, so I didn't say anything to Krause. Charlie was back on the street beside Krause and they were both telling Knox to go back to Krause's.

"Claudia said she'd give me a ride home," he said.

He looked at Claudia and she said sure. Krause stared at Knox and then kicked at the street.

"Don't be asking to come to my house if you're just going to bother my fucking neighbors you fucking faggot."

Aaron looked like he was getting nervous about the whole situation so I told him to chill out.

“Krause does this sometimes,” I said.

Knox threw a peace sign to everybody and got into Claudia’s car. Krause turned his back and walked back towards his house while talking shit to Charlie.

“I told you not to leave the fucking house,” he said. “You’re gonna get us all in trouble for P.I. or they’re gonna arrest us cause cops like to fuck with us.”

Charlie was looking away from Krause.

“I’ve been doing this shit a while, I know how it works, man. Seen it too many times.”

He shook his head as if he had to explain this shit everyday to someone. Charlie and Krause came back up next to me and Aaron. I took a hit from the joint I’d been passing around with Aaron and looked at the trees and yellow grass around Krause’s house. They were beautiful sometimes if you were in the right type of mindset. I was feeling good. Krause looked over to the street at Claudia’s car when she pulled out of her driveway and his eyes weren’t angry, they looked kind of sad. I was confused, Krause didn’t get sad, what the fuck was this?

“Krause,” I said, “Aaron’s saying we can make 150 profit selling just one package.”

Krause wasn’t looking at me. His eyes were still on the street. His mouth was moving like he wanted to say something, but he never did. He just sat there and nodded his head. I handed him a beer from the case of Bud I kept in his room. He said thanks. Aaron looked like he was about to leave in his truck so I ran after him. I motioned for him to roll down his window.

“Count me in,” I said.

“What about Krause?” He said.

“He’ll be fine,” I said. “When can you cross them?”

He looked up towards what should have been the sky, but was only Krause’s trees. He took a chug from his Mickey.

“We can go this weekend. Weekends are always better.”

We gave each other a fist pump and he pulled out of Krause’s house. I watched his silver pick-up pull out and into the street. There was a loud rumbling from his motor and dark smoke appeared when he peeled out on the freeway in front of Krause’s. Krause looked at all the black smoke and he asked me to bring my pack out. I didn’t want to drink it all, but I figured Krause wasn’t having the best day. Charlie was still here too, so I went and got it. We sat drinking till the sunlight became slivers of shadows that snuck in through the trees. By the end of the pack, Krause was in a better mood and was making plans for Mexico. He let Charlie crash on the living room couch that night, and I slept on the wooden floor. The creaks of the house and shrieks of the birds were already common to me. I was looking forward to the weekend.

Krause was sitting next to Aaron in his pickup and I sat in the back. The windows of the truck were down and the dry heat hit us in suffocating bursts. It was Saturday, the weekend had come and we were going to make ourselves some money, yes, we were. Once we got out of Weslaco, it was a straight shot down expressway 83 to Progresso. We cruised it slow, enjoying the view in the daylight. Palm trees sloped and their leaves blew with the wind, making them look like the leaves were shrieking in song. State troopers passed by us in black and white cruisers, we turned our eyes when they’d look in our direction. There were convenience stores all around at first, but near the border the stores morphed into little shops that looked like they were

made out of adobe. We pulled up to one of the stores a few miles before we had to cross the border and went over the plan.

Aaron was going to cross the roaches—he said he could cross at least three boxes worth without any trouble. Krause and me were going to cross the border with him, we wanted to see how he did it. I got the feeling Krause didn't trust Aaron entirely. He didn't say any of this to me or act any different towards Aaron, but I knew how Krause was with his cash. If he thought there was a way someone could fuck him over he didn't take the chance. In the shop, Krause and I looked around at all the stuff they sold while Aaron was in the restroom changing into some tighty-whiteys and putting duct tape inside his pants.

Krause played a country music on cheap imitation acoustic. Me and Krause were tight, but I never got why he dug country music so much. I just thought it was maybe part of his being white. I never thought of Krause as white, but when he'd start playing his country shit, I could picture him on a porch in Missouri playing banjo. I was feeling a little jumpy. There were old white couples looking at every souvenir like they were in Mexico already. Some even bought some of the orange, Mexican styled pots and those stupid mini driver's plates with peoples names attached.

I saw an old lady grab one for someone named Doug. Who the fuck would like being called Doug? I shook my head and went over to the Popsicle refrigerator. I was pretty damn high so I couldn't decide between a coconut flavored one or the chamoy flavored one, I ended up in line with both flavors in my hand. Aaron came out of the restroom and nodded his head towards us, Krause stopped playing and followed him outside.

I opened my chamoy popsicle and started eating it before I got to the register. It hit me like a shot of tequila sour. It made my eyes tear up a bit, and I took another bite. It was damn good. Somewhere in the middle of eating my popsicle I felt like people were staring at me. It was mostly old white folks. But, having grown up in the Valley, I wasn't used to seeing so many of them around me. I didn't feel any type of fear or anything, it just felt weird thinking everyone was looking at me. I always opened up whatever I wanted and ate it before paying at the register. It was no big deal, at least in the Valley it wasn't. Some of the older looking white dudes, who were either thin or on the paunchy side gave me a couple of sideways glances, but when I looked at them closer I saw they were having a good time. They were just as high as I was, enjoying the moment, ready to cross the border into a foreign land, full of strange beliefs and folklore.

We paid a dollar to leave Aaron's pick up at the parking space and we all went over the plan again. It was pretty simple. We'd cross, stop at a taco stand, grab a couple of beers, and then let Aaron do his thing. Crossing the bridge, there were no children or people by the river asking for cash in the heat. I figured they were out hustling some place else, made sense, better to catch someone when they were leaving drunk than when they were walking in sober. We crossed and the Rio Grande River looked green. Not a sick type of green or one that looked covered in sludge, it just looked green, like miles of mini-cacti had been opened and their juices had bled into the Rio Grande.

Krause was smoking a cigarette and Aaron, or Puma as we'd taken to calling him on account of his football team's name, was watching the river ripples. If you looked long enough you'd catch reflections of sunlight that shone bright as a mirror's light cutting directly at you. There were people all around us. Kids our age, young white folks, and old white folks walked around the city. Everyone was walking down the same tunnel and it was like none of us knew

where we were headed. At the Mexican checkpoint we were stopped, and two men in green uniforms spoke to us in Spanish. They asked us what our reason was for going, none of us spoke Spanish well, so I gave it a try.

“Vamos a comere tacos.”

I made motions with my hand like I was shoveling food into my mouth.

“Nada mas. Nomos quiere a comer.”

They looked like they didn't even know what I was saying and I was pretty sure I'd fucked up the whole trip with my bad Spanish, but the two men let us through without a problem. They even told us to avoid going too far into Mexico, which I appreciated.

Once we crossed, we saw the difference between Mexico in the daylight and in those manic high school party nights. In the daytime it was a constant hustle, kids came running up asking if we'd like chicle or dulce. Krause didn't know what they were saying, but he pointed to a couple of candies they were carrying and asked how much they were. I told Krause they were offering 8 candies for a dollar.

“8? Shit man, those go for a dollar a piece in Weslox. Tell him I want two dollars worth.”

I did and he handed us each a candy coated in chile with a watermelon flavor once the chile ran out. There were women huddled over baskets, looking as if they hadn't had a drink of water for days. They looked at us and asked for change. The streets smelled of cilantro, onion, and dirt. All the smells blended into one that was unexplainable while still being easy to see as the sun above us.

We continued walking. Knockoff sunglasses, gaudy jewelry, dream catchers, and pirated DVDs lined the streets in small booths. Everyone in Mexico looked like a drug dealer, like they were on the hustle twenty-four seven. We got to a pharmacy that Aaron said was the one. He said to chill while he made the deal with the pharmacist. Me and Krause sat down at a taco stand and ordered some Coronas.

Krause squeezed his lime into his beer and threw the lime into it afterwards. This caused the beer to foam and tip over the side of the bottle. I bit into a taco and watched tourists passing, usually old white tourists who all seemed happy drunk. I was used to happy drunks, but I was just as used to family getting wasted, breaking bottles, and getting into fights with each other.

It was nice to see everyone drinking on the streets and having a good time. Most of the tourists wore sombreros and would break into out of tempo dances, shouting loud like they were in Vegas or something. The taco's were covered in cilantro, tomatoes, onions, lettuce, and avocado slices on the side. They gave us two containers of salsa, one colored green and the other red. I preferred the red salsa, it mixed flavors in the mouth as good as any taqueria in the Valley. We were on our third beer or so when Aaron walked out bow-legged. He winced like he was walking barefoot threw burning coals with every step.

When he pulled in a chair to sit with us at the table, his legs were spread wide. His face was red and it looked like he was about to take a shit. He ordered himself a beer.

“What’s the deal with the walking?” Krause said to Aaron.

Aaron knocked a container of salsa onto the white table. We were sitting with beads of sweat running down our face.

“My balls”, he said.

Krause looked at him with a dazed look on his face.

“What?”

A young kid came and cleaned the salsa on the table and looked at us. The taco owner’s looked at us and at the boy. They kept their eyes on the boy. We ordered some more beer and tipped him. The smoke from the grill made dark circles in the sky.

“The edges are fucking stabbing my balls, I kind of may have overcompensated.”

“What do you mean?” Krause asked.

Aaron shifted around and scratched by his balls.

“I mean the fucking edges of these lists are making small paper cuts in my balls every time I move. Fucking sucks.”

“Shit man,” I said.

Krause nodded his head in sympathy with Aaron. The boy brought us another round and we thanked him. He nodded his head like it was no big deal and he walked off to take another order at the table next to us.

“You good to go?” I asked after a chug from my Corona.

Aaron nodded. “We have to go now though,” he said. “Finish the beers and let’s go.”

His left leg jerked involuntarily. Krause and me looked at him.

“I’m good,” he said.

We looked towards the border and said if maybe we should try a different plan.

“I’m good,” he said.

We made it through customs easy enough. We passed through the stiff motherfuckers without any hassle. Aaron had gone first. He smiled at them and said his trip had been fine. Just eating tacos. They didn’t ask about any of us drinking. I swear I smelled like Moonshine or some shit. I was leaking alcohol. When I got to the register they asked what I’d been doing. I said I was eating tacos, too. They waved me through.

Funny enough Krause was the one they stopped and asked a few questions. What he was doing in Mexico? He gave pretty much the same answer as me and Aaron had, but the customs just gave him more shit over it. They asked him where he got the tacos. How long he was in Mexico? Krause kept cool through all that bullshit. It took a good twenty minutes of them talking to him on the side but they let him go without searching him.

“Funny,” I told him, “they search the white dude while me and Puma here just walk on past.”

Krause said, “fuck you.”

We pulled over to the nearest gas station. Aaron walked inside and pulled the lists of roaches out of his underwear. Me and Krause drank and made plans for the next day.

I woke up to the sound of honking outside of Krause’s house. At first I thought I was dreaming. It was blurry, and I started losing track of days. We were making 500 a week selling roaches to everyone at Weslaco East and I’d started popping two or three a day to keep myself going to class. Then I started falling asleep in class. I’d try to stay up and would feel my eyelids

droop. I was always blinking, everyone said I looked chink- eyed. I'd smile and laugh because it felt like I was floating past their voices.

Everyone laughed and that made me laugh more. One time they woke me up in class with a security guard standing over me. He kept it cool and did the routine. He asked if I'd been drinking or doing any drugs? Everything was cool, he said. Then they'd take me to the restroom in a principal's office and they'd search me for pills. They ran their hands up my legs, patted my chest, and cupped my shit. It was all types of queer. Our principal, we called him Skunk, I swear I saw him smile when I was taking down my pants. Those days were always dreamlike hangovers. Sometimes it got so you didn't even know if what you were doing was actually happening. It was like being in a dream in slow motion and the dream always slipping away just as you were about to reach some epiphany.

The daylight rippled like a mirage. The lines were a distant white that was framed in black. The horn blew. I heard my mom's voice. I heard Krause's mom talking. I heard shuffling footsteps. I grabbed a Budweiser and chugged it quickly. My mom was looking at me with Krause's mom beside her. I heard the sound of Krause's forest outside. I got into my mom's car and thanked Krause's family while we drove off. I don't think we talked the whole ride home.

My mom worked days as a librarian and my dad was a DPS motherfucker. He wore his hair like a typical cop, buzzed bald on the sides and cropped short on top. He walked and talked like he was one of those fucking cops in *Law and Order* or some shit. He hated weed and always made a point to sniff like he was a police dog when I'd walk in. He never spoke to me unless it was to complain about something. I was the bastard child my mom had cursed him with in his

old age. My dad always liked to tell me how I was a mistake and if it weren't for me he'd be living it up in Hawaii, sipping a daiquiri, and bathing in the gentle warmth of the Island.

My two older brothers, Adam and Joseph, were about ten years older than me. They'd graduated high school top of their class and had gone to UT and Texas State. They graduated Magna Cum Laude. He liked to tell me that, too. When I went missing at Krause's those six months, I pretended I didn't have a dad. He always made sure to remind me first thing when my mom brought me back. I heard them arguing that first day. I was still drunk and that's what they were arguing about.

That boy needs discipline, I heard my dad say through the walls in my room. I tried to tune them out but there wasn't a TV in my room anymore and my guitar wasn't on its stand. My old *Nirvana* and *Pink Floyd* posters had been torn off the walls, the bastard didn't even try to hide his frustration. Pieces of ripped paper hung by tacks on the walls. I could barely make out what my mom was saying, it sounded like, "Wait till tomorrow Ronnie, let him sleep it off."

I heard my mom's voice ring "Ronnie" in a warped melody. Then, I heard the footsteps. He walked heavy my dad, stomping the floor like he wanted to make sure everyone knew he was boss. I heard the stomping and then he was knocking on my door.

He told me to open the door. I tried to stay as still as possible, hoping he'd think I'd passed out. He pounded and said to open the door again. I didn't know what the fuck he wanted to talk about. He always wanted to talk about my behavior. What the fuck was up with this behavior talk?

I lay still on my bed, trying to will myself to sleep. The ceiling fan whirled slowly and shot cool air at me. The knocking continued.

“Jack, I’m not mad. Just need to talk is all.”

My dad hadn’t hit me since I was a kid. I got up, ready for another lecture on drugs and my friends. When I opened the door I smelled the whiskey on him.

“How you been?” I asked him.

“Good,” he said, “good.”

My dad was about a half foot taller than me and probably outweighed me by a hundred pounds. He walked into my room and told me to sit down. I had a small desk in the room for studying. Me and him sat on opposite ends of it. His eyes didn’t blink the whole time, it was like he was wired on coke. When he talked though, you knew this motherfucker didn’t do drugs. He was one of those Reagan saps. He watched the news every night. He believed if I smoked enough weed I’d go crazy and start breaking into houses and mugging old ladies.

“Look here,” he said. “Jack, look at me.”

I turned my face from the tack on the wall where my *Nirvana* poster used to be and faced him. He was sweating so bad the whiskey smelled in his sweat, culminating in a steam of heavy, whiskey pungency. He looked at me and wiped at his hair. He let out a slow whistling sound that came out like a plane sputter before the crash.

“Look here,” he said. “I know you’re drunk and I can smell the weed on you. You can barely keep your eyes open for fuck’s sake. I want you to enjoy your high, cause this is the last time you’re going to be fucked up under my roof. Your friend Krause, that fucking hippie motherfucker, I don’t want you around him. Him and his mom, nothing but hillbilly trash. Heard she was giving bj’s at that hotel she works at, real classy lady huh?”

I was staring at my window now and watching the leaves on the trees make sweeping motions against the screen.

“Look here,” he said, banging his fist on the desk. “Look here, you stay away from that Krause, and all the rest of those punks you call friends. You want to end up in ‘cuffs Jack? I wouldn’t want to see it myself, though it might do you some good, but I know I’d never hear the end of it from your mom. If she wasn’t reading all the time she’d know how much of a fuck up you’ve been. Not anymore. You’re going to classes and stopping with this drug bullshit.”

My mouth was dry and his words hurt my head.

“You get me,” the way he said it was more of a threat than a question. “Shit, your mom wants you to start going to church too, thinks it’ll help straighten you out.”

“I don’t believe in that church thing, people acting fake and happy, the kneeling.”

“You’re going to church on Sunday, not another word.”

He closed the door behind him and I wanted to be at Krause’s where all the doors were open and where I didn’t have to hear stupid words like behavior or church. I went to bed that night and dreamed shadowy figures that tried to speak to me, but their voices only came out in fading whispers. I couldn’t make out anything the whispers said.

There was knocking on my door Sunday morning. Beams of sunlight slithered in through the edges of the curtain and I heard birds cawing outside.

“Jacky, it’s time for church, mijo. I left your clothes ironed in the laundry.”

I didn’t respond.

“Jacky, you need to go to church, you’ve only been back a couple of days.” There was an eager silence, and she said softly, “Please, do it for me.”

The bed creaked when I got up. I slipped on a white undershirt and put on some basketball shorts. I opened the door and my mom had one of those crazy church lady smiles on. She smelled like peaches and was dressed in a blue dress with white linings around the edges. Her heels were shiny and black. She had her hair tied back and sprayed.

“C’mon, let’s get you dressed. It’s only an hour before mass.”

I didn’t want to piss her off so I showered and combed my hair to the side. I put some gel in my hair. I looked at myself in the mirror and what I saw was a fucking Mormon faggot, you know, like the ones that ride around on bikes and go knocking door to door. I must have been in the restroom a while cause next thing I hear is my dad’s voice.

“Jack, you about ready in there. We have to leave in ten.”

I walked out of the restroom and my mom was all smiles and my dad nodded his head, his arms folded tight across his stomach.

“You look good son, all you need is a clean haircut and you’ll be looking like a regular person in no time.”

My mom gave him a look when he said that but I don’t think he noticed. I followed them out the door, the air outside fresh and cool. We drove a few miles on Westgate to a Catholic church that I didn’t know the name of. Everything looked real nice in the morning, the sun was rising and I could see dew glistening on the grass in front of two-story houses all lined up next to each other.

I guess church hadn't opened yet cause I saw a bunch of ladies and little kids clustered around the entrance. The kids all had gel on their hair and the same parted to one side hair-cut that Knox wore. The women all looked like the mannequins you see in malls except they weren't shaped the same. They had round stomachs and fat ankles.

When we got out of the car there was a silence like they made us do in school during the pledge of allegiance. I could tell everyone was looking at me while trying to make it seem like they were still talking about god or Jesus or whatever. My dad looked towards them and they looked away and I heard one woman say something like, 'let he that be without sin cast the first stone.' The other woman all nodded their heads and ran their hands down their dresses to smooth out the wrinkles. I poked my mom with my elbow and asked her what time church started.

I looked towards the church and you could tell that whoever made it had spent a lot of time working on it. It had a large cross at the center of the roof. The windows were all painted with angels and saints. The bricks on the church looked like something straight out of those pictures you see of castles in Europe. It looked like the most expensive place in Weslaco.

My forehead felt sticky. I hated gel and I hated the way people were looking at me. I hated the smell of all the different perfumes and colognes. It was like I'd walked into an infomercial on how to live your life the right way. Men in slacks and long-sleeved shirts shook my dad's hand and asked him how he'd been doing. The group of church ladies surrounded my mom and asked her what she'd been reading. She was opening her mouth to answer and then there was the sound of the gong. It made the floor shake a little and everyone's body stiffened with the echo still ringing in the air. It sounded again. And again.

Everybody walked into the church in a straight line like they were in elementary school. They all had a stupid smile and an excited blank look in their eyes. I guess I waited too long outside because my mom came and got a hold of my wrist. She led me inside. She let go of my wrist once we walked into the church.

It smelled like incense inside and everyone looked real serious like they'd just found out a family member died or something. There were long wooden benches that everyone squeezed into. There were bibles in front of us in little pull out trays. I saw a couple of people kneeling on wooden pads that popped out from under the seats, they were murmuring with their eyes closed and looked like they were trying to figure out how to solve some math question or something. I saw two clean shaven guys in white robes at opposite sides of a podium.

Then there was silence. The priest walked out in his black smock, his collar was white and straight. He was thin and youthful looking, like he could've been a student in one of my classes. He started his sermon on some prodigal son shit, and I felt like the whole church was looking at me and my family. My dad didn't show any emotion during the speech, but my mom's face was teary like when she'd watch her Lifetime movies.

The priest told everyone to get on their knees and pray. I didn't want to get on my knees for nobody, but everyone else pulled out those stupid wooden pull out pads and I felt my mom tug at my shirt. I kneeled like all the rest of the idiots in there. They said 'blessed be' and asked for forgiveness for so much shit that I got an idea of why these people kept coming back. They were sinners like me. I could tell in the way some of them would flinch with their eyes closed at certain words the priest said.

Adultery, I'd see Mr. Ramos who owned Tierra Santa golf course in Weslaco wipe at his forehead. Beads of sweat slipped down his face. *Envy*, I saw everyone's face tighten a bit. How was it possible to not be envious of somebody? Everyone wants something they can't have—it's the American dream. *Vice*, and I saw the PD, most of the men and women around the church tighten. I must have been having too much fun looking around at everybody, because the next thing I know, one of those clean shaven guy's in the white robes is poking at me.

He doesn't talk, but instructs me to close my eyes. I see my dad looking at me sideways so I close my eyes and I tilt my head up. I start praying that I'll never have to come to this stupid place again. I smell cologne and perfume and some other scents, like mothballs. At the end of the sermon I walked out with my family. The church ladies gave me hugs and told me how great it was to have me. The men nodded their heads at me and I nodded back. I didn't look any of them in the eye.

They didn't really like to leave me at home, but since I'd been back they'd started to trust me a little more. In the mornings before class, Charlie's mom would drop us off in her scrubs. She had heavy eyes from long hours at the clinic. In the afternoons, my mom would pick us up after work. The mom's had reached some type of agreement, and Charlie and I eventually reached an agreement of our own. It wasn't really an agreement, but something we'd do before getting into his mom's Sentra.

It went like this: Charlie would come into my house every morning to make sure I was ready. We'd take a couple hits from my pipe and blow it out of my window. Then sniff some Ritalin to keep us up for classes. We'd pop roaches and we'd walk out. His mom was a nurse, so

I was always paranoid she knew the real deal. I'd catch her eyes looking up at the rearview mirror and some days it was like I knew she was staring at me.

Her eyes would flick away and center, but I always knew she had an idea. She never did ask though, she'd sometimes say, "It smells a little funny in here." The trip to school only took about fifteen minutes, so it was no big deal. We'd pretend we were tired and act like we were trying to get some sleep when his mom said things like that. When we'd get dropped off at the campus, everything looked beautiful in the early sunlight.

At seven in the morning there was no heat. There was a light breeze and the feel of dew on the grass slipping into our shoes as we made our way to East High. There was the occasional smell of weed and exhaust in the air. Those mornings we'd spend huddled around the benches outside the front doors, an hour or so before first class started. The morning was the hangover of the dream. There wasn't much to do but let yourself get lost. When seven a.m. would hit and they'd let us into school, we'd walk in trying to hide the whiskey on our breaths and avoid eye contact with any adults. If they did ask though, we always said we were only tired.

I still sold roaches, but only to friends now. This was important, though it may not seem like it. This time I wasn't really looking to make money, I just needed enough to buy weed and beer since I never got any cash from my parents. I wasn't looking to get greedy and get myself thrown into juvie like some of my friends had, so I kept it cool. I only sold after class and to a few people I trusted to keep their mouths shut. Krause had started selling with a new guy, Flip. Me and Krause were still cool, but he seemed pissed that my mom had shown up to his place. I was working with Puma now.

I sold to the gangsters and Puma sold to everyone else. Working with Puma was good because he knew all the cheerleaders and jocks, and it turns out they all liked getting high too. I'd see girls passed out on their desks and hear their slurred speeches. I'd see dudes getting into fights between classes and I'd think to myself, Puma's doing good. It got to the point that the school started taking people out of class to give them sobriety tests. On the intercom in the mornings they'd say there was a roach epidemic and if anyone knew anything about it to please 'alert school officials.' I wasn't selling at school, so I didn't give a shit. Puma was taking the heat for that. He never looked worried.

I'd been back at home for about a month when I got a call from Flip. Yo, I need everything you have, he said. I was hungover from the roaches and his voice sounded straight. I told him to meet me at my place before my parent's woke up. I had about thirty roaches and figured I could make a quick sixty if I just sold them all to Flip right away. I popped two before he got there and smoked a joint to kick in the roaches. When he called, I went outside. I felt like I was floating on the tongue of a lizard.

I knew I was fucked as soon as I walked out. Flip was outside of his truck and Krause was in the passenger seat. There were two gangsters in back. I tried to play it cool and walked up to them.

"What's up," I said, "you got the sixty right?"

Flip looked at me like he wanted to kick my ass.

"Na, you're going to give us the 30 you have, or else we jump your ass right now."

I was about to say sure, bring it on, when I saw Flip's knife. The wind outside blew grains of dust into my eyes. Krause looked down at his seat after I asked him what the fuck? Flip, got up close to me and took the three lists from my hands. I saw the other two faggot gangsters in the back. I recognized them from school. Flip took a roach out and popped it into his mouth.

“Hey, at least leave me a couple, you all fucking me over like this.”

Flip stopped walking back to his truck and looked towards the truck. I saw the two back doors of the truck open and Krause still in his seat. Krause nodded his head and Flip popped two from the list and gave them to me.

“Here you go man, enjoy them,” he said. “And stop selling at school, that's me and Krause's shit now. You fuck up again, we'll come back and kick your ass, not just make you look like a bitch.”

I popped the roaches and nodded. I stared at everyone through the glass windows as they left. I promised myself revenge.

Puma told me to leave it alone. We were smoking outside of his parent's house with Knox and Charlie. Puma lived on the outskirts of Weslaco by a freeway so we always heard cars speeding by. We'd smoke on the side of his house underneath a big tree, so his parent's wouldn't give us any shit. The flies buzzed and bit at me heavy that afternoon. Knox and Charlie called me a pussy. I took a chug from my Mickey and told them they would have done the same thing.

“Fuck no, I would've told them to suck a dick,” Knox said.

Charlie nodded his head.

“Should've just taken the ass kicking, now everyone thinks you're a pussy.”

“Fuck no, no one’s said anything,” I said.

“Yet,” Knox said. He was smiling and dressed in one of his usual collared shirts, him and Puma both.

“Everyone’s going to think you’re a bitch,” Charlie said.

I ignored them and blew smoke into the air. I heard cicadas and a bird shrill in the bush. The sun smoldered.

“I don’t care, let them think I’m a bitch.”

My tongue was dry and my throat felt like I’d been yelling at somebody all night. My vocal chords and my voice sounded like an old man’s.

“They can talk and talk. You can tell them I said that. I’ll show them who the real bitches are.”

“It was a bitch ass move,” Puma said. “Let’s set up a fight, you and Flip. Neutral location. No weapons and no jumping in. I’ll bring some of my crew to make sure no one jumps in.”

“The jocks wanna help?” I said to Puma.

He was bouncing around like he was doing one of his football drills. A car sped past the freeway and we heard it screech to a halt. Birds cawed and the clouds in the sky were grey.

“They love kicking the shit out of punks and mojo’s,” Puma said, wiping the raindrops falling from his brow. “They’d do it just for fun. Trust me on this.”

I got home that day and my dad asked to smell my fingers. His eyes were glazed over and he sweated with flush cheeks.

“Why?” I said.

“Don’t talk,” he said. “You always think you’re the boss, huh?”

His voice was usually pretty harsh, like he’d never had a good day in his life. Today it sounded like he wanted everyone to share in his lifetime of shit. I was a little freaked out. He was still dressed in his uniform. I couldn’t hear my mom cooking or walking in one of the other rooms. He went to the fridge and popped open a Heineken and chugged slowly. His eyes were on me.

“Let me smell your fingers,” he said. “You’re stoned, I can tell. I remember being your age, all the shit I was offered. I might even have smoked once.”

He looked at my hands and said, “Let me smell them.”

I held out my hand and he smelled my fingernails.

“Knew it, I knew it.”

He was walking back and fourth around the living room. He took faster chugs from his beer and then he opened another. His hands were clutched tight. His veins were like spider webs around his forearms. His fingertips were pale. He got close to my face and looked me in the eye.

“This is the last time, okay?” I felt him slap the side of my face. “Look at me, look me in the eye. This is the last time, okay?”

He gave me a pat on the shoulder and said, “Don’t tell your mom about this. It’s a guy thing, okay?”

I nodded and went to my room. I laid in my bed with the sunlight creeping in through the windows. I called Krause’s house about thirty times that week. He never answered, and his sister always said he was busy or out. I liked the Krause’s, but I didn’t know where Flip lived so I decided to make myself noticeable. I knew Krause’s routine better than he did. He woke up in the mornings and would go make his drops from noon till midnight. That gave me a full twelve hours to show him and Flip I wasn’t about to be punked out by a couple of bitches.

I was fucked up one day driving around with Knox and Joey, when we passed by his place. Joey pulled his Camaro to the curb where no one could see us. Knox and me, we ran up to Krause’s room. We grabbed a brick and threw it against his windows. Then we went inside and pissed all over his room. Knox took a shit and stepped on it, leaving a trail of brown-green shit everywhere. I took his Washburn guitar and broke its neck. Then I smashed the body of the guitar into his TV. We walked out five minutes later making sure to stay close to the shrubs and wild branches filled with trees so no one could see us. When we jumped back in Joey’s car, he sped off as fast as he did when we’d do our beer runs. We stopped at a corner store where they only spoke Spanish and I went in and bought an 18-pack of Budweiser for all of us. It was a time to celebrate, so I splurged and we drank away the whole afternoon. We waited for the next day to see how Krause would react.

My dad woke me up the next morning. Someone had thrown a brick through his cruiser and he wanted to know what I knew about it.

“I don’t know, dad. I mean you’re a cop, you pissed anyone off lately?”

There was a loud thud when he shoved me against the wall. My body tensed but I didn't look away from him.

"You think you're funny, huh? Fucking comedian. You want to act like all those cholo's and addicts you hang around with. I'll show you what that's like."

He grabbed a pair of handcuffs from his dresser and told me to hold my hands out.

"No," I said.

"No?"

He twisted my arm till I knew it was about to break and asked what I'd said.

"I run across punks all the time, it's not too late for you. I'm not about to have my son embarrassing me every day. Now give me your hands."

I did and he cuffed me tight. I felt the circulation in my hands stopping and my hands were turning white.

"I have school today," I told him.

He looked at me as he left the door and locked it from the outside.

"That's okay, I'll write an excuse for you tomorrow."

I looked at the windows and he caught me.

"Don't think about breaking those or I'm really going to show you what cops do to people like you."

"Dad," I said.

He opened the door and a stream of light hit him, he looked like one of those born again fucks. He looked at me one more time and walked out.

It was a Friday. Krause and Flip found me the day after we fucked up his house. Krause cut his hair and wore it slicked back like he was a gangster from one of those early gangster flicks. Flip looked wired and was moving around like he was a pit-bull. I guess he was trying to scare me. I was with Puma and Knox. Flip stopped pacing and walked up to me. His breath smelled like shit.

“You fucking think we don’t know it was you, Jacky? Huh, you fucking 5-O motherfucker just like your pops.”

Puma and Knox moved away from us and Krause was looking at me like a fish flopping on dry land, his gaze distant and fading.

“Back the fuck up,” I told Flip.

He moved closer and I shoved his face with my hands. He moved and then came back with his fists up.

“You fucked up, twice now,” he said.

He swung at me. I took his hit and walked forward.

“You punch like a bitch,” I said, beginning to move my feet. “That first one was free, try and hit me again.”

He swung again. I ducked and tackled him to the floor. I put my forearm against his throat.

“You stupid mojo motherfucker,” I said. “You rob me in front of my own house and don’t think I’m going to do anything about it.”

He was looking up at me smiling like fake motherfuckers do when they know they’re beat. Krause had his face in his hands. Puma and Knox were watching the fight and looking out for any of Flip’s crew.

“I’ll fucking burn your fucking house down and kill your whole fucking family, you little bitch,” I said.

He tried to get up, but I punched him in the eye. I felt him squirming under me and I punched him again.

“You too pussy to fight me on your feet, Jacky?” Flip said, his eye already swelling.

“No.”

I got off him and when he was picking himself up I kicked him in the face.

“I don’t fight fair with bitch ass motherfucker’s that bring a crew to fucking rob me.”

Flip was bleeding from his nose and had his hands over it. I looked at Krause. “You’re fucking lucky,” I told him.

“You always were a tough motherfucker, Jacky,” Krause said.

The early morning light hit him and I was blinded for a second from the sun’s reflection on his blade. He walked slowly towards me. I saw Knox running to get help. When I blinked again, Puma had tackled Krause from the side. They were both fighting for the knife. I saw the school security guard come running with Knox behind him, and I saw Joey running with them.

Joey went up and stomped on Krause's wrist. He lifted Krause up and threw him across the pavement. The security guard was trying to stop us, but Flip had gotten up. Now he was trying to fight with Knox and Puma. Then I saw a whole bunch of teachers and principals come out and they separated us. Flip was saying he was going to kill me. Krause was in handcuffs. Before I had time to say what had happened, I was in handcuffs again.

When they asked me to make a phone call, I said no. It was Weslaco PD so I didn't think they would know my dad unless he'd helped them out before hand. I didn't recognize any of the cops, so I figured that was a good thing. They took us all in separate squad cars. The cop driving me was short. He had a puffed out chest and balloon stomach. His name was Ruiz. He was clean shaven and looked pretty young for a cop. I'd seen him looking at me through the rearview mirror a couple of times during the trip to PD, but I didn't say anything to him.

When we got close to the station he asked if I wanted to press charges on the kid who pulled the knife. I didn't want to laugh, but I did. I laughed like he'd just told me some dirty joke I hadn't heard before. His eyes tightened at the corners and he asked, why I didn't want to press charges. You know I can't tell you nothing, man, I said.

"Man? It's officer or sir, not man. Shit, I was just trying to help."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

"So do you want to press charges?"

"I'm good."

After that he didn't look at me for the rest of the trip to the station. He got me out of the car and grabbed me by the wrist. He led me into the holding cages in the police station. It

smelled like sterilized piss when I walked in. I saw Flip, Krause, Joey, and Puma all lined up against a wall. There was a chubby cop with rubber gloves calling them one by one. I saw Krause led into the room and then him leaving in an orange jump suit. Flip must have still been pissed because he got into it with one of the cops. The cop pushed him against the wall, and talked some weird number code into his speaker.

Doors slid open mechanically. Two cops came and took Flip to another room. Joey got to call his Grandma cause he was only sixteen, but everyone else was fucked. We were seventeen, which meant felonies for all of us. Well, maybe not, I thought. I could say I acted out of self-defense. Puma could say that, too. It was Krause who started it all. Him and Flip. And that was how I spent my first night in jail, trying to get my story straight so I wouldn't have to serve any time.

I was desperate after that. My dad wouldn't bail me out. I'd been in jail for a few hours. I slept on the cement floor. It hurt whichever way you moved your body. The cell smelled of dry urine and piss, and there were chunks of vomit lining the toilet rim. Everyone in the cell looked drunk or hung-over. Everyone mean-mugged each other. The older looking drunks didn't seem to give a fuck or even notice that anyone else was in a cell with them. We were all in the holding cell together. We stared at each other, waiting for one of the group to make a move. I got up to take a piss and Flip got up, too.

"I'll fucking piss on you right now motherfucker if you don't get out of my way. I should have stabbed both you pussies," I said.

Flip's face was bruised and his lip split open like a cunt. He got in my face again.

“Flip, you dumb fuck, he already whopped your ass. You want to get us all locked up for longer?” Krause said.

He didn't look at me when he said that, but I felt that Krause knew he'd fucked up by teaming with Flip. Flip, being Flip, went ballistic. He started banging his head against the cell door and winding up kicks to throw at it.

“You see this here, I know how to fight, I grew up in the hood. I'm fucking the real deal,” he said.

I looked at Krause for a second and he smiled at me. We both knew he was a pussy. I looked away from Krause and pictured how it would have been if I'd been the one holding the knife. I wouldn't have stabbed Krause, I couldn't believe he'd had the balls to try and stab me. Puma was looking at Krause, muttering under his breath that once he got out he was going to fuck Krause up.

“You're gonna fuck me up, Aaron? You?,” Krause said.

Puma shook his head at Krause. His eyes were wide like he'd just taken a huge line of coke.

“You don't fucking get it do you?” Puma said. “You're a white boy in Weslaco. You sell drugs, but there's other dealers. Hood dealers. Not fucking hillbilly bitches like you and your slut family.”

Krause moved close towards Puma and I grabbed Puma's shoulder.

“He's trying to get you to hit him, man. Calm down.”

I felt Krause's breath on my shoulder.

"You're a fucking pussy Aaron, can't even fight your own fights, just sucking Jacky's dick. Faggot."

Puma pushed against me, but I held him back.

"Shut the fuck up Krause," I said.

I felt Puma sigh like he'd just finished a beer run and he sat back down on the cell floor.

"That's right, listen like the bitch you are," Krause said to Puma.

I looked at the metallic silver of the toilet and thought of the gleam from Krause's blade. The light in the cell reflected off the toilet's edge and shone white, burning white like the glare from a trooper's flashlight. I saw Flip in a corner. I looked back at Krause. He stood straight, his hair still sleeked back from his gel, and it was the fucking smirk.

I hit him. His eyes went wide and then I slammed his head against the cell door. He swung and hit me, but I didn't feel shit. I banged his head against the door again. I felt someone punch me on the side of my face. I threw an elbow and saw Flip go down. Aaron jumped on him and it was just like the day before. Only this time, I'd fucked up. I knew it the second I punched Krause, but I didn't give a fuck. I kept hitting him till the guards all separated us and put us in isolation. When they took Krause out of the cell, the side of his head bulged and blood dripped from a cut on his eyebrow. I watched it drip, and spit at him.

"You fucking bitch," I said, "pulling a knife out, pussy. I fucked you and your homeboy up. How 'bout that, huh? You want some?"

A cop slammed me against the wall.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said.

He had me pinned tight so it was hard to breathe. I calmed down. The cop’s gaze lingered in the blood on the floor. He never relaxed his hold on me.

The next morning I’d slept about three hours. I would’ve expected my mom to call at least, but nothing. I didn’t want to talk to my dad. I knew he’d probably just fuck me over worse than they were doing here. So, I waited for my mom to show up. I saw Puma being walked out by the cops in the morning. I gave him a thumbs up and he nodded his head at me. I could see Krause and Flip watching him from their cell windows. They looked at him like he was a ship taking off into the ocean. I cupped my hands and let some water from the prison sink fall into them. I sipped out of cupped hands in quick gulps like a dog in the summer. I lay back on the concrete slab and used my t-shirt to keep warm. They kept the temperature in the fucking 50s or some shit. I don’t know how much time passed, but I heard banging on the door. Loud banging like gunshots. I looked up and it was Ruiz, the little fat guard who’d booked me.

“Cordova,” he said, “get your ass up. Judge is here.”

I got up and ran my hands through my hair. When I stepped out of the cell it was warmer. I blinked a few times to get used to the dim lighting. Ruiz had a pair of cuffs in his hands. He told me to put my hands forward and I did. I felt the cuff’s knife into me like tiny paper cuts all at once. I didn’t flinch. I just stared straight ahead. I saw Flip and Krause already handcuffed against the wall, their foreheads pressed. When they heard my name they both started talking shit. I ignored them and Ruiz told them both to shut the fuck up.

“Any of you make me look bad in front of the judge, I’ll make sure you guys are fucked. I mean, really fucked. They like young boy’s like you in prison. Especially the pretty white ones,” he said to Krause.

I saw Krause wanted to knock the shit out of the little fucker. I also saw that he was using restraint, Krause may have been a fucking traitor, but he wasn’t a dumb fuck. Flip started mouthing off about police brutality and Ruiz gave him a shot to his body.

“Shut your mouth,” he said. “I’m about to mace your ass if you don’t start playing nice.”

“Playing nice, you want me to play nice? You just fucking hit me in the stomach, that’s brutality.”

“Sure,” said Ruiz.

He shot out a stream of mace that hit Flip in the eyes and made him scream. Some of that shit got into my nose and it was hard to breathe. I tried to keep my eyes covered. I’d been maced before and didn’t want my eyes swollen for a whole fucking week. I kept my head down and tried not to breathe. Krause did the same. Flip kept trying to rub his eyes with his shirt sleeve and asked if he could wash out the mace.

“Judge is ready to see you,” Ruiz said.

He stopped Flip before we went to see the judge and said, “Don’t think the judge gives a fuck about anything you say.”

Flip rubbed the corners of his eyes hard and his face looked like those guys that have their mouths taped and want to scream. His eyes bulged out. Ruiz took us into the holding cell.

“If any of you all start anything. Fucking anything. I’ll mace this whole fucking room. Don’t make me look bad in front of the judge. Don’t you fucking even think about it. You got me?”

He was looking at all of us like we hadn’t heard this shit before. I knew how the fucking system worked. I nodded my head. Flip just kept screaming for water, the officer led him to a sink and told him to wash his eyes out. I looked at Krause’s swollen face and wanted to make it bulge more, make it look like he’d been attacked by a gang of wasps or some homeboys. Krause didn’t really look at me. He didn’t really look at anything but the blank walls. The smell of blood, mace, shit, sweat, and piss all blended into one toxic hit of some drug that would probably even kill me or Krause.

It smelled like Weslaco.

The judge looked serious. He walked into the room and everyone stood up, like they wanted to salute the dude. They stood till the judge told them to sit. I was standing in front of the bench with Krause and Flip. I felt the eyes of my mom and cousins on my back. I stared straight ahead. Everything was kind of like I was dizzy. I didn’t want to fuck up worse and pass out. There was a rush of air when everyone sat down. It felt like wind being sucked out of a room. It was a kind of whooshing sound, like someone had pulled the carpet out from your feet. The gavel gave out a big thud. I heard him talking fast, my heart pounded like a snort of pure cocaine.

“Jacky Cordova, you’ve been charged with possession, assault on an officer.”

I felt like the faces in back of me were screaming with their hands frozen onto their faces, like that one Dali painting. After they sentenced me, they took Krause and Flip back into holding.

When I was being led out of the room, Ruiz pulled me to the side. He led me out of a door across from the holding cells.

“What’s going on?” I said.

Ruiz didn’t answer. His lips were tight. The sound of his boots thumped against the floor like a nail hammering wood. He didn’t look at the cops and other people trying to get his attention. He took into me an office and told me to sit. He sat on a swivel chair. There were papers and mugshots on his desk.

“You’re a lucky fuck,” he said.

His fingers scratched at his palms. I didn’t know where he was going with this lucky fuck shit. I was thinking of running out of the room and yelling in case he wanted to try some gay shit on me, but he just sat there for a while and stared at me.

“A real lucky fuck,” he said.

He told me to stand up and to hold out my wrists. He uncuffed me and told me to follow him.

“Where we going?” I asked.

He didn’t look back at me, he kept walking down a corridor and I followed the echoes of his military stomps. He took me into the front of the station and I saw my mom and dad there. My dad looked at Ruiz and nodded his head. Ruiz smiled at my dad and shook my mom’s hand.

“He’s a good kid,” he said to my parent’s, his eyes looking toward my dad, “just needs to be straightened out a little bit, Ronnie.”

My dad shook Ruiz's hand. The other officers in the room looked away, but I'd catch their eyes looking at us every now and then.

"I'll make sure this never happens again," my dad said to Ruiz.

My mom nodded her head and thanked Ruiz quietly. I felt my dad's hand on my shoulder.

"You have anything to say to Officer Ruiz, Jack?" he said.

My dad kept looking at me and I tried to think of what they wanted to hear.

"I won't get into any trouble anymore," I said.

Ruiz smiled and patted my back. My mom and dad were sweating when they led me out of the station. I saw sweat stains underneath my dad's armpits. The sun hurt my eyes when I went outside, I blinked a few times trying to get my eyes to see right. The heat slithered around me as I walked. It dug trenches into my pores, but I didn't mind. It beat the hell out of those walk in fridge cells.

When I got home my parent's sat me down. My mom read from her bible, scrawling notes all over the margins. Dad had a glass of gin in his hand and didn't really look my way. He moved his eyes around, like he wanted to say something. He sipped and I sat there. I didn't know if they wanted me to talk first. Maybe they just wanted me to sit there in silence.

I sat in silence. I heard a car pass by outside and the shudders to the house were drawn. Mom smelled like that perfume she always wore and still had her eyes on the bible. It was quiet like the moon sometimes made you feel at night. He spoke and adjusted his collar.

"This is what you want to do right?"

“What do you mean?”

My mom looked up and then back down at her bible. My dad took a gulp of his gin and put it back down on the table.

“I mean you want this lifestyle, you want to keep selling drugs, hanging out with those fuck ups.”

“No, it’s not,” I said.

“Don’t interrupt me,” he said.

His eyes were looking right at me.

“I’m going to tell you this and I don’t want any arguing.”

“Jack, you’re already going to be 17. Either you lose all the friends, all the drug dealing shit, the fucking fighting, and I’ll let you stay under our roof.”

I knew he was serious and didn’t say anything.

“Jack, speak,” he said, grabbing my wrist.

I don’t know if it was because he grabbed my wrist the way he did or if I was surprised, but I got up pulled his wrist off me.

I heard my mom’s yelling and my dad’s and I was trying to get my head thinking straight. I saw my dad taking out his handcuffs, so I ran out the back door. He chased after me, but I jumped the neighbor’s fence and outran their bastard dog Henry. My mom yelled at me to come back. In the wind I heard her voice floating towards me. I felt the heat of the air and saw dead,

yellow flowers and sick looking trees. I kept running. My mouth was dry and my lungs felt like they were going to strangle me. It was a good twenty minutes before I stopped running and hid out in a monte for a while.

I sat there and felt hands crawling over my body. I wanted to smash them all so I went and knocked over their stupid ant house and all the ones close to it. When it got dark I walked a back road on a canal to Knox's house. He was drunk with a girl named Brenda. I knocked on his window and he opened it. He asked if I wanted to see Brenda's titties. He was fucking her. I looked inside and Brenda smiled at me. She moved them a little bit and sat up straighter so I could get a good look. I'd been selling her roaches and coke for a couple years now. She was good friends with me. Knox was naked and he went back into the bed with Brenda.

"Where are your parents," I asked.

Knox lit a cigarette and passed it to Brenda. Her eyes looked like fire with the reflection from the flame. She still had her tits out.

"They're out of town."

"I got into something," I said.

"What type of something?" Knox said.

"I'll tell you about it later, can I crash?"

"Fuck you, tell me about it now."

Brenda ashed the cigarette on the red ashtray by Knox's bed. I told them and Knox threw his pair of keys at me. I walked into his room and he told me to sleep on the other side of Brenda. I knew Knox was crazy, but I didn't want to get into any threesome.

"I'll sleep on the floor," I said. "Man, I can't let my best friend sleep on the floor, c'mon, keep your clothes on if you want. Jump in the bed."

I did and Brenda stayed between us. After a while she was fucking Knox and she grabbed my cock through my jeans. She fucked Knox while feeling my cock the whole time. She told me to grab her titty and I did. She asked for a roach and I said I'd have to wait till tomorrow for that. Brenda kissed my neck and smiled.

The next morning I took a shower with a beer by the sink. Knox went for an 8 pack of Bud in the morning and I felt all right all things considered. I scrubbed my body hard like I could wipe away the shit that had happened in the last few days. When Knox got back we drank and watched music videos on Napster. My parent's had called Knox's house looking for me a few times, but Knox hadn't answered since he recognized their number on the caller ID.

"Fucking shit man, you must of really fucked up big, Cordova."

Brenda laughed and said Jacky's always fucking up. She smelled like she was doused in perfume. I took a sip from my beer and watched an *At The Drive In* video. I didn't talk for awhile. Brenda and Knox were arguing over who'd drank the last Natural last night.

"Got any bud," I asked Knox. "No, but Bigg's does, delivers too."

I didn't have any money and I didn't want to say anything stupid so I asked Knox to front me for the bud.

“Sure,” he said. “Brenda, can you loan me ten dollars.”

I could hear the TV in the background and Knox’s house smelled like cigarettes. Brenda didn’t answer.

Brenda came in all pissed off looking and slammed a ten on Knox’s counter.

“There, you drunk asshole,” she said. “You look sexy when your mad, come over here and let me slap that ass,” Knox smiled.

“Fuck you,” she said and walked back to his living room.

The TV on the living room was louder and was on a channel about male models that Knox hated.

“Fucking bitch,” he said, shaking his head, “she probably wants me to fuck her.”

He had that look in his eye when he was hungry for some pussy so I asked him if he wanted me to walk over to Bigg’s.

I walked the back alley in Knox’s neighborhood in case my dad had sent anybody looking for me. Birds perched on electrical wires. They squawked at me and a couple of guys in homes stared at me. I ignored them and walked straight so they would know I wasn’t a pussy to be fucked with. A giant bitch of a pitbull growled at me from behind its fence and I growled back at it. I was pissed off, might sound crazy, but I wanted to fucking tear that dog to shreds.

“Fuck you,” I said to the dog. I growled again with dust hitting me street from the unpaved street.

I gave up fighting with the dog and kept walking to Bigg's. I got to Bigg's and he had two giant pitbulls outside his house. They were chained up and I knew the routine so I walked into Bigg's front yard. I knocked on his window. It was still fresh outside and I felt a cool breeze. Bigg's window opened a half-inch.

"What you need Jacky?" I gave him a ten and he said, "Bud or hard?" he said.

"Green," I said.

He closed his window and the dogs looked at me like they were ready for battle. He slid the sack out through a small crack.

"Tell Knox, he still owes me for that ten of the other stuff."

"You got it, man," I said.

I walked back towards Knox's house. On the way back I kept looking over my shoulder and listened for my dad's truck engine. All I heard was shouting and the sounds of dogs barking. The sun was rising and I wished it stayed down. A day without the fucking heat would really help out. I knocked on the door, the humid air cloaked around me like being in the middle of a pyre they used to burn witches and stuff with in the old days. I knocked harder.

Knox opened the door naked and told me to come in. I walked into his house and saw Brenda was in the shower. She didn't look at me and I looked away. I told Knox I was going to roll a joint. He said sure and went into the living room. I rolled the joint and listened to the flow of the shower water. It was good being at Knox's, the motherfucker really knew how to live. He didn't give a shit about rules, or orders, or anything. With him it was always the girls and the high. I gave Puma a call on Knox's cordless phone and got his answering machine. I heard Knox

and Brenda leaving the shower, steam blew out like bowls of smoke. Brenda had on Knox's *Pink Floyd* t-shirt and Knox was still dressing. He took longer to dress than any girl I'd ever met. I grabbed another beer and sat down. The daylight crept in through slits in the window shutters. Brenda sat next to me and Knox picked up his Epiphone acoustic. He strummed a few chords. I went over to his phone and dialed Joey's number.

"Jacky?"

"Yeah, Joey—"

"It's fucking six in the morning, what's up?" he said.

I could swear I heard him snoring midway through our talk but he agreed.

"I'll go and get you, you dumb fuck. I'm not going to Mex though, not that stupid."

Joey hung up. The dial tone rang in my ear like a piece of sharp glass and I felt better. A ride and a couple of homeboys was all I needed. I could make the rest happen myself. They call me Jacky Cordorva. I'm the king of this shithole called Weslaco. I heard Brenda telling Knox she had to go to work and it sounded like air on a car window about to break through, and I thought what a nice way to live. Knox was comfortable and he had a pretty girl to tell him that life was great. I listened to them talk for a while. Her voice was raspy. She even made sense sometimes when she'd lean forward and you could get a good look at her tits. Otherwise she was walking nonsense. No low-cut v-neck could hide stupidity. Her eyes shone like a deer about to be hit. She was stupid, just, you know, sometimes she'd let on that she was a little smarter than we all thought she was. I told Knox this and Knox, being Knox, laughed and took a chug from his Natural.

Pussy likes money and good-looking people, that's it. And fuck anyone that says different, that's the way it's always been. Knox drank from his beer.

“Being pretty's the only way to make a decent life. And what the fuck is life anyways? I hate god,” he said. “Sorry to say shit like that, but I hate god. I love him for the dick he gave me, but besides that, he ain't done shit for me.”

I listened to Knox and it was like hearing a loud tire horn grow increasingly louder. His voice called out for attention and the stupid shit he said made you laugh and think at the same time. He looked back at me real serious.

“Hey Jacky, I don't hate god, just so you know. I know you don't believe in that shit, but he's looking at us. I shouldn't have said what I did.”

I said I beloved in god, why else for Brenda's titties. They were a gift from the heavens, passed down slowly, they curved carefully, robust like the flame that lit Olympus. Where the fuck did I remember that from? Shit, I needed to go back to school, I needed something. I needed a fucking girl.

“How much weed you smoked, Jacky?” Knox said.

Cracked lines in his tiles circled the floor making little death images, but fortune—luck was the well off life. We had no riches to look forward to or plot towards, all we had were small chunks ripped from time where we wouldn't feel so bad. When everything could feel good for just a few minutes. That was what it was like at Knox's those few days. Brenda smoked a cigarette with those giant tits out and sometimes ash would fall on them. She'd blow the ash off her titties and smile. She made a great display when she brushed the ash off. She wanted to make

sure everyone was looking. I don't know if Knox was looking, but I looked at those titties like soft volcanic eruptions.

There was knocking on the door and I could tell it was a cop. I'd heard the way my dad knocked on my door enough times to recognize the sound of a cop. They didn't knock like regular people, they made sure their knocks struck you like bullets, like an early morning alarm clock. They liked to be theatrical. Knox told me to hide upstairs. The cop kept knocking, and Knox didn't answer, not even when they threatened to kick down the door. They must've gotten tired of kicking or yelling because after a while, the noise stopped. Knox looked out from his side bathroom window and saw that the cop's cruiser was still parked outside. I came back downstairs and sat in Knox's living room.

"There goes us going to the store for a while," Knox said.

My heart pumped and I felt like running. I knew that's what cop's expect you to do, so I thought of Brenda showering and I thought of the nights at Krause's before he'd fucked me over.

"You fucking jew motherfucker, fucking up the morning," Knox said.

Brenda was passed out upstairs, I guess she didn't hear the knocking or anything because she never came down. That or she didn't really give a fuck. She probably didn't give a fuck. Knox was looking through his couches, looking for a beer.

"Stupid fucking pigs, fucking my day up all ready. Fucking, Jacky," he said.

The room burned like we were standing outside in the middle of summer and I told Knox to turn up his air con.

"Fine you crybaby, fine," he said.

Knox came back smiling with two 16's in his hand. He poured me a cup and we didn't look outside to see if the cop was around. I felt better with the first sip and drank slowly.

At the drive through, Knox sat in the passenger seat. We were at Estrada's, the usual time. The sun still wasn't really up and the clouds outside were floating around the sky. I coughed and passed the joint the Brenda. The owner, an old gangster with a thick mustache, asked us what we wanted.

"Chulito, quiero dos sies de berranga," Knox said.

I laughed and Brenda dropped the roach on Knox's carpet. The owner smiled at us while I ordered and looked him in the eye. My facial hair stuck out like the yellow dead vines across the street. I said thanks to the owner and he said, have a good day and we left. I popped a 6 open and passed one to Knox. Brenda's eyes were beady, the way they got when she smoked weed and popped Xanax. Knox's was dropping her off at Charlie's mom's nursing school so his mom could make sure she passed the course. I slammed my beer against Knox's. The car was like a grey cloud.

The birds outside awed and Brenda was snoring a little bit. Across the street the dog's looked at us like dead-eyed gangsters, big, heavy pits chained up with deadbolt's. They barked louder and the car behind us honked. We honked back and flicked the guy off while we drove away. He was by himself but he looked at us and I toasted. He smiled. Knox and me, watched the rocks in the street flicking up sideways and we tried to figure out if we should get bud now or later. The dog's were barking when we drove off, the both of us debating whether to do a beer run or not.

We drove to Charlie's, but thought Charlie's mom might see us. So we drove into the alley behind his house. The car was fogged out and Knox was calling Charlie an asshole again for making us wait behind his house. Charlie came out with a Busch in his hand and walked over to the car. I told him to shut up and get into the car. Quit acting stupid, I said, you know that's the only reason we picked your dumbass up.

He got into the backseat with Brenda. She looked up at him and sat up. Charlie said if she wanted she could stay asleep and rest her head on his lap. Knox asked Charlie if he wanted a slap. Charlie smiled again and chugged from his beer.

Knox started driving with his eyes looking back and forth at the rearview mirror to see if Charlie was doing anything stupid with Brenda.

"The guy lives in La Seis," Charlie said.

Knox looked back at him and told him to open up his beer and drink it or give it back to him.

"Fuck you," Charlie opened the beer and didn't chug.

"Making us come all the way over here and your guy lives in my fucking neighborhood. You're a douche, you know that right. Fucking cheap skate," Knox said.

Charlie smiled at him and took a slow sip from his beer. Outside the sun was a light yellow and we could feel the breeze hitting us in cool bursts of air. It was still early enough in the morning that the heat outside hadn't turned the air humid which was a good thing because we didn't have enough gas to use the AC. We passed by a cotton field on the way to Charlie's and we saw workers picking cotton and throwing it into wastebaskets.

A small kid walked around with the wastebasket and a cowboy hat perched on his head. The workers all wore long sleeve undershirts under their heavy work jackets and had bandanas wrapped around their mouths. They wore sunglasses. When we passed the field there was an elementary school to our left. We slowed down because of the school zone and then we took a right in La Seis. Charlie leaned in the back of Knox's car like he was on a recliner and smiled while he sipped from his beer.

"Let me see the sack," Knox said.

Charlie walked back into the car and held his hands in his pockets for a while. He opened up the dime sack and we could smell the skunky bud—it smelled like those fancy Heineken's we'd steal from the store.

"Can I have a nug," Charlie said.

I took the bag from his hand. I rolled a cherry flavored blunt and we sat outside of Knox's house blazing, relaxed. The grey smoke drifted out of the open car windows and made tiny spirals when it went out into the air. I was sweating. Mosquitos buzzed by my ear. The sun hung in the middle of the sky, white clouds made halos around it. It shone down on all of us. I blinked and after the first hit the heat didn't bother me so much. Knox chugged another Natural.

Charlie asked for one of our beers, but Knox told him to shut up and finish his beer first before asking for one of ours. Charlie chugged the rest of his Busch and looked at us with his stupid smile and held out his hand. I tossed him a beer and it hit him in the stomach.

A couple of crackheads passed by us in the streets and asked if they could take a hit from our blunt and we told them to fuck off. Charlie wanted to get off, but Knox grabbed him and said

the crackheads always did that this time of the day. They rode off in bikes, their thin frames hunched over while they rode. After the first blunt we rolled up another. I took a roach and offered one to everyone in the car. They all swallowed one with a chug of beer.

I was feeling pretty good. Everyone else was, too. Brenda sat up and a button was loose on the top of her shirt. The radio hit with heavy, shaking throbs of bass that felt like tiny massage bursts. Red eyed, Charlie volunteered to do a beer run. Red eyed, we all agreed. Red of the early morning sun, we rode off. There was a sputter and I woke up. Knox turned his engine on and the car shook a little before it started.

We rode into the sun chasing the charred black smell that woke us every morning.

That summer we did beer runs almost everyday. We knew all the back roads and if anybody tried to be a hero and chase us, we'd lose them along some back canal or dirt road. Knox would drive, Charlie would get off and grab the beer, and Brenda and me would be lookouts. I always told Knox I should drive since I was the better getaway driver, but Knox said no one drove his Cadillac but him.

We'd hit up most of the stores in Weslaco, so we went to one on the outskirts of Donna, just outside of the Weslaco city limits. We all got a little quiet pulling up to The Mac's mart in Donna. We stopped by the gas pumps with the freeway right in front of us so we could speed off once Charlie got the beer. Charlie asked for a beer and we passed him one. He chugged it real quick and then his eyes focused like he was about to get into a fight.

Charlie got off and walked into the store. It's always the minute before your homeboy runs out of the store that is the worst. You're trapped in the car and if your homeboy fucks up you have to leave him there. If he pulls it off everyone might be fucked by a cop trying to chase

you down. We waited and I saw Knox with his hand on the steering wheel and his eyes on the expressway in front of us.

It had been a couple of minutes. Knox and I were looking at each other. We both knew that if Charlie wasn't out in the next minute or two someone had tackled him on the way to the beer aisle. Brenda looked bored in back of the car. Her eyes were wide and she was pulling at loose ends of her hair.

I saw Knox putting the car in gear. Then there was Charlie running out of the store with two 18 packs of Bud and a big dude running after him. Brenda opened the door and Charlie jumped in. The big dude's hands just missed Charlie's ankles. Knox hit the gas and we peeled out in front of the dude's face. He looked like a real mean motherfucker, some dude who was probably going to get his ass fired for not being able to stop a few kids from ripping him off. He hit the back of the car with his hands as we drove off and Charlie started yelling.

Brenda moved a little closer to him and Knox nodded his head. After the beer run we stopped by the Galvan's house. The Galvan's were two who already had a couple of kids each. They let anyone party at their house. Being cool with them usually involved doing a beer run or challenging someone to a fight. Once you were their friend, you were their *friend*. Anybody fucked with you they were also fucking with the Galvan brothers.

Eric the older of the two brothers came up to the car. Knox handed him a beer and he smiled. Eric had been in prison a few times and had sleeves of tattoos climbing up and down his arms and chest. Eric looked at Charlie and looked back at Knox. We got off and walked onto his porch under the shade. His younger brother Justin came out and he gave me and Knox fist pumps.

Justin went up and shook Charlie's hand. They both looked each other in the eyes the whole time and when they released their handshake Charlie offered him a beer.

His girlfriend Megan came out with their baby and told Justin to get back in and watch their kid. Megan was 17 and had been dating Justin since they were both in middle school. Eric came up to me and asked how I'd been. He motioned with his eyes for me to follow him to a tree that was out of the way so no one could hear us talk. The tree was thick and you could tell it had been there for at least a couple decades. People were proud of their trees in the Valley, it showed how long someone had been able to keep their property. Also, it kept everyone cool in the nine month heat that suffocated us all. My mouth was dry and I probably needed some water but that's not how Wesloc's do it, so I grabbed another Bud and popped one open while Eric talked.

"Jacky, Flip and his crew came by, they're looking for you."

He had his hand on my shoulder and was looking me in the eye.

"What'd you tell them," I said.

"What the fuck you think, I told them to fuck off and if they wanted to keep fucking around I'd get the crew together. They showed me their guns, fucking punk bitches. Justin came out with the semi and some other homeboy's let them know what's up."

"How many guys he have with him," I said. I lit a Camel Galvan had handed me.

"He's got about six fuckers with him, little faggot ass crew. I let him know it, too. He says when he catches you on the street he's pulling the trigger."

"I've handled worse than that bitch," I said to Galvan.

“I know you have, Jacky. These guys mean business though. I don’t want to see you end up in jail like I was. Not for a bunch of pussies who try to shoot at you. Lay low man, you know I got your back, but I know the way that crew operates. They’ll probably go after Knox first to get your attention. Maybe hit up your house.”

I felt my heart beating fast. I was sweating. I crushed the Bud I’d been drinking and threw it onto the pile of aluminum Eric kept to make a little extra cash. I asked someone to throw me a beer. I chugged. I told him I would lay low, but in my thoughts I thought of how I should have finished Flip off when I had the chance.

“Don’t look so serious, Jacky,” Eric said. “That bitch ain’t coming right now. He does he’s gonna get fucked up.”

We walked back to the porch and kept drinking till the sun started to go down.

I was smoking out with Joey cruising around in his Camaro. *Strung Out*’s latest cd made the car shake. Joey’s speakers pounded out the music, I could hear the manic frenzy of the bass drum, hitting triplets in three minute songs that kicked ass. Songs about cheating bitches, fucking corrupt pigs, and drinking beer. Joey usually listened to Tejano and some hip-hop, but he’d been jamming with me and Knox since Knox’s parent’s got him a Fender for his birthday.

Joey had been listening to the stuff Knox was listening to and then Joey brought his drum set over one day to jam. I sucked compared to both of them, but since I usually hung out with Knox during the day, I got to mess around on the guitar, too. I was happy to see Joey enjoying the jams. It’s good to see your friends happy when you’re feeling down and out. Makes you feel like you guys are in it together. Joey pulled up outside of Puma’s house and we drove through

his narrow driveway. Puma lived out in the country. There was a freeway directly in front of it. His house was invisible unless you got past his gates.

Puma's house looked classy. He had black steel gates and his two story house was made of bricks. It was carefully done, you could see that whoever'd done the cement hadn't slacked off. It was actually cool outside for a change and we were just glad that it'd been a pretty good day so far. We passed by Puma's brother Jason who smiled at us when we past him shining his brand new Challenger. Joey stopped to admire the car. Him and Jason talked about the engine and a whole bunch of stuff I didn't really care about. I had a Mickey in my backpack and we walked to the back of Aaron's house where there was a field growing alfalfa. Puma had a canal that separated his house from the neighbor's so we all felt pretty much invincible there. No one could see us cause of Puma's bonefingered oak trees. We smoked in a corner of his house that no one could see from any angle unless they drove up through the front driveway.

Puma had a blunt in his ear and a list of roaches in his hand. He broke off four for me and Joey. Puma swallowed one with a Miller he had in his hand. It looked like it might rain, the clouds looked charcoal colored and were swollen. We clicked our beers and popped some roaches and damn it, we felt good.

Joey lit a blunt he'd rolled up and we were all getting ready for the party that night. There was gonna be a five dollar fee, but it didn't matter. Pretty much everyone was invited and once you paid the five bucks you got a red cup and could drink from the kegs all night. I didn't even know the guys, they were friends of Knox and we'd been there to party a couple of times. We were pre-gaming, talking about the crazy bitches that would be there and wondering if we should bring our own.

“Stupid move,” Puma said. “Bring your own and best case scenario they get stolen.”

“What if we don’t give a shit about them,” I said.

“Then it’s a no lose situation, bro. Seriously, all you have to do is show up with a little coke, maybe a roach or two, some beer and we’ll be swimming in the pussy.”

Joey took a deep hit from the blunt. He’d cut his hair short recently and wore it in spikes.

“Yeah, probably,” Joey said.

When he passed the blunt to me I nodded my head and listened to the rush of the cars passing by on the freeway. The smoke tasted like cherries, it was some fancy hydro that Puma’s brother was selling. I didn’t think much of it, but after about fifteen minutes I was blown out of my mind. Joey’s eyes were bloodshot and he kept cracking up and pointing at trees and birds. He would sit on a lawn chair just laughing. I was kind of paranoid at first, like I got when I was on coke, but it was a different paranoia. I didn’t feel like anyone was after me or anything like that, but I also felt like I was thinking too much. I needed a beer to slow my process down. Only everything was also really slow, so when I talked it felt like my words would hang in the middle of the air for a couple of seconds before reaching Joey or Puma’s ears.

By the end of the joint we were in Puma’s kitchen raiding his fridge. Puma cooked some Ramen noodles in a giant pot and Joey cooked burgers that sizzled on the skillet. The food smelled like some type of heaven, we all drank and laughed throughout the whole thing. I grabbed a bag of Doritos and stained my fingers orange. When I looked in the mirror I saw my eyes were slits and I made stupid karate moves and practiced talking like Bruce Lee.

We ate in front of Puma's living room while watching *Half Baked* and I swear the movie had never been funnier. I burned my tongue from eating the Ramen noodles so fast and instead of getting full while I was eating, I just got hungrier. Eventually we all decided to go to the corner store down the freeway and get another pack of beer and some nachos to munch. Before the party I bought a gram of dro. Joey did, too, at a discount price thanks to Jason.

The party was in the middle of a giant field and from a few miles away you could hear the music from cars. It felt like the world shook under us. We had two cases of beer in the back, an oz of weed, and roaches. We passed by dirt fields and they looked weird without the shrubs that were usually there. I rolled a blunt and passed it. Charlie took a deep hit and looked all of us in the eyes. He made his mouth like a blowfish's before letting out all the smoke. He tried not to cough, but he ended up coughing worse than I had.

"Told you guys it was some good shit," Puma said. "My brother don't lie."

We laughed and knocked our beers together. It seemed like it was our last night partying. Like today was only meant for us, and if we didn't take advantage of it we'd end up miserable like the college kids we'd see after school picking up 9th and 10th grade cheerleaders after school. Our girls. We drove past a ditch and the dark ripples in the water looked like the red wavy lines that happened when you blinked too fast.

The noise got louder as we approached and there must have been at least 40 or so cars when we pulled up to the party and tried to find someplace to park. We eventually parked towards the edge of the guy who was throwing the party. We smoked some more and chugged till we felt ready to see what was going on with the party.

It was like we were in some trippy, beautiful version of heaven. Once we got there and paid the five dollar drinking fee, they let us onto the patio which was where the kegs were. Girls were grinding against dudes. They shook their asses to rap music.

Knox ran up to a keg in his red long sleeved Kenneth Cole shirt and slacks. He filled up his glass with beer. He chugged one glass, and then another, and then he chugged one more. He filled one more up and told the rest of us not to fuck up his game, he was going to get some girls. He walked off and patted some pretty blonde on the shoulder and told her if she would be his girlfriend. The girl laughed and said no.

Knox said something that made the girls laugh. One grabbed Knox's hand and asked if he would mind hanging out with them for the night. Knox smiled at us and then turned back around to the girls. I walked off with Charlie, Puma, and Joey stayed by the kegs. The sky shone dark blue that night, the clouds blanketed the stars and all around us there was laughter and the smell of weed. The field looked like a parking lot and we wondered how the hell the cops hadn't come by to stop the party.

I saw a Lupe Trevino sign on the guy's front yard and I nodded my head. Smart kid, I thought. Neon lights came on as a DJ took over the music. I saw Puma dancing with a girl. Charlie and Jesse were talking to a couple girls, too. I was smoking a joint when Lynn and Brooke came up to me. I don't know if it was me buzzing, but they both looked better than ever. They didn't have any guys with them, and being drunk, I walked up to both of them and asked if they wanted to blaze. They kind of laughed and said yes.

Lynn grabbed my hand and Brooke leaned her head on my shoulder. She asked if I had any coke. I was feeling crazy, like Brooke had never touched me like that. Lynn was being Lynn,

and I thought about those stories older guys talked about. You know, the one's where the girls wanted to share a dude in a threesome. I didn't think it was gonna happen, but I told Brooke, sure. I can get you some coke. She said thank you close to my ear and Lynn asked if I could shotgun a hit into her mouth.

I did and she pushed my lips closer to hers and in the background the music spun, like a continual loop that night. It just spun over and over, the moon hung over all of us in a hollow, white light.

When we regrouped after the party Charlie had a black eye and Knox was nowhere to be found. Some sheriff deputies had shown up at about three in the morning and flicked their lights at us. They didn't get off and arrest anyone, though, so I figured the guy throwing the party had connections. We waited till most of the cars had left and then Puma took us to meet the guy throwing the party. He was a tall, older dude. He told us he'd seen Knox dancing with a couple of girls and they had driven off in the girl's car.

“You're Jacky, right?” he said.

My body tensed up and I felt Joey stand taller behind me.

“Yeah, I'm Jacky,” I said. “Great party.”

I hadn't moved my eyes from his since he called me by my name and he looked at me hard for a good thirty or so seconds. A group of guys were moving around us like they were getting ready for a rumble.

“What the fuck is this?” Puma said.

The party host told me, “Flip offered me a hundred bucks to fuck you and your crew up.”

His face moved around while he looked at me. The guys around him all looked like they tightened their biceps while they looked at us hard.

“You gonna take him up on his offer?” Joey said, already moving towards the group of guys.

The party host told his boys to back off and they did.

“Aaron, you tell Jason he owes me one,” he said.

“I will,” Puma said.

We got to Joey’s Camaro and drove off. There were cops lights and the sound of sirens in the background. I looked at Joey’s face. He drove his car like he was playing a game of chicken. I saw the speedometer hit ninety. His palms were white from squeezing the wheel.

Puma woke me up the next day, he shook me hard, and I didn’t want to wake up cause my head felt cracked in two. I couldn’t see straight and Puma’s voice hurt my ears.

“They jumped Knox last night, bro.”

My ears felt like they were ringing.

“Those girls that were with Knox, they were crack bitches,” he said.

The sun from Puma’s guest room window hit me in the face and I closed my eyes, trying to make the sun go dark. When Puma told me Flip’s crew jumped Knox I tried to walk out off the room, but he held me back. His face was sweaty and I could smell liquor from the pores of his skin. Jason already called up a couple of homeboys. He was mad that they threatened me.

I heard thuds from the staircase and I saw Jason in front of the guest room door. He was wearing his Weslaco High School football shirt and had on jeans. He asked me to tell him what happened last night. I saw him biting the edge of his lips while I talked.

“So they threated you and my brother, huh?” he said.

Behind him were Fat Joe and Eric Galvan. Eric looked at me and he nodded his head. I knew what he meant and I got up.

“They knocked all his teeth out, those pussy fucks,” Eric said. “They held him down and kicked him in the face over and over. There was four of them.”

I touched the blade I kept in my pocket and ran my fingers across it. Knox’s parent’s were looking for him, and then his mom got a call from the P.D. saying they’d found Knox in Donna, in the middle of a field. Those fuckers left him to die.

Eric’s eyes looked farther away while he spoke, like he was watching a funeral procession. He pulled a gun out from the front of his jeans and looked at me. I walked next to him and Fat Joe, and I nodded my head. Puma was calling Joey from his house phone and Jason took a bump with Fat Joe from a bag of coke. I grabbed a leftover beer from last night and popped it. We waited outside the house for Joey to get there, the wind blew dust our way and the sun melted away at our skin.

This one was for Knox.

There were two cars we drove out that day. Joey, me, Charlie and Puma were in Joey’s Camaro. Jason, Fat Joe, and the Galvan brothers were in the Galvan family truck. We’d all agreed beforehand not to let anyone know about what was going to happen. We all had 40s in

our hands and most of us had knives in our pockets. None of us had any guns in Joey's ride. The Galvan's and Fat Joe were going to be behind us in case Flip or any of his crew decided they wanted a gun fight instead of a Weslaco street brawl. I'd called Lynn in the morning and thanked her for last night. I told her I had some stuff to do. She asked me what and I said, I'll let you know soon enough.

She hadn't heard about Knox yet, but I was sure she would know by the middle of the afternoon. We packed into the car and drove off from Puma's house. We were headed towards the south side of Weslaco. It was Flip and Krause's side, the white side, where if we got pulled over and questioned they'd take us all in for some bullshit charge. Cops always lied for each other, all of us knew that. We lit up a blunt and we took some roaches to get the edge off. The clouds in the sky drifted south. There was a gentle breeze in the air, no signs that we were about to go and take care of Flip and his crew. I knew they would have a crew waiting too—we all did, but we were ready. No one fucked with us in our town. The smoke in the car made us all sweat a little, and I thought I saw Charlie and Puma's hands shaking a little.

We coughed and followed behind the Galvan's truck. We knew that once we hit the south side of Weslaco, anything was possible. The cops there would side with Flip and his crew. We were pretty much fucked if we didn't do this right and get away fast. I pictured Flip's face with no teeth and I saw myself as the pliers. I wanted every fucking tooth ripped from his cavities. I smelled blood.

Vengeance is swift, and revenge is a motherfucker. We spent the whole day looking for Flip. We went to his house and all the dealers' houses we knew to ask if they'd seen Flip around. They said nothing of course, like any good drug dealers should do. We asked if they'd heard

about where any of his crew might be staying. Again, nothing. By the middle of the afternoon we'd stopped at the Galvan's house to regroup and tried to figure out where Flip and his crew had gone. Joey stepped out of the house, stomped on the gravel underneath his shoes, and walked towards Eric's porch.

The sun hung steady in the air, like we were in some old western or something. I stumbled getting out of the car and Knox's and Charlie's eyes were bloodshot. A car sped past us on the street in front of Eric's house. Puma talked with his brother underneath a large oak tree. Fat Joe looked pale. The Galvan brothers were arguing with Puma and Jason, who wanted to go home and rest—they didn't think we'd find Flip today.

I felt dizzy and wanted to get something to eat, but I couldn't do that, not with Flip fucking up Knox. I took a chug from my Mickey. Eric turned away from Jason and told him to go. Justin stood behind Eric with his arms folded across his chest, the glare from the sun made him look wavy, like he was some shroomed out hallucination.

Everyone left except me, Joey, and Charlie. We weren't about to pussy out. We all sat on Eric's porch smoking the blunt, the wind coarse and dry, the high of the weed making it seem like it was just another day of summer. The tone in everyone's voice was different though, it was flat and sinister, as though they'd gotten some glimpse in to a desert that stretched for miles, as if they'd seen some vision of hell that no one had anticipated. We drank and talked out where Flip might be hiding. Eric asked about Krause. There was silence for a while and we heard a car drift by, the leaves rustled lightly with the wind. Joey told him that Krause wouldn't have fucked with Knox like that.

“Fuck Krause,” Charlie said. “The motherfucker skimped me out on a dime of coke, I wouldn’t trust him for shit. And he tried to stab Jacky. Right, Jacky.”

I’d thought about Krause all day and wondered if he had it in him. He’d come at me with the knife at school, but I didn’t see him jumping someone like that, Krause was a businessman. Fucking up Knox wouldn’t help his business, but he did try to stab me. Justin came up to me and handed me another cold one.

Eric looked at me from behind his Mickey and I could tell this was some type of test. I walked to the side of the Galvan house and pissed on the weeds and grass. It was getting dark outside and I knew the rest of the guys already wanted to cruise by Krause’s to see if he knew anything. I zipped up and walked back towards everyone. Eric was still looking at me. I told them we should cruise by his house. It felt like the wind let out a sigh and everyone patted my back and pumped fists with me. “

We’re not gonna jump the guy if he didn’t do anything, Jacky,” Eric said.

I looked back at Joey and Charlie who wouldn’t meet my eyes and I wasn’t so sure. I got into the Galvan’s truck anyways. Joey and Charlie followed behind us in the Camaro. It was almost dark outside.

Pulling up to Krause’s in the darkness, it brought back memories of old times. Seeing the branches overgrown with leaves under the pale moon, I remembered nights drinking late with Krause. There were nights when his sister would smoke with us. She would talk to me as if I was somebody, not just some drunken fuck up. The nights when his mom would come home blitzed and let us drink from her bottle of Jonny Walker while bitching about the customers at her hotel.

I looked at the houses across the street and wondered what Claudia would think of the whole thing. Beautiful Claudia who washed her car with the amber glow of an Angel. The sound of country music and heavy metal in the night. I heard the wind singing to me a clear picture of the past, and when the car jerked to a halt, I blinked my eyes as if woken from a dream. Everything seemed still like we were all in a limbo state.

Galvan asked if I should get off by myself first or if we should just approach him as a group. I took a chug from my beer and said I'd go talk to him alone. It was around nine at night, so I knew his sister would probably be off fucking one of her boyfriends and I knew his mom was working the late shift at the hotel. I got off with my hands shaking a little, it felt like I'd just snorted a giant line of coke. I passed by the bench where I'd talked with Krause's sister that one night and then I was blinded by a security light. I couldn't see anything but a white glare and could only smell exhaust fumes from the freeway in front of his house.

I made out a figure in the light and I knew it was Krause. He had a shotgun and was pointing it at me. I put my hands up and motioned with my other hand for the Galvan's to hold up.

"You really coming at me with a car full off people, Jacky," he said.

His voice was hoarse, like he'd been yelling all night. I saw the barrel like an unblinking eye, it waited for me to make the first move. I don't know why, but with the gun pointed at me, I didn't feel any fear. I only felt the moment. I heard grasshoppers and saw fireflies glowing to my left and right. I made out the silhouette of Joey's car pulling up to the side of Krause's house and I knew he was going to start shooting soon.

I still couldn't see him through the fog light. I told Krause that we wanted to know about Knox. The headlights from the cars made me feel cornered by white light.

"If any of you fuckers tries getting out of the car, I'm going to fucking shoot Jacky straight in the gut. This is private property," he said.

I hadn't noticed, but one of the Galvan's had started to open their door before Krause yelled.

"As an old friend, did you have anything to do with what happened with Knox?"

"Fuck Knox," Krause said, "I didn't do anything to that guy."

He fired a round in the air, I heard the shells hitting the pavement that led to his room.

"I'm not fucking around you assholes," Krause said. "If you all don't back off, I'll shot this fucker."

I heard Eric yelling some shit at him and I motioned for Joey to drive off so Krause wouldn't feel so panicked. Joey's car moved down the street and parked at the edge of the cul de sac in the neighborhood across from Krause's house with its lights off.

"Where's Flip," I said.

"Fuck if I know, Jacky. I heard about Knox, but I wasn't with Flip last night. I was in fucking Harlingen playing guitar with my band, you can ask anyone. I wasn't there."

I didn't know if Krause was trying to buy time or something, or if his excuse was real.

“You have to have some idea where Flip might be. Come on man, you know the only way both of us get out of this is if you let me know where we can find Flip.”

Krause fired his gun towards Eric’s car, and I heard the truck door slam shut.

“Don’t fucking try to ambush me,” Krause yelled.

“Come on man, anything,” I said.

The air felt still, like before a hurricane’s about to hit. I thought for sure I was getting shot in the next couple of seconds. Krause pumped his shotgun again and I could hear sirens in the distance.

“I haven’t heard from that motherfucker, Jacky,” Krause said. “You need to get the fuck out, unless you want to get your ass arrested.”

Eric fired three rounds Krause’s way through his open window and then we sped off. I couldn’t hear much, everything sounded like an underwater echo. My heart was beating, but there was no excitement in this. It wasn’t fun like a beer run and made me feel dirty. Justin looked at Eric like he’d gone crazy and none of us could make out whether he’d actually hit Krause or not. Eric kept his eyes on the road and in the rearview mirror we could see a couple cop cars pulling up to Krause’s house. Eric drove the speed limit the entire ride home and none of us talked. I felt a coldness in my bones and I shivered a little bit. Eric’s eyes stared straight at the road and his hands were steady when we pulled into his house.

Joey and Charlie didn’t show up to the Galvan house, and I couldn’t reach their house phones. I ended up staying at the Galvan’s place. I heard car breaks all night and heard the sound of gunshots. It was the weekend, and in the fields around the Galvan’s house, automatic rifle fire

wasn't uncommon and neither were drunken pistol salutes. I felt as though a hailstorm of bullets was going to pierce through the wall and strike me dead all at once.

I wouldn't have minded. Life had fucked me over and over and kept asking for more. Another gun shot, good god! it was the Fourth of July out here, it was New Years Eve! Time for a new beginning. I was baptized as a kid, but I don't know if that really counts. If you can't remember someone dunking you in a pool of water and you probably screaming like you'd just died, it doesn't seem like it really would count. Somewhere in that baptism, that howl, that newborn, a child or soul is issued a personality. Did the pitch of the child's cry determine whether it was good or evil? Did excessive crying necessarily mean that the child cradled was guilty of some original sin?

My eyes were heavy. I wasn't sure if I was awake or asleep. I think I knew, thought perhaps, that I was in the Galvan's cot. I was, but I guess the day had gotten to me. I wanted to bite at the root of a tree. Daylight crept in through the windows and I gave up trying to sleep. There was a knock on my door and with the thought of religion on my mind, I opened the door to see Eric. He looked like a martyr. He had on no shirt and had sleeves of tattoos and snakes crawling up his neck. I followed him to his front porch and we had a beer and smoked.

It was around nine when the cops showed up. They had a complaint against Eric. There were two cars, their lights flashed dull in the dry Texas air. Walking with his chest high was Ruiz. He stared at me the whole time. I heard the sound of a toilet flushing in the background. Ruiz smiled wide as his stomach. He came close to me and Eric. He hit Eric in the stomach. Eric coughed and looked back up.

Ruiz looked at me and I swear he smiled.

“You’re resisting,” he said to Eric.

One of the other officers threw Eric to the ground. He was choking Eric with his forearm. Justin watched from the window, I heard his girlfriend screaming at him, but he just looked. He knew better than to interfere.

“I’m not resisting, I’m not doing shit,” Eric said.

That’s when Ruiz and his partner lifted him up and threw his head against the P.D. cruiser. They cuffed him till I saw his wrist shining small beads of blood that squeezed out through the handcuffs. Eric knew better than to ask for the cops to loosen the cuffs. He nodded his head at us and looked dignified when they threw him into the back seat of the cruiser. He sat up straight and looked at us. I couldn’t tell what he was looking at, but he didn’t look worried. He breathed steadily and looked calm.

“Your dad’s been looking for you,” Ruiz said.

I didn’t say anything, Ruiz’s eyes were large and looked like nickel sized pools of tar. The other cops with Ruiz questioned Eric and their hands were like snakes. They slithered around and made snapping motions in the air. I heard another cop asking Justin if he could come into the house for some quick questions. I heard the thuds from the cop’s boots and saw sweat drip down his face while he said, that he’d be back with a warrant. Ruiz shook me.

“Were you with these guy’s last night?” Ruiz said.

I felt Justin looking at me through his curtains and I said that I had been with them last night. Ruiz’s face got tighter and his hand squeezed my shoulder.

“Jacky, you don’t know what the hell your talking about. Your dad wants me to take you in, but they’re taking Galvan in for attempted murder at the Krause place.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

I was sweating. Flies flew around me, but I tried to not flinch. This was a different kind of game than the ones I played with my friends, higher stakes, but I knew it was still a game. I’d seen my dad draw up false police reports and seen him ask buddies to lie for him. I was going to play dumb, like my dad had told me a few times before he’d considered me a fuck up. I don’t know what anyone did, I mean, yeah I was with them yesterday, but I don’t know anything about any Krause shit. Haven’t talked to that shithead since he tried to stab me, you remember that, right?

Ruiz looked me up and down. I felt calm lying, like it was something I’d always been good at, but had never had time to practice. I was doing pretty well for myself. Ruiz wasn’t staring at me this time, he was looking at me, but he didn’t have that tough guy stare down look all cops put on when trying to get you to admit something. He looked at me like I wasn’t a complete idiot.

“I heard some shit went down at Krause’s, but I’m telling you I wasn’t there. Krause just wants to fuck with you guys. He probably had a drug deal go bad and got ripped off and tried to throw the Galvan’s and me under the bus,” I said.

I looked down and there was a handcuff strapped tight to one wrist. I shot my elbow back and I felt it connect with someone’s face. The cops yelled and I saw Ruiz reach for a black bottle of mace and then I couldn’t breathe or see anything. I heard the cops voices, but I didn’t make out what the fuck they were saying. They were trying to grab one of my legs. I kicked out and hit

somebody again. I felt somebody lift me up and throw me on the ground. I felt them kicking me and then they took me close to the pavement where the road was unpaved. They pushed my head down against the rocks.

I heard Justin yelling that he was going to report them. I heard an officer tell him to stop taking pictures. Then I heard Justin yelling at one of them to get the fuck out of his front porch unless they had a warrant. When they lifted me up, I felt blood dripping down my face and coming down my nostrils. I head-butted whoever was talking and they threw me against the car. They beat on me like it was a gang initiation or something.

I felt every blow. I could hardly breathe by the time they were done. I couldn't feel my hands—the cuffs cut off the circulation to my hands. When I opened my eyes I felt like acid was being poured in them. I got a small look at myself through the cruiser's rearview mirror and my face looked like raw meat. My teeth were loose and I couldn't breathe without mace going into my lungs. I started yelling at them. I threatened to kill their families. I was going to rape their daughters. I banged my head against the barricade and opened the big cut on my forehead, till it felt like a steady stream of blood had coated my face. I called Ruiz and the other cop driving me to PD a couple of faggots and offered to fight them. They told me to shut the fuck up, before they did worse. I kept yelling all the way to the police station.

I could tell you about the prison sentence they nailed me for—3-7 years. I could tell you about how my mom and dad never showed up to the trial, or how they left me rotting in the cells for months, but I will not talk of that. It does not change the facts. It is all past me. I am a new man.

After prison, I never went back home. When my mom would come to visit me during hours, I didn't step outside. No point in playing nice. Once, I fought the feeling of abandonment and managed to go out and see the woman whom I associated with my decline, my precipitous fall. She had more wrinkles in her face. She looked at me as though I were transparent—a ghost awakened, but I barely even was home for long.

Life is good.

I'm in a cheap hotel with a woman, Claire. I've been in this hotel for a few weeks now. Claire works days as a nurse. I stay home and drink. I find her quite the woman. She tells me we're going to move to Austin. I tell her that place is for faggot hipsters. With light rogue lipstick on, her auburn hair flutters onto the bed. I want to wrap my hands around her throat and tell her I love her. She likes my hands around her neck, erotic asphyxiation she calls it. She reminds me a little bit of my dad. You know, only with the roles being reversed. I reach for her while she slides into her scrubs. Her hips shimmy wonderfully. The cloth is thin, and I grab at her breast before she slaps my hand away.

"Don't start drinking right away," she says, "you know what it does to you."

I move closer to her and smell her sweat. It's salty and she smells of Lysol. I want to drown in it. The small ceiling fan circles above us, making waves in the air. There is one bed in the hotel and I have been living in it for several months. The ruffled bed shifts. It smells of sex—that sweet interlude.

I do not like it here, but at least here I am alone. She kisses me goodbye, I hug her from the bed and promise not to drink. When she closes the door I go into her medicine cabinet and take two of her Xanax. I'm sure she won't mind. I lie back in bed, grab a joint from inside the

bible in the hotel's cabinet and light it. I think I see her reflection in the window while she passes and walks downstairs. I am comfortable. I have no job and Claire supports even my most inane ideas. I once asked her if she would mind if I dressed in a tuxedo all day and she said yes. She said yes. Her eyes wide, a smile on her lip.

As if I would wear a tuxedo!

I who have worked so hard to achieve nothingness. I would rather burn all my clothes and walk around naked then dress up in tuxedo. She didn't get the joke and told me to start looking for work. She is a fool of a woman. She doesn't know what a scum I've always been. I am the sole's on the feet of every passerby. I have learned that life eats away at you slowly, the only way to numb yourself—to function, is through alcohol and pills. That is if you want to live your life happily. If you want to live in a nice house with a nice cushy office job, there's room for that. But you will find no happiness.

Happiness gave me an eviction notice a long time ago.

Knox knocks on my door. He knows that Claire is at work.

Part Two

After I served my time, Knox and Joey picked me up. Knox slapped my hand, but Joey, he gave me a big bear hug. I could smell a thousand grimy men and couldn't shake the feeling that it was me who smelled like shit.

“5 years, huh,” Knox said.

He was in green scrubs and his hair was gelled to the side. He'd become a nurse. I blinked several times, the glare of the sun, shone like police flashlight. Waves of heat came down from the sun. I loved it.

The daylight caught me by surprise. The horizon was full of light patches of red, yellow, and purple. It was a Dali sky. The clouds were white, almost muted. I drifted carefree. When I breathed I smelled the prison, but I also smelled the salt of the Rio Grande Ocean. There was a cool hit of breeze, and for the first time in months I felt good. Joey and Knox led me to the car, and I felt home.

We dusted off a six pack and drank until we neared Knox's place. It had a garage and circular driveway. The little fucker had done good for himself. He asked how I liked the house. Knox was living in an apartment on the outskirts of Weslaco near Donna. With nurse money, we were drinking everyday. He smiled and I told him his veeners looked good. Joey looked at me like I shouldn't have said that, and Knox just said, fuck you. I took a shower, the warm water was like a rapture. The bible made the time go faster in prison and sometimes the stories were pretty cool.

I liked the biblical one about the guy in the lion pit. Time, time, moonless nights howled the time. I read other stuff also, mostly Stephen King and *Fight Club*, but I also read some of those fat fuckers. Time has a way of hitting your brain, making you think different inside. You can see clearer. Those big books made sense and some made you feel like a howling, savage beast incarnate.

Crystal 3, the third of three Crystal's Knox was dating, was at his house. She had short brown hair and brown eyes like honey. Her fingers smelled like cigarettes the closer you got to

her. Pall Malls. Joey pointed to a case of beers and told me to grab one, I did. It was good to have a cold beer in my hand. I'd forgotten the feel of dampness in your hands.

We were in the car a few minutes and *The Blood Brothers* played. Joey asked if I wanted to play some guitar with their new group. Knox popped a Natural and shot a hit of smoke at me. He passed a police cruiser and I kept my beer low. I heard the sound of police sirens grate my ears and in the rearview I saw a cop walking up and knocking on a window.

I tried to nod my head, like I was following what the guys were saying. Knox told me about how they'd been playing shows. He told me how Krystal 1 had long legs and how her pussy smelled like crawfish. Joey laughed and said it was good seeing me. On the way back we passed roads that were familiar and welcoming. I got so fucked up I told my friends I missed them that day.

This is the part of the story, where I have to talk about Krystal two. It's the part I've dreaded the most. In order for you to understand the depths of lunacy a woman can drive a man, I must explain her. I must explain how I fell in love with her for seven years and how those seven years brought the greatest happiness and worst pain I've felt in my whole life. She lives on forever trapped somewhere in a box within my mind that I shall open now. Pandora! damn you, damn you to the ninth circle of hell.

I should never have opened the box. But alas, it is open. This is the story of Krystal. A face I see in nightmares and dreams, the love of my life. The slow, withering of the soul.

I first saw her outside at the Galvan's a couple of weeks after I got out of jail. I was twenty two at the time of my release and considered myself old. The Galvan residence looked pretty much the same: giant oak trees, some mesquites. There were cars speeding past the road in

front of us. Flies everywhere. The only difference was that Eric now had two kids and Justin had one. Eric was out of jail, too, for not paying his child support. I spotted Krystal sitting in a lawn chair. She was one of Eric's exes.

Her hair shone a radiant auburn and I heard her cursing out an ex-boyfriend. I asked Justin about her and he made a face sideways, like I shouldn't have asked. He was with his second baby momma. His new girlfriend looked about sixteen. I sat there trading prison stories with Eric and drinking Bud Light all day. The sun outside eventually faded to twilight and a distant star of the moon looked light purple. The hues in the sky were magenta. It was late at night when I finally approached her. I stumbled over to her and asked if I could sit down.

Close up she was even prettier than I thought she would be. I didn't talk for a while. She was petite and had her legs crossed. The moon reflected her skin—a light luxurious color. I felt my arm hairs perk up and my body cool. She looked at me, and that was the first time I noticed her eyes were green. I heard once in prison, that a person's eyes were the only way to know their soul. In her eyes I saw mania and passion. They glistened, invited. She grabbed my hand to ask if I rolled the joint yet.

I lit it for her. Her fingers grazed my fingers while she stared at me with those eyes. Through the smoke I saw her face and she looked like she was having a good time. She grabbed my wrist and blew smoke into my face and dared me not to blink. Her eyes stared at me the whole time. I heard everyone bullshitting around us. I told myself I needed to take her home or somewhere.

We talked more that night and when the sun started to come up she asked if I could give her a ride home. The Galvan's didn't want her to stay at their place. She was wasted, as was I, I

led her drunkenly to my car. I asked if she wanted to drive. I loved the way her eye's crinkled up and how she laughed. She laughed like she was in on some secret the world wasn't. She didn't have any care in the world, and why would she? She was beautiful as the morning sunlight and her eyes lit up a part of my soul I'd long thought dead.

I didn't hold her hand that night and tell her she could save me. I didn't tell her that I needed saving. We passed through fields and ditches. After a while she asked what I'd been in for. I told her, she nodded and sparked another joint. We cruised around that whole night smoking and she took me to a field across from her house. We parked the car in the middle of dust and rock, and she kissed me. I grabbed at her chest and she pushed me away. She licked my ear before I dropped her off and I thought maybe she might be my reward for those years in prison. She squeezed my dick when I dropped her off and asked if I hung out at the Galvan's a lot.

I told her I lived down the street. Hadn't she heard I was the prince of Weslaco, a genius. She laughed while smoke blew out her mouth and I inhaled it all, one slow, deep breath at a time. She lived on my side of town. I figured I'd see her again soon. I needed to see her again soon.

I got a call from her the next morning. I'd stayed at my parent's and I heard my dad's triple tap cop knock.

"There's a girl on the phone for you," he said.

He handed me the cordless phone and I answered, heart beating fast, I wasn't good at talking to girls sober. I grabbed the phone and heard her voice hoarse, like a sexy whisper before the plunge.

“I’m home alone if you wanna cruise by, smoke out and chill maybe.”

I told her I would see if I could get my car, and it sounded like the wind sighed when she did. Mom was cooking breakfast and Dad was sitting up, cutting up pieces of bacon when I walked in to ask. It looked like my mom was about to say no, like she was about to give me the full interrogation, when Dad stepped in.

“Jesus, let him go. It’s better than him hanging out with those people he calls his friends.”

My mother stared at the boiling eggs and I smelled them burning.

“That’s fine,” she said to my dad.

He looked at me and smiled, I hadn’t seen Dad smile in a while. I felt a little bit like I was being tricked. I was about to drive out in my passed down, engine fucked Chevy when he tossed me the key’s to his Chevrolet. I walked out of the door with the sound of my mom’s voice.

I wanted to brag about her to everyone, but I didn’t want to share her. I took her to fields and orchards to smoke and it was like the past five years in prison had never happened. Life was a ripple and she was the rain drop or gust of wind that nudged the water. I explained to her how I’d only been with two girls before. She had asked. She kind of smiled when I said two. In the greenery of the orchard her eyes shone beady and enthusiastic, eager and wanting. I asked her about her dad and she didn’t say anything. The wind blew her hair and I wanted to smooth it down for her, I wanted to touch her, but I stayed my distance.

I knew she was thinking something and I was happy looking at her. A simple world like happy makes a world of difference. After a while she said she didn’t remember her dad. I looked at her to see if she wanted to talk about it, but her gaze was already on the sky. She grabbed my

arm and we walked out of the orchard. Her head was on my shoulder. If I could have died then and there, I would've died smiling. I'd known her a week maybe and already she haunted me.

I saw her in dreams and when I was awake. I paced by my phone waiting for her to call. I even asked her if she might want to get out of the Valley and move to Austin. She never answered any of those questions. She had her own way of answering my questions with a look or a touch. She smelled like apple blossoms and going home those nights, I'd hug my shirt for her scent.

Things got good with Krystal. When they kicked her out of Weslaco High School senior year for smoking in the restroom and telling a room full of teachers to fuck off, I started to pick her up in the mornings and take her for cruises. My dad liked that I wasn't hanging around with my friends as much. I was feeling better than I ever had.

I was talking with her on the phone one day, when I heard knocking at my door. My dad was at work and my mom was working on the garden in the backyard. I hurried to the door, hoping my feet wouldn't make any loud noises against the mahogany floor. Looking through the Church Mural window, I saw Knox. He must've seen me looking because he started knocking harder. I opened the door and walked outside. I told Krystal I'd call her back in a few minutes. It was the middle of winter so it was actually chilly, and when Knox talked, you saw smoke blow out his mouth. Knox had a thermos in his hand and I could smell Vodka on his breath. Knox gave me a hug and tried to kiss my cheek. He kept smiling.

He pulled out a quart of whiskey. The sun reflected gold off the bottle. He said he just wanted to have a drink with his best friend. His car was parked outside so I told him to wait in

the car while I told my mom I was going to take off with a friend of Krystal's for a little bit. She kept clipping at the magnolia flowers and didn't answer me.

The whiskey went down smooth and my chest burned alive. We sped down highway 107 in the back roads near Krystal's house, past the ploughed fields and ditches. The sound of Knox and Jesse's band played in the background. The clouds were charcoal grey and peaceful to look at. Knox and Joey's band actually sounded pretty badass, they played some progressive punk shit. I asked Knox who was playing what. He passed the thermos back to me and took a deep pull.

Outside electrical poles lined the streets and the wires hung taut as rope along the fields. Clouds hung low. They dropped, like ghosts of the gallows. Brown dirt peppered the air, and when we opened the windows to the car, a chill blew in, sudden, like the sharp bursting of a shotgun shell. I scratched my face, and rubbed my hands to warm them. The whiskey was hitting me harder than usual, I hadn't really been drinking too much since I'd been hanging out with Krystal. She liked to drink, don't get me wrong, but she was more of a stoner chick. I kind of liked that about her.

"You're getting some pussy aren't you," Knox said. "Tell me her name."

I didn't say anything, I just looked at the black birds swooping low by the orchards.

"I'm not gonna bust out any more of the Jack unless you tell me who she is. What are you worried about, crybaby chicken? I get enough pussy on my own, I don't need your sloppy seconds."

I was staring out the window and my face had gotten tight, I was getting into one of those angry whiskey moods. I still didn't say anything.

“Fine, if you don’t want to tell me her name, I’ll just wait outside your house until I see who she is.”

I nodded my head at Knox and told him to fuck off.

“Fine, man, fine,” he said. “I didn’t know you’d get so sensitive about some pussy.

“Fuck you,” I said.

Knox acted like I slapped him and then he started to honk his horn.

“Woo,” he said, “my boy Jacky getting some pussy. She better be a fucking 8 at least if you don’t want to tell me anything about her.” “

She’s pretty,” I said.

Puma answered the door and gave me a bro hug. He invited us in to smoke. We went upstairs to his room and we saw his dad drinking a beer watching college football. When we got upstairs I saw that Puma’s room didn’t look the same. It was basically just his bed, all the posters and pictures he kept in his room were gone. Puma got into Texas State. He was hitting up all that nice white pussy up there. Of all of my friends, I’d always considered Puma to be the one that might get out of the Valley.

I didn’t really care about how much pussy he was getting up there, I wanted to know what the people were like—what the city was like. I wanted to know why it was everyone wanted to get out of the Valley so bad. I didn’t want to ask him much more about San Marcos, so I asked if he was still selling roaches. He stood up and went to his closet and tossed me a black vial with a white label.

“Xanax, bro,” Puma said. “Shit hits you better than roaches, and you actually remember what the fuck is going on. Try one, they go good with smoking.”

I’d finished rolling up the blunt and when he handed me the four quaterd pill, I thought, what the hell and downed it with my brew. Puma smiled and we all went downstairs to our old spot by his patio. About twenty minutes after I took the pill, I felt my arm hairs raise up. I felt a coolness run through my body and there was a euphoria I couldn’t explain. After taking a couple of hits from the blunt I felt like I was floating in some time warp: I forgot about all the shit that I’d been through in my life. All that mattered was the here and now. Laughing with my friends, it felt like old times, and it was old times with Knox laughing and Puma cracking up. I even forgot about Krystal for the next few hours.

When I got home my dad was waiting for me. I saw the light in his window on and I knew he’d stayed up to wait till I got home. I waited outside for a while. I didn’t want to go in right away, and I figured the longer I stayed outside the better chance I’d have of looking sober when I walked into the house. There is a creeping darkness that inches its way up your spine—like tiny prickles of fingernail scraping. My dad came outside. I stumbled and grabbed a tree. I don’t remember what he said. The night breeze stung, and I felt warmth, cool skin, and my eyes drooped. My dad led me inside and I thought he was doing me a favor. The only good thing to do would be to pay him back.

He stared at me when I woke up. There was phone ringing in the background. I couldn’t get up from the couch, every time I’d try it was like a bag of sand pressed against my chest. I tried talking, the sound of my voice unnerved me. I sounded like those drunks on TV, the ones that overact and never like someone who’s actually drunk. I didn’t know what my dad expected from

me, some type of apology? I wished he would get angry because the silence was absolute besides the ringing of the phone. I wanted to talk, but I couldn't stop hiccupping.

He looked at me and turned his head to look out of our side window, I'm not sure if he knew what to say or if he'd already decided how he wanted to punish me. I heard the sound of some sermon from my mom's room and knew she was waiting for my dad to start talking too. The phone kept ringing and after a while he answered it and said that I would call them back. He moved close to me and asked me to stand up. I did and the light from the sun burned at my temples. He was wearing a polo shirt and khaki shorts. He smelled like cologne and I could smell whiskey on his breath when he leaned in close. When he finally spoke, he took a deep breath, like he was about to dive underwater and needed all the oxygen he could get.

"You were doing so good, so good. I really thought I could trust you," he said.

I was getting pissed, hearing my dad talk all nice, like he actually gave a fuck. I sat and listened. If I didn't do what he said, he was crazy enough to lock me in a room or cuff me like he used to. He looked away from me when he spoke.

"I've thought about it and you can still see her, you can call her back today, even. But, if you show up this fucked again, or I see you with any of your friends, I'm throwing you back in jail myself, Jack. I won't let you shame our family anymore. I'd send you up to Austin, but your brothers won't have you. Your mom, god bless her, thinks everything can be solved through prayer. I wish I still believed in prayer, I did pray for you when you were in jail, Jack."

I opened my mouth to tell him he had no idea what I went through in jail, but he held up his hand.

“No, let me finish. Then you can talk, give me your reasons. You always have your reasons, huh, Jack.”

He walked out of the room and I heard my mom asking him questions. I heard him tell her to shut up and do it his way for once. I went to the garage and got the lawn mower running. My head hurt like hell and I was groggy, but I wanted to talk to Krystal, so I took the pain.

The beads of water hit my body slowly, gently, like the caring hands of a masseuse. The steam of the shower absorbed the sweat and dirt on my skin. I let myself marinate in the warmth of the water and then I shook my head. I didn't think Krystal would be mad at me, but I'd never gone missing before. She once told me everyone in her life just disappeared, kabooosh, they were gone like the father she never talked about. I wasn't that person, I'd promised her I wouldn't be that person that left. I dressed and my hands shook when I dialed her number. The phone rang. There was no answer.

I sat inside my room and thought about calling Knox or Joey to talk about what I was feeling, but I knew they'd probably just call me a fucking faggot for giving a fuck about some pussy. So I waited. I picked up an old acoustic guitar I'd bought when I was staying over at Krause's.

I played the few licks I knew. I played some *Nirvana* and *At the Drive In*, after a while I got bored and just started playing scales. I tried memorizing those, and when I looked up to my clock, I saw that only a half hour passed. My hand's still shaking, I dialed her number again. It rang, and rang, and there was the click. Someone had answered!

“You're Jacky, right?”

“Is Krystal home?” I said.

“She was,” said the voice on the other line, “but she got tired of waiting for you. She doesn’t wait for anybody, you know. This is Jessica, her sister, her *older* sister. I’ve never met you Jacky, but I’ve heard stories about you. My sister likes you, Jacky. She’s told me so, she told me everything about you. I’m going to be straight with you, our mom is never home, she’s a drunk. You all might get along but I’ve been taking care of Krystal since she was four. I’m only two years older than her, but everyone thinks she’s a cousin or my daughter, they never think she’s my younger sister. What I’m saying is, she waited for you to call, and she never waits, for anybody. I need to ask you this, and I want you to answer me truthfully.”

“Ok,” I said. “What’s the question?”

“Are you a good man, Jacky? You speak like a man, Jacky,” she said. “I think you could be good for my sister, but she has a habit of running the good ones off.”

“What do you mean,” I said.

“She took off with Justin Galvan. Don’t tell her I told you, but she was mad at you.”

“Justin,” I said.

“Justin,” she said.

I went to the spot in my closet and brought out my bottle of Jack. It was half empty. I’d make sure it was done before I went to sleep, one way or another. I drank straight from the bottle once I knew everyone at my house was asleep. I felt the Xanax kick back in. A coolness swept up and down my body.

I saw Krystal in the green orchards. I saw us smoking together. I saw her laughing, we were laughing. Smoke shot up into the heavens and merged into the clouds. The sun blazed down on us and throughout we stayed bathed in that golden hue. It was all a warmth so unlike the heat of the Valley. No sweat or moisture or hangovers. No one complained about how they wanted to get out and stay out. I burned all the bitterness away with the bottle. When I was fucked up enough, I opened my window and smoked out of an empty Pepsi can. Every hit made the Xanax kick in more and sometime around three I passed out.

I heard the sound of dogs barking. Cars with heavy bass passed and blasted shitty rap music. I imagined each one was Justin driving Krystal home. I knew she fucked him and that I'd fucked myself for caring. I woke up. I wondered how much of what I'd dreamed was true and what was me just being paranoid. I knew the code down here. Nobody was anybody's girl unless someone said that they were. If they weren't with somebody, they could do what they wanted. I knew I fucked up.

I looked at the clock next to my bed and it was one in the afternoon. I answered it thinking it would be Krystal, but it was Charlie. Dumb Charlie. He asked if I had any bud.

I hung up on him and dialed her number. It rang two or three times and then she answered. I wanted to ask her where she'd been and how everything went last night. She said fuck you, Jacky. Then I was confused like fuck. I tried calling her back every two or three hours, but no one ever answered. I still didn't have my car, so I called Charlie back.

I wasn't making her out to be some girl who needed to be saved, who needed to be something I could shape and mold. I thought about myself that day. It was good hanging out with Knox and the rest of the old crew. I hadn't been home in three days and hadn't bothered trying to

call Krystal. If I drank enough I didn't think about her at all. Knox had his own little apartment that wasn't too far from where he used to live. There weren't many neighbors and the ones that were there all drank beer and smoked weed, too.

Even though the neighborhood looked friendly, it still carried the grime of Weslaco with it. The men looked hardened, like their life had been shit since they'd left their mother's womb. They rarely smiled, just raised a hand to say everything was good on their end and to let us know we weren't bothering them. With a head nod for a goodbye, they'd take off to sell drugs or coach football or teach math, some job they didn't want. Their wives were all about thirty, most with three kids who stayed at home because their husbands didn't want anyone to talk to them.

The guys who lived in the middle class neighborhoods weren't dumb. They'd grown up in Weslaco and knew how guys here were like wolves, looking for any chance to fuck the chick they'd loved in high school. And those "ladies" being from Weslaco knew what was up, too. Most of them were teenagers when they got pregnant and most were with the first guy they'd fucked in high school. Their sweetheart. They thought about all the fucking they'd missed out on. So they let their husbands work and would have a plumber over all the time. If Knox's new neighborhood was La Seis, we'd let the other dudes in the neighborhood know what their chicks were up to. We figured these guys must have been fucking stupid if they couldn't tell their wives were fucking around on them.

At Knox's it was Sodom and Gomorrah. Knox was making good money as an RN, and being Knox, he couldn't help but show it off to everyone. He'd show up with an 8 ball of coke, some Xanax and beer, weed, and three girls that liked to party.

It was like being back in high school, but now no one had to worry about getting ratted out to someone's parents. Everyone was in their early twenties and going to community college or working as a bartender or hostess somewhere, and somehow Knox was a nurse. That's what cracked everyone up the most, because Knox would run down halls naked. He'd roll around and then get up and chug from a 'Weiser after snorting a line. No one gave a fuck though, Knox was paying for everything and even if you were broke or hiding out from something like me or Charlie, Knox had your back. It was old times except we could actually pay for everything we were partying with. We finally had a place and money to entertain the girls that never wanted to say shit to us in high school.

Knox woke up at five and cracked a beer while he dressed for work . It was the second day I'd been staying there and I still thought how fucked up it was that Knox was nurse Knox. He handed me a beer and I talked with him before he took off to work. Beer cans were in small piles scattered throughout the house and joint were on the kitchen counters. Charlie was passed out with a girl named Toni. I'd woken up next to her friend Remy. She was a French transfer student or something. She was in one of the classes Knox taught before he'd gotten his job as a nurse.

I don't think I'd slept with her, but I wasn't sure. I didn't care. Knox patted me on the back and told me we had ten minutes to kill a couple quarts. I chugged mine and so did Knox. The sun was just coming up and it seemed like we'd reached something unattainable—at least in the Valley.

We hadn't gotten out like Puma, but we were all pretty happy. We had money to party and Knox kept us entertained. Everyday blended together in a loop, a never-ending party. The

beer left me feeling good, and I looked out at the orange hues and airbrush blue of the dawn. I rarely woke up early enough to see the sun rise, so it really did surprise me how pretty the damn thing looked. I sat outside of Knox's porch, rolled a joint and watched him drive off. I took a few puffs and the smoke drifted into the air. I thought about calling her, but then I heard a crash from inside the house. I went back inside and saw that Charlie had broken a half-empty bottle of Jack.

Charlie was sweeping up the glass with a dishrag and he looked at me and put a finger to his lips. I relit my joint. Remy was asking me what I did for a living. She had black hair and olive skin, she talked in a weird whisper and looked more Italian than French. She was sitting pretty close to me, so I figured we'd probably at least fucked around last night. I had no idea who she was really, besides the fact that she knew Knox and was friends with Toni. Charlie had come back with some more green and a twelve of 'Weiser. I was in the guest bedroom with Toni. Remy asked what they were probably doing. I didn't answer and she went to grab us a pair of beers. She handed one to me, and I asked how she met Knox.

I heard Charlie coughing and thuds against the wall. They reverberated like small echoes across the house. Remy stood up ran her hands through her hair, the light from the early sun shone golden against her bronze skin. Her thighs were taut and she walked with a purpose. She grabbed me by my wrist and blew a soft engine of smoke into my mouth. I exhaled and volunteered a joint.

We went outside and the grass sparkled green. There reflections of white light striking while we sat and talked. The neighbors did not bother us and neither did anyone else that day. Charlie walked out smiling, his arm around Tony's collarbone and they joined us shortly after. We waited for Knox.

Everyone had taken off and I sat alone in Knox's apartment. I sat watching an old episode of *The Simpsons* and thought about the times after school where I'd sit in front of the TV smoking at his neighbor's house. We'd show up at Charlie's house, all laughs and avoiding eye contact with his parents, though our eyes were always white because we still used Visine back then. We'd make fun of Charlie cause he'd always be on the phone with his girlfriend. We sat in Charlie's backroom, eating pizza or bbq that Charlie's dad cooked. The tangy scent, the smell of chicken drifted out of the pit while we'd watch Charlie's dad glaze his chicken with his a beer in his hand. The sun would slide down the sky in the background. Orange spots and purple would be in the clouds.

His dad was a stoner, too. He wore his hair in a ponytail. He was tall and lanky. On weekends we'd see him riding his bike in the neighborhoods or down a back road. I didn't know until Charlie told me, but he'd always be smoking out on those bike rides. I liked the idea of getting to live to be that old and be content. I didn't think a guy could still smoke and drink beer and be a regular guy. I thought it was either you chose the straight edge life and become a lawyer or doctor—something that made you money—or you became worker like most of the other dad's I knew. The guys who worked teaching and cutting lawns, the guys who took the jobs no one wanted and worked in the middle of a Valley summer with the sun branding its way into their skin. The tan was a symbol that they had become an untouchable. There was no way for you to move up in life, and who could blame you, everyone you'd seen around you had the same problem.

There was no leaving the Valley. Not unless you become a kiss ass piece of shit who runs up to their boss with an espresso in your hand. To see Charlie's dad made me feel a little better about getting older back in those days. After Charlie would hang up with his girlfriend, his dad

would serve us. He'd give us plates of BBQ stuffed thick with chicken thighs, gobs of mashed potatoes, and yellow corn splattered on the plate. It was greasy and delicious. We'd chomp away, wiping our hands on our jeans. Our mouths full and moving, and it always felt like if life could be this good in the Valley, why were people in such a rush to leave?

There was a way to still keep living life the way you wanted without moving to some hipster town, or just moving because you could never stand the Valley. I didn't understand the idea of moving at all. I had everything I wanted in the Valley. Knox came back in from work at about six. He was with Joey and Charlie.

It was looking outside at the clouds and rain that got me to call.

"Krystal," I said.

"Jacky," she said.

That was all I needed to hear. I pictured an army lined up against us, pictured the whole of the America against us. I liked our chances. My dad yelled some bullshit in the background, but I ignored him. I thought I heard Jessica laughing in the back of the phone, possibly some dude, but I talked to Krystal. And what I learned was, she was just as fucked up as me:

First drink, first smoke: age twelve. She said pussy like it wasn't a curse word. She didn't want any relationship, she'd been through the grinder. She was lucky to have made it to eighteen. She'd been pregnant twice and aborted twice. I didn't ask how.

Her mom had three kids by three dads. I kind of thought the idea was cool at first, but then I pictured an army of rag-tag Mexican brothers and familia staring me through.

Seeing the shit that I was. And finally, I think her sister liked me. She was only a couple of years older than me, and would lean in close, like head on my shoulder close, and ask if I could take care of her sister. They didn't look the same: Jessica had straight black hair and pale skin. She looked tough. Ready to go anytime. Real Valley girl.

K was beautiful in that she made everything she did seem like a movie. She moved with a delicacy of the hips that could not be taught, her stomach was taut, well-defined—her hair a mane of auburn. When she'd look me in the eyes, I would look as long as I could, hoping to catch a piece of whatever original sin had ignored. I picked her up after school and I knew that all the teachers hated me. I was driving in Knox's Benz and usually chugging a beer in the car when I'd pick K up. She never minded. The first time I kissed her was in that car. It was a shotgun-blunt hit. I'd drive her home afterwards and we'd sit talking.

The smell of grass and the oranges in the orchard blew at me in soft gusts of gentle wind. Her hand gripped mine most nights. Her hair matted and flattened through laying in dirt—she never looked so radiant. For that was the only word to use to describe how she looked on the days when the shade was high and palm tree leaves blew in the distance like whispers.

That's the end of my list so far. I travel forward. In Greek, I write my name and sit surrounded by a council, dressed in white, their bald heads covered in wigs with the wings of Helios perched atop their foreheads. They chant and circle around me, a rhythm on bongos and the sound of a symphony being conducted by Mozart himself (whom I did not know was so fluent in Greek), while in the background a pyre burned high into the sky and mad the moon that same radiant color I used earlier to describe K's hair. Was it the color of her hair all this time?

I told Puma about my situation mixing dreams with reality. How the hell could you tell if your bar memories were real? He shook his head, the burning edge near his mouth and he'd ash occasionally in a red cup near his dresser. Ash scattered throughout his green carpet. He'd gotten much sloppier with the rules of smoking we'd come up with in high school. I didn't say anything. Knox came out of Aaron's restroom. Knox was thin, his skin pock-marked and he'd developed a case of jaundice. Knox's face was bloated and dripped sweat, an eyedropper of Visine, rested in his hand.

Puma was down on vacation and we'd stopped by his house. His brother Jason held a baby outside. Jason gripped the edge of the tongs with caution, and he flipped the ribs over onto the other side to cook. The seared side gave off a scent unique to Valley BBQ. My lips were full of spit, my tongue hung out like a dog's waiting to lap up some water. I tossed a beer towards Puma's heap of trashcans. He kept the empties by a couple 4 foot tall trash cans that he'd use to collect aluminum. Puma led Charlie, Joey, Knox and me up to his room and there we split an eightball of coke.

I hadn't really done coke in years, and I licked my fingers to remind myself of the numbness. My mouth felt motionless. All of us were licking our fingers and sniffing with a finger on a nostril. There was knocking at Puma's door and Charlie highered Puma's stereo. The knocking continued. Puma answered the door with a foot against the inner edge, he didn't want anyone to get in unless he had to.

"Let me in bro," the voice of Jason said.

Aaron pulled his foot to the side and Jason walked in, tall, his hair full of gel. He asked us for a bump. This was the dude who'd helped us out when we were younger and who'd shown us

all of our first hook ups. He paced after the first couple of hits and drank from his beer. From the upstairs window we could see Puma's family members in the backyard talking and patting each other on the backs like it had been really long since they'd last seen each other. Jason asked if he could do another line. The rest of us—paranoid—looked out his window and hoped his family couldn't see us. After Jason had left the room, we put on *Jackass 2* and we sat around watching Steve-O put a fishing hook through his mouth.

Outside Jason was talking with his dad who was helping him with the cookout. There were thoughts bouncing around in my head, ricocheting here and there, but all I said in reply was, “yup” while I ran my tongue against my teeth. Joey and Charlie were sipping from their Mickey's and I told Knox to pass me a beer from the eighteen. Our eyes were wide. What I noticed with coke was that people either wanted to talk all the time and moved back and forth, or were like me, and just felt like someone was always watching them. Knox and Charlie definitely liked to talk and were arguing over who had fucked Valerie Garza first. Knox claimed he'd sucked her nipples in his pool and Charlie said that Knox said that about every girl.

The smoke from the BBQ waded its way up towards Puma's window. The smell of chicken burning , the sizzling of fajitas, homemade spices glazing the ribs. A classic Valley dinner. One where only your true friends and family got invited. Even though we were all coked out, the beer had got us so we were hungry. We smoked a joint Joey had rolled up in Puma's front driveway behind Puma's truck. The Valley never left you. There were the old back road fights, the friends you'd grown up with who'd been in and out of juvie and jail, who'd become family because all you endured together. The family you eventually had to accept as your own. They weren't always blood, but family was family in the Valley. There was no question. Whether through blood or through growing up together, everyone got to know everyone in town.

It was up to you got to decide whether you believed every rumor that came with living next to that lead.

After we'd finished smoking, we went to eat together. The meat was good and we stayed at Puma's for a long time afterwards talking about the old times. My dad wasn't home when I got in that night. I wasn't too stoned so I wasn't really worried, my mom was reading from her bible so I didn't think she'd notice either. But, she put a bookmark in her bible and underlined a verse before looking up at me. My mom was still young, in her late 30's, although most people said she could pass for late twenties.

She smiled and I remembered how when I was young she'd read to me those kid's books with pictures. She'd read about Daniel and the Lion's den, Noah's Arc, and the Garden of Eden. I didn't remember much else since she'd started reading to me when I was really young, but I remembered that I liked the pictures and the sound of my mom's voice. She'd read with enthusiasm and changed her voice to sound more like the characters in the book. I wondered how she'd married my dad, who didn't really seem to believe in religion, but who did so for my mother's sake like I did.

"I noticed you haven't called that girl you were talking to in a while," she said.

"What happened?"

I didn't reply, and she asked me to look up at her. I wasn't in the mood to talk about K.

"Jacky, it took me a while to get over you being in prison. I wanted to visit you, but your dad said it was best to punish you. To pretend that you were dead."

She shook her head while she spoke.

“To think your father would say that, my youngest son dead. No, no, that I could never do.”

I wanted to tell her of how I felt dead while I was locked up, and how I’d see everyone else get to see their families during visiting hours. I stayed silent. It was obvious she was trying to apologize. I rapped my knuckles against the oak and she asked me to pay attention to her. I didn’t say anything, but I stopped the rhythm I was making with my hands and looked up at her.

She looked calm after I said that and adjusted the hem of her dress.

“You would say that, “ she said. “You’ve always been the dramatic type. Always talking of killing yourself, or wanting to show how you could make money on your own without listening to us. You weren’t anything like your brothers—I didn’t know how to handle you. I’ve asked the lord in my prayers time and again, what I had done to deserve a son who acted like an animal. No respect or manners.”

I never knew what it was that made everybody so batshit crazy about the church. Some old friends of mine, they used to drink and smoke with us, one pretty much raped a chick after she passed out and was now a proud member of The Door. The guys name was EZ and the girl he’d raped was a friend of Lynn’s, that’s how I know the story. It was freshman year of high school and Lynn and Brooke took off to party with a bunch of seniors. They drank some MD’s and ended up getting fucked by five or six dudes. And I know this because Charlie was there and told me about it. He said that after the 2nd MD the girls started getting naked and that they’d made him leave because he was a freshman, but before he left he saw EZ taking Brooke’s clothes off and he had his hand up her skirt.

Lynn was walking around with her top off and blowing everyone in the room according to Charlie. This was a couple of days after Lynn had broken up with me, so I got all pissed off and wanted to fight the guys who'd fucked her. I said that I'd fucked her first and they were having my sloppy seconds. Lynn, was my first real GF and I was pissed that she never fucked me, but she gave it up so easily to fucking One Ball Paul, Fred, and Alex. This was before the picture of her after the gangbang at the beach so I figured she'd been taken advantage off.

I went up to One Ball Paul during lunch break one day and asked him how it felt to have God hate him. He looked at me puzzled.

“What's it like to have god hate you? Shit, man, he only gave you one ball. One. I don't know what I'd do with one ball. Is it as big as two balls, you know like squished together or just the size of one regular one?”

He stood up that day, talking with his lisp of a voice and said, “She never fucked you, Jacky,” she told me.

I hated his fucking voice. I hated his tight shirts and lip ring. They gave him that “punk rock” look I guess. I was talking more shit to Paul when I felt someone push me. I turned around and it was Fred and EZ. They were all in some shitty band together and they thought I was going to back down from them.

“How you rapists doing?” I said, and Fred punched me in the face. I stumbled and EZ tried to tackle me. I smacked him in the back of his head with my elbow and he fell. I felt EZ kick me and I saw One Ball sitting back, too scared to jump in. I punched EZ and he fell while Fred kept punching me in my face. A couple of security guards and a whole lot of the administration came out to break up the fight. One Ball said he didn't do anything. So did EZ

and Fred. When the principal asked me why I picked a fight with them I didn't answer. I wanted to tell him they were rapists and should be tried for statutory or at least let me beat their asses, but I kept my mouth shut. If I snitched I wouldn't get a chance for revenge and One Ball and everyone else would think I was scared of them.

I said nothing and I remember spending the next couple of weeks in ISS and drawing pictures of Lynn with her eyes crossed out. I thought about that rapist EZ and how much he was like my mom now. I know God is supposed to forgive everything, but I spent time in jail over some bullshit charge and EZ, a fucking rapist, sauntered around town handing out pamphlets that in my mind still smelled like Brooke's pussy juice. In my head he knocked on doors and smiled. He explained the Door's mission to help troubled teens, and he had that same lazy expression in his eyes and that hint of a smile I knew he had on while he was having his way with Brooke.

It was only Friday night, but mom talking about church brought back the memory of EZ. The hypocrites. All them church goers, nothing but hypocrites. I can be a hypocrite too, I thought, putting on a silver cross my mom had given me a long time ago. I'd make mom happy and maybe I'd figure out what made people feel the need to be saved and blessed. I think they were just scared of hell fire. Before my mom went to bed that night I told her and my dad that I would join them for church on Sunday. They didn't show much emotion.

What do you wear to church? I thought about that most of the night. I knew the answer was some shirt that made you move like you were a robot, stiff-kneed and uncomfortable. All my friends wore crosses and were religious, but they never went to church so I couldn't call them and ask them. I wondered if they would quiz me on biblical questions, the breeze from the fan cooled my skin and almost let me sleep. Then I thought of K and whether she'd ever gone to

church. She never mentioned religion. Of all the girls I talked to, she was the only one who didn't start telling me I was going to hell right away when I'd told her I wasn't sure about God.

When I thought of people like EZ and some of the other "converted" I felt like church was just another business. It was like selling drugs, you gave people something they wanted, something they felt they needed and they kept coming back for their fix. I'd have guys knocking at my window at three, pitch black outside with my dogs barking and I'd grab my knife ready to kill somebody. It was always someone looking for roaches or asking if I knew where to get bud or coke. I usually did. But I told those guys to fuck off.

The look in an addict's eye was the same look I saw in people when they'd get out of church. I remembered someone told me about this or something being "the opiate of the masses" and I agreed. When I was still slanging, I didn't really get what the hell anyone was talking about when they would mention that. Opium knocked you out cold. Kept you in a cocoon of warm feelings. I recognized this after I got out of jail. And I understood it.

It was the same thing in prison. They gave you time to work out and a minute or two where you felt the guards weren't looking. They'd let you have a smoke and not give you any shit about it. It was all the same thought process: a spinning orb and an hourglass whose sand always refilled itself when it needed to show you that things would be alright. I slept two hours that night and in the morning I called K.

"Is Krystal home?" I asked.

"Yup," she said.

"What's going on?" I asked.

I heard voices in the background and I asked her, who she was with. Fuck. I thought about apologizing or making an attempt to tell her where I'd been, but she talked short and to the point. I heard some semblance of the girl that I'd partied with and hung out with for that month after prison and asked her if she was fine. She laughed with a group of dudes and I missed that laugh, but I hated she was partying with some dudes I didn't know.

Outside the sun rose and lit the earth. It looked malleable like adobe. I thought of myself as some type of character in the books I read in my free time and I told her I missed her. There was laughter all around at the other end of the line. There was a dial tone and I knew she'd hung up on me. I called back and some guy answered and said his name was Sergio, and to leave Krystal alone.

I hadn't drank in a while, but I went to my stash spot in the closet and brought out my bottle of Jack. I chugged. Sergio was yelling at me. He said he was going to come at me and kill my whole family. I didn't know what gang I was fucking with.

"Sergio," I said, "before it wasn't personal, you could have had Krystal and I'd have been fine with that. But your bitch ass voice annoys me, bring your gang. I got guns too, you fucking wetback," I told him. "Go back to Mexico with your whore of a mom."

I took another swig and I was ready for whoever or whatever came after me. I wasn't about to be punked out by some teenage wannabe gangsters.

"I'm going to call my cousin," Sergio said. "We'll be cruising by your place real soon, after I fuck Krystal. We'll make a trip to your house. I owe you one anyways, you got my homeboy Flip locked up."

“Good,” I said.

This wasn't even about K anymore, it was about being called a bitch. I wasn't about to let some dude call me a bitch and threaten my family. I told him I'd be ready for him. He started to talk more shit, but I hung up on him. I sat drinking until I passed out and when I woke up, Krystal, was at my house with my dad. She had a black eye and bruises on her arms and face. She looked tough for a second, but then it was like glass shattering—the whole foundation broke. She cried, and my dad acted like he should for once. He asked what had happened and how he could help. I saw he had his hands on his pistol and he asked me if I needed a gun.

He grabbed me by the arm and looked me straight in the eye. His voice was full of anger. I was talking to my dad, but the whole time I was sneaking looks at K. She looked angelic even with the bruises. She was my fallen angel.

K asked if I had any Xanax. I told her yeah, and I got out a few. I gave her a whole one and took one with her. I poured her a drink from my bottle of Jack, she knocked the shot glass back and drank it in one gulp. She was sitting on my bed and I wanted to sit next to her, to hold her and console her. I wanted her like I'd never wanted anything in my life. She asked for another drink. When I handed her the shot glass she ran her fingers across mine. She had that look in her eyes when she wanted me to tell her what she wanted to hear. She got that look when she wanted to reward you for saying nice things about her. I sat next to her on the bed and she put her head against my shoulder.

“Why haven't you called?” she said. “I figured you were one of the good ones.”

I smelled the perfume she was wearing and I wanted to kiss her neck and run my hands through her hair. I wanted to eat her whole.

“I did, your sister answered.”

“Jess answered?”

She stood up and went into my closet. K took a chug from the bottle of Jack.

“What happened with Sergio?” I said.

She grabbed my hand and moved it to her tit. The next day was Sunday. After K had called her mom who wasn't home, she told her sister that she was going to church with me. Jessica told her that Sergio had been calling all morning. In the daylight the fields on the way to her house had their own particular type of beauty. It was hard to tell what exactly, but in the morning dawn, the fields looked fertile and the lines from the tractors were straight. The soil was rich. The green of the leaves took on the color of K's eyes and her irises narrowed. An orange autumn scent of the land drifted throughout.

The empty field tranquility. The smell of perfume and of sweat and smoke, the smell of dust and ripe fruit straight from the land itself. The air swarmed around my arms with the open windows and it was beautiful because it only got cold two and a half months out of the year. I looked over at her, K. wasn't holding my hand or anything. She was checking out her face in the passenger side mirror. She took out a small black makeup kit from her purse and started to apply blush to her cheeks and around the black eye. After a while you could hardly tell that she had a black eye. She looked at herself in the mirror and fluttered her eyebrows like she was trying to look real pretty.

“How do I look?” She said.

Beautiful. Fallen angel, that I shall protect henceforth. You will guide me out of this Valley and I shall not be afraid because I am with you. I will follow you wherever fate may lead and I will do so willingly and without hesitation. I shall forget who I am and who I was. I will become the protector that you need and you shall nourish my soul back to health. And our reign shall be eternal, the diadem atop your head will sparkle and shine for miles so that traveller's the world over will come to see the modern day Helen. I shall slay Achilles myself if need be, an arrow straight to the—

K sighed and looked at herself again in the mirror, applying eye shadow. The she held my hand and smiled. She told me not to be afraid of her sister. We turned into a small colonia with a single dirt road. We passed rotted and vacant houses. A man sitting on his porch waved hello, a 40 oz Mickey in his hand. She finished putting on her make up.

We pulled up to her house which was pretty much like all the others, but with a slightly better kept lawn. Beside her house was a barren field and a road that lead to a dead end. K got out of the car and told me to follow her inside. I smelled my shirt and looked at my eyes to make sure they weren't bloodshot and I took a swig from a 24 of Natural I'd brought with me.

I knew I was in for a problem when K went to shower. Her sister Jessica had pale skin and straight black hair. They didn't even look like sisters unless you really studied their jawlines and cheekbones. She was about 4 inches taller than K and was about two inches shorter than me. Her breasts hugged against her shirt and I kept telling my eyes to look up. They did, but I could tell Jessica had caught me looking. She didn't say anything at first, she just looked at me with a smirk.

“You were expecting me to look like an ugly bitch weren't you?” she said.

She lit a joint and invited me out to the porch.

“Jacky Cordorva, the famous roach dealer,” she said.

I looked across the street. Their neighbor had a pasture and a couple of mangy looking horses trotted by. The bud smelled like strong malt liquor. I took another hit and the Xanax kicked in. I started to talk more loose than I usually did with people I’d just met.

“I don’t sell roaches anymore. I take Xanax now. It makes me think better and keeps me chill.”

“My sister has a prescription for Xanax, maybe you guys are meant to be. Kris, can’t be with anyone for longer than a month or two. She hates men because of our dad, probably why she likes you. She’s never dated a good boy.”

“I just got out of jail for getting into a fight with cops. I’ve slanged since I was twelve. How does that make me good?”

I don’t know why I was arguing with her, but the tingling of the Xanax had now completely spread throughout my body. My skin felt fresh and cool. Why the hell was I telling her about all the stupid shit I’d done? She grabbed me by the arm and I heard the shower stop.

“I know everything about you, Jacky,” Jessica said. “Most of my friends used to buy shit from you and Aaron when we were all in high school. You got good grades, I saw you reading sometimes. I always wondered why a drug dealer would read, and that’s when I thought you might be something different. Nothing wrong with being a good guy.”

She smiled and though she didn’t have any make-up on she looked great. Like if I hadn’t met her sister first I might have gone for her. I heard the door to the shower open.

I followed Jessica inside and K was walking around in a pink bra asking where her blue top was. I could tell Jessica was looking at me to see if I was checking her sister out, so I kept my eyes above waist level. Jessica told her sister to put on a t-shirt.

They got into some argument about sluts I didn't care to comprehend. Watching them argue kind of gave me an idea about the crazy girls I'd talked to growing up. I'd never really got why they talked the way they did, why they flirted with dudes the way they did—it was all a type of game. K and her sister talked liked guys almost. They cursed. The threat of one of them slapping or punching each other was not that far off of an idea. Jessica grabbed her sister by the wrist before she left and told her to call if she needed anything.

I went home and dressed up in a blue collared shirt my mom had bought for me and put on a pair of black slacks. K smoked a bowl and blew the smoke outside of my window while I dressed. It was early for me to be up and I felt pretty tired. I knew I would never hear the end of it if I missed the church service. I gave K some Visine and she put a drop in each eye.

My parent's were already at the Catholic Church in the middle of town and I told them I'd meet them there after I got ready. Outside it was overcast and the leaves on oak the trees floated downwards into the mowed blades of grass. K laughed at me when she saw how dressed up I was and the laugh echoed through the hall of my open bedroom. K was looking at a picture my dad had taken with President Bush. He'd taken it with the Border Patrol. When she asked, I pointed out who my dad was. In the picture he smiled, a real smile, not the strained or sarcastic one he'd put on at home. He was clean shaven and was maybe in the third row. The president looked like he always did, far away, like he was of some distant reality far removed from the

Valley, but there he was in the picture. In the center of all the agent's he stood staring straight into the camera. He almost looked like a regular dude.

I took the pipe from K.'s hand and hit the bowl. I felt it burn down my lungs and then I exhaled. I felt calm. K smiled at me, she asked how long the church service was going to be and I said I didn't plan on staying longer than an hour. She was putting on make-up again and had her hair straight. Her green eyes almost looked blue against the sky outside the window. I took a shot of Jack and she wanted one, too. After we both felt ready we got into my car and drove through town into the church.

I don't know if it was because I was stoned, but the church seemed like it was the center of town. People stood in the parking lot, patting each other on the back and talking about how their weeks had been. Drunks you'd see around the neighborhood had on collared shirts that squeezed tight against their bellies. The men talked about how they were missing the Cowboy's game, and how they had to do it for the wife. They looked like they enjoyed being in each others' company. In the background I could hear a church organ and I felt like I was in a movie, like K. and me had left the Valley and were now being allowed to participate in some clandestine tradition that spanned generations and whose customs had always been accepted as fact.

The people gathered outside of the church looked like what I thought people should look like when I'd hear words like "community" when those mindless dudes from The Door pitched their message. Those who were dressed the nicest talked the loudest, I noticed after a while. A group of women, serious looking with their hair in tight buns corralled the kids together—most of whom were dressed in identical clothing because they were brothers or sisters and the moms' wanted everyone to know how long they'd spent combing their kid's hair. How their outfits were

coordinated. How their daughters did not wear make-up, but were instead taking Bible Study courses after class.

These women dressed like we were still in the 1800s and they gave me and K a look when we got off and walked towards the church entrance. I thought I saw a couple ladies grab their kids close, like me and K were oncoming traffic that would hit their kid if they didn't stop them from darting across the street. We represented a world they could never bother to familiarize themselves with. If it was in the bible it was undisputed truth. I saw a pregnant lady with no husband walking into the church with her elderly parents and the crowd of ladies did not say hello or meet their eyes. They passed straight by them. The girl was pretty. She had no weight gain besides in the belly. Her father's face was grim with determination. The mother showed the shadow of trepidation. There was a silence when they walked up the steps that led into the church. Then the ladies all spoke in hushed tones.

About halfway through the service I really wanted to go, but I kept thinking about how my mom wouldn't bitch at me. She'd just be silent and there would be nothing but resentment for me. People looked at us, but they did it while reading from their bibles. K kept passing out. The Xanax and shots made her eyes opaque slits. It was like she didn't want to let any light in or out of them. So she kept them open just enough to catch the peripherals of movement and light. The priest spoke loud. Piously. His smile was perfect and he looked like he'd gotten botox recently. He probably smelled like expensive cologne the way his hair was parted. He didn't seem to be older than thirty-five. By the long church benches, little kids walked by, carrying a pot where you could donate money if you wanted to help out the church.

I looked at how the people didn't just donate money, they were eager for it. It was like watching guys at strip clubs when I'd go with my friends. They'd throw their money away, all trying to one up the other in the hopes of getting noticed and being known as a man of the people. They at least had a little more class at strip clubs, the dudes knew they were filling some void which alcohol or family couldn't solve. Here it was like the guys wanted to compete and wash clean the memories of those debauched nights. They wanted to forget the smell of the pussy grinding against their face and of the glitter they'd wash off their skin afterwards. If they paid enough, they would get a free pass for that one night, two nights, an abundance of nights where they'd sinned and were truly sorry.

I found these types despicable, really. They acted like they were good dudes and their wives acted like it, too. Their kids were too young to know the difference and they'd end up being the exact same way. Like they tried to make me. I wanted to yell something stupid, but stopped myself. I am not sorry for any of these people. I am not of them. I'd seen the priest's BMW. His wife's weekly hair-dos. I wasn't stupid. When the collection box came to me I put in a piece of lint I had in my pocket after the row we were sitting had put down a wad of cash. I didn't think anyone would notice and I didn't care what any of these fakes thought of me. I'd rather be an alcoholic, weed smoking, Xanax junkie than these hypocrites. Towards the end of the service, I considered the possibility that the people here really believed that thirty-five dollar hair cut priest was really speaking the words of God. Did they really think he gave a damn about them. I saw my mom and dad smile when he came by to thank them for getting a new member to join the congregation. When he shook my hand, I smiled too. I nudged K and she got up and smiled. The priest never stopped smiling the whole time he talked to my family and K.

In the evening, after dinner, I dropped K off at her house. She smiled at me, I threw a peace sign. Her teeth, small and white, her mouth—both, shone against the pale white of the sky. She waved as she walked into her mom’s house. She closed the door, and all around me, grasshoppers hummed. The field next to her house looked like grains of sand and for a while it reminded me of when we’d all go to the beach. Puma, Knox, Joey, Brooke, and Lynn—all the old crew. I missed them all and wished I could’ve been like them. I was out now though. Out and never going back. I looked at the brake lights of the car in front of me and saw splashes of blood that bounced off of white tile. Beads of water.

Awake, but not. In one day, and out the next. The car behind me honked. I drove off like I’d committed another crime and tried to stare past the streetlights. At the stoplight I turned and bought a couple of 40s. I snuck them in my house after my parents told me how glad they were for K and me. When they hugged me, I felt warmth from them, I felt hesitation. I felt as though I’d achieved a type of ceasefire.

We talked as in the morning and sent each other texts while she was at school. I felt a little weird about us being a few years apart in age, but she was eighteen and that kept me out of prison. I thought about calling Krause, I kind of missed the dude. I wondered what he was up to. It’s been getting harder to keep this nice guy act up with my parents. I can’t even smoke in the backyard or at the Galvan’s like I used to. I hadn’t really talked to them since K had taken off with Justin, but I wondered what they were up to.

I open the door and it is Knox. He is dressed in a fedora hat and has on aviator sunglasses, a blue scarf wrapped around his neck. I usher him into the room quickly. There is

silence. He looks somber. Jacky, have you heard, he says. I flick a pile of ash from my cigarette onto the ground. I do not respond, but I nod my head: I have heard. Knox shakes his head and takes off his fedora. I ask for a drink, and while he stands I see that Knox has become emaciated, yellow—the alcohol has destroyed him, too. Knox makes drinks in the hotel bathroom and I know. I can smell. She is in heat. That feline heat that brought about the great flood and the dry Valley we live in now. Knox hands me a glass of wine. We toast but do not drink. A discussion begins about whom is to blame for the Nurse that left Knox. I tell Knox that he himself is to blame. He sips. The wine spills onto his shirt and he laughs. She'll come back, they all do, he says, flicking his cigarette ash onto the floor. Silence. Silent sounds. Abruptly, there is a knock at the door. Knox grabs his cane and shakes it at me. His eyes are wide and manic. I must not answer, he says. I get up to answer and Knox yells at me, Do not answer for the leagues of hell have marked thee. I think he is joking until they knock. and knock again. With a brave bellow that shakes the ground. Knox says, "out!" and the floating shadows of the past are gone. They have become irrelevant minutiae. Knox takes off his top hat and places it on the dresser next to the pale light idling by the lamp. I nod my head. There is the sound of a concierto by one ----- playing—Mozart? Chopin? Vivaldi perhaps? that rat devil, I cannot place the music and it animates the room. Makes it regal. With a sip of Cognac I toast to the past. Knox curls his mustache at me, like the monopoly man. He tells me finally, definitively that she is swollen with child. Krystal, whom I have not seen in 4 years. She is pregnant with a baby girl and wishes me to attend the wedding, he says. I do not look at him at first. I ask him if he is certain. He takes off his top hat and nods gravely. I drop my cigarette and I'd burn my finger trying to prevent from burning a hole in my jeans. Ha ha, I say. Ha, ha. I have her now. She will need money, sustenance. Will he provide her sustenance, Knox? I ask. He sips from his cup of Cognac while tapping his cane. He

will, there is nothing you can do. It is the same way I lost her. When Knox says this her he turns his back to me and takes out a handkerchief. He wipes at his eyes. I open the shutters to see outside of the hotel. Blue darkness. Encroaching. I sip my Cognac and I think. It is all I can do. I feel nothing. I feel nothing. I smell the orchard. I smell citrus. I close my eyes while we smoke cigarettes and talk about K and Precious. We talk the whole night through. Strategizing, gentleman of the night.

Charlie picked me up after his classes in his red Nissan. He's signed up for STC, the local community college and tried to get me to enroll. Smoke wades out the windows and the heavy bass system thumps the ground. He's listening to some stupid rap shit like he always does. I haven't called K in a couple of days. I don't plan to. I didn't need her giving me bullshit about being in love with two guys at once. She was taking too much coke. Fuck her.

We drove with the windows down since it was summer again and the humidity clung to us like dirty sweat. I place my hand out and he hands me a cold one. I drink on an empty stomach and my stomach hurts. It feels hollow inside. I almost vomit, but Charlie punches me in the arm after I ask him to. I chug the rest of the beer and tell him I've been great. He calls bullshit and I show him a picture of me and Krystal in the orchard. I punch him in the arm when he doesn't give me the phone back. He hands me another beer and I pop it. The foam fizzes over and I try to sip it before I waste any or dirty Charlie's car. Charlie doesn't believe she is real.

Towards sunset, I called her and she answered. Her voice was a shattered memory. She is at the Galvan's, she slurred. She tells me to go by. I feel Charlie's eyes. I knew he wanted to investigate further. We pass by the fields by my house and I tell Charlie to cruise, I needed time to think. I didn't want to see her. We kept drinking and smoke blew out the exhaust and through

the rolled down windows and after a couple of shots and a half a bar I told Charlie to cruise by the Galvan's. I was ready to see her.

When I got there she was yelling at Justin's baby momma Valerie. Justin held the both of them apart with his hands while I stood there. The wind blew against the leaves on the trees and I heard them rustle. I heard the sound of rustling like fucking in an orchard with autumnal, orange, bright yellow leaves crunching beneath us. I drank from my Mickey. Charlie wasn't really liked by either of the Galvan brothers since he'd stolen a bottle of whiskey from them a couple of years back. Justin looked like he was in too much trouble to remember about that.

I walked up to Krystal and moved her away from Justin. Valerie took a heel off and threw it towards K. It hit me in the face and then K started yelling at me to let her go, "Let me fucking go," she said, trying to kick her legs out at Valerie. K was tiny and the one time I'd seen her try to fight she'd gotten beat up by some fat girl with orange hair and hairy arms. We pulled the fat girl off of her by her hair while one of the Galvan's poured beer on the ginger's face. Justin looked at me and I could tell he knew that I knew.

K kept thrashing against my body and somehow got free and punched Valerie in the face. They started fighting on the floor, Valley girl style. They were grabbing each other's hair and throwing punches that meant to leave scars.

Justin and me and Charlie eventually separated them. Justin yelled to get the crazy bitch off his property. We drove towards my place and I saw Charlie looking at the back towards K. The face that launched a thousand ships, my K. I was proud of her like she was some fancy sports car. I didn't really love her then. I thought I did. It wasn't till she started fucking my friends and not random dudes. I couldn't picture that I realized how much I really loved her. She

loved me too, sometimes. It's the sometimes that allow me to retain any semblance of sanity. Charlie wanted to give K a ride home but I told him to go suck a dick. We walked in with the cool breeze. The sky was pitch black, lighted from the incandescent city lights below. When I let K into my bedroom window after my parents had fallen asleep she was already passing out. We shared some whiskey I had and she fell asleep with her head on my shoulder. It was the most loved I'd ever felt.

In the morning K told me a story so I could understand her relationship with Michael. And with Sergio. She denied being anything but friends with Justin, but I knew—she knew I knew. I told my parent's K had gotten dropped off in the morning so they weren't snooping around my room too much. They liked me having a girl and being like a regular kid. Like my brothers. Like the ads on TV where everyone is smiling and chases the American Dream. She had a way of pouting when she talked, like everything in her life had been leading up to some shithole she felt resigned to.

"I don't care about them, I don't tell you about every girl I've been with," I said.

She was still tipsy so she started to act stupid.

"How about you Jacky? Five, ten, more, less? How many?"

I thought of Tina and I told her, I'd been with plenty.

"You wanna know how many guy's I've really been with?"

She curled her lips up and for the first time since I'd met her she looked devious, like there was some spark of evil in her that I'd overlooked. We spent the rest of that morning scoring Xanax and bud, and by the end of the day it was like the conversation had never happened. I

dropped her off at home after a couple of days having her stay at my place. Jessica didn't seem to mind, she came up to me, gave me a peck on the cheek, and thanked me for taking care of her sister. We helped K out of the car and placed her on the red couch inside. Jessica asked if I wanted to smoke a joint or have a drink.

Jessica got close to me and gave me a hug. I could feel her tits pressing against me. They were firm like her sister's and when she let go I wanted to ask her if she was testing me or playing some type of game. I didn't say anything though. The light in the room was dim and outside the moon was fading. I felt like I was trapped. When she got close to me—close enough that I could smell her breath and the raspberry perfume she had on, I did what I always did when a problem came up: I ran.

“Why didn't you bang them both?” Knox said.

“The sister's crazy, trust me, I knew the guy she was smashing. Robert Rosa. His dad owns the local pharmacy, cool dude. Could probably even get you Xanax if you wanted, I'll call him. He used to bang my sister,” Knox said.

“How is she?” Knox said. “Like is she nice?”

Knox had stopped outside McDonald's and was ordering burgers while we talked. The lady kept asking him to repeat the order.

Men and women with swollen bellies sauntered, most of the women due to pregnancy. The men carried a contemptuous gluttony that managed to reach into the fabric of their faces. Their kids wore muscle shirts. There were wisps of mustaches like smudges of coal above their

lips. The girls wore red, green, and white bonnets weaved intricately into their hair. They had on Spanish dresses. The ones without bonnets had long, straight hair that shone white reflections in the daylight and off of car windows. When they laughed, a lot of the kids had silver and gold teeth.

Knox asked me about K again. I fucking hated Charlie. Charlie had told the whole crew about K. How good looking she was. They were all like a pack of ravenous wolves after me, trying to find any hint of carrion to feast on. We smoked a joint after church and Knox kept asking if I could set up a double date with K and her sister. I stopped talking with him halfway through the drive and opened my window to let the air rush in, it was blowing fierce in the South Texas sun.

Knox's car was full of smoke and he had a pretty Filipina girl with him. Her name was Precious. Knox kept making stupid jokes about her name. She was smart. He'd met her in his mom's nursing school and he'd started giving her private lessons after class shortly after. She had a round, kind face. She had brown skin that made it look like she was Mexican. Some girls down here looked Oriental from all the different shit that the Spanish had done when they owned the Philippines. Precious was different than Knox's usual girls. She had ambition, she'd gone to Med-High and was already a nurse's assistant.

Knox liked to call himself a doctor, but he was a doctor because his parents owned a school that handed out diplomas to anyone willing to pay. I respected her. When I walked into the car I could tell Precious was drunk. So I got the feeling she was playing smart like some of the people I ran into at Charlie's community college. Pretending to have read books. She was

drunk that day and she reminded me of those people. They'd never read all the stuff I'd read when I was there.

She was talking about music and the Valley music scene. She said we could start a revolution if we voted and Obama won. She sounded like every college douche at the time and I wanted to tell her something. Anything to get her off her high horse. I dropped beer onto Knox's floorboard and he didn't yell, but pulled over immediately. He cleaned up the froth and bubbles that gurgled from my cracked beer. I watched him and helped, but it was like I wasn't there.

My hair was flat and glimmered in the sunlight. I hadn't shaved in a couple of days. I had on jeans and a black shirt. Dust clung to my skin. We were all in one of the old fields we used to smoke at. Knox with Crystal 2, his other girlfriend besides Precious, and Charlie was with a dark skinned girl with frizzy hair named Toni. Joey was smoking a joint by himself at the edge of the field while the rest of us broke up a blunt. The care that Charlie took in breaking up a blunt—the surgical cut that split it in half, and his fearlessness to paste the pieces back together always left me feeling stupid about my rolling skills.

Charlie was like Beethoven when rolling blunts. Joey was better, but we got tired of yelling at him. I felt calm again. I hadn't talked to K. in a while and I'd heard that Joey had rescued her from being raped. She'd passed out at a party and one of my old friend's dad had started to feel her up. Joey never liked that type of shit, so he fought off Israel and his dad to get K out of there. Joey wouldn't look me in the eye when I asked him about everything. I figured Joey had rescued her from a gang rape. I really was glad that he didn't let that happen to her, even though I knew he fucked her at his mom's afterwards.

I hated her. But I'd call anyways. My brain was lobotomized, a mindless drone. The six or seven Xanax I was taking everyday made me oblivious. I didn't answer phone calls or shower. I disappeared like I used to back in the old days. The days after my dad had slapped the cuffs on me and I'd sit in my bed afterwards. The bruises on my wrist were swollen and purple. The days where I'd seen Lynn with One Ball Paul and think how if I'd only had a car I'd have kept her. Smoke curled around my lips, I looked into a mirror and saw smoke. And through the smoke, there stood my red, blank eyes. Eyes without expression. A far away look. Creeping slivers that came out in bursts. I rubbed my wrists and took a hit from a small joint. Oblivion. Sometimes there is tranquility in oblivion. It's a cousin to the phrase ignorance is bliss. If you can't see or no longer care for what is happening around you, you've decided to destroy yourself slowly. It's a calculated suicide, a systematic slow burn of death: freedom.

When I thought of oblivion I understood how those church people felt. They didn't believe in anything, they'd lost all reason to hope. Jesus did wake from the dead three days later. Now we all smash confetti eggs to celebrate. Thinking. It was the thinking that did you in. Without emotion you could be rational. When you've reached the state of numbness and accepted it, then you can be happy. There is no dream to chase. There is no carrot at the end of the stick. I slept well those couple of weeks. I slept well and did not dream.

The phone rang and I turned it off. I didn't want to talk to anybody, I'd heard Flip was finally out of jail and I wanted to get some payback. I didn't know what I wanted to do to Flip, but the fucker cost me five years of my life. Him and Krause. I wanted to see Krause's head impaled on a stick. He always claimed he was a fucking Viking, I'd give him his Viking death. I stole my dad's car keys early in the morning. I drove towards the outskirts of Weslaco where the

Galvan's said Flip had been hanging out. I wanted to call my crew, but I knew Knox wasn't worth a damn in a fight. I was still pissed at Joey and the Galvan's.

I turned into Charlie's drive way and honked. His dad came outside smoking a joint, his long grey hair and beard shrouded his face. He looked at me and nodded his head and then he yelled for Charlie. Through the window, palm trees stood tall in the air. The sun hung low. I wondered if my dad had filed a police report for a stolen car. I told Charlie about Flip and he said he was down for whatever. He went inside and came back out with a Smith and Wesson knife and some brass knuckles. He brought out a couple of twenty fours, cigarettes, and got in the car.

I felt the knife in my pocket. I ran my fingers through the handle before I put the car into gear. I didn't say anything and even though my brain was ringing like after a shotgun blast. I heard Charlie tell me that Mendez was back in town. I coughed beer on my shirt and took a chug from my Mickey. I turned my car towards Mendez's old house and drove towards it. Charlie wiped at his brow and he lit up a cigarette. The pulsing in my veins slowed. Mendez was the craziest of all of us. He'd help.

In high school, Mendez's huge eyes looked like they were ready to pop out of his head. He laughed out manic cries of glee during fights. I don't know when he got the nickname, but eventually we started calling him Alien-Head. In high school, he'd carried around knives and screwdrivers to smash car windows or jocks faces when they wanted to fuck with any of us punks. He was only about 5'5 and skinny like a joint, but he was crazy and fearless.

Sometimes you need the unhinged to keep everything in balance. When the house was burning, you called guys who'd walked through fire before. Not the guy who worried about

whether he'd pissed off his boss that day or how his life was going to shit unless he stopped drinking. He was a typical Valley kid. That's how it usually went in the Valley.

A long time ago, Mendez had gone to his girlfriend Cece's and killed her dog in front of her. She asked if any of us had Xanax and I felt the inside of my coat, wanting to make sure I hadn't popped my last couple.

"She's fucking that De La Rosa faggot, I fucking know it. I know it."

I heard the Van door creak open and I ducked my head, the sunlight shone in like the light of an officer's flashlight. When my eyes adjusted to the glare, Mendez was gone. Cece started screaming and I wished Mendez had left his keys in the ignition, he was going to get us all busted with whatever the hell he was doing. I pictured him raping Cece. Mendez came out carrying Lady by the neck. He threw her on the pavement and started to stomp on her, as the dog began to howl and try to run off. Cece was beating at Mendez's back with her hands and then she came back with a knife.

She stabbed him in the back, close to his shoulder blade. Mendez didn't seem to feel anything; he lifted up the disfigured dog and started to bang its head against Cece's window. The blood from the dog's skull dripped down Cece's window. I heard Jesse yelling at Mendez to stop and all I wanted to do was get out of there. Mendez dropped the dog and told Cece he was sorry about her best friend.

Mendez finally noticed he had a knife in his back. He looked at me without any expression in his eyes and asked if I would pull it out for him.

We were deep inside Donna. We drove twenty minutes out of Weslaco passing acres of green orchards through pale white dirt roads. Farther down the road, above the trees, charcoal smoke blew into the sky. With burning eyes I pointed farther down the road. My skin itched and we blew dirt into the air when we drove up his driveway. Charlie followed me out, handed me a beer, and we knocked. We said we'd come to see Mendez. One of them acted like he was going to frisk us. He was a skinny little mustachioed kid. Mendez walked to the door with a cigar in his mouth and smiled when he saw us.

“You dudes don't call?” Mendez said. “You motherfucker's, where you been hiding.”

He'd gotten fatter and his face looked like it'd aged about 7 years, but his voice still sounded like Mendez. That was something. Being locked up hadn't broken him. He still looked ready for anything that might come his way. He looked like all those years had only pissed him off. Mendez was out and that was good. He was out to make up for lost time.

We explained the situation and he listened. He hadn't changed, but his mannerisms were different. He looked like he thought about specific questions more when you asked them and he didn't automatically think his first idea was his best. He'd lean his head into his chin and nod, like he had all day to think of whatever answer he'd decided. He stood up after a few minutes and got everyone a round. He told us to sit down, and his pitbull, El Jefe, jumped onto his couch and looked at all of us. El Jefe was the size of a German Shepard at least. He had linebacker shoulders and thick brown fur.

Mendez had him trained and El Jefe listened to his commands. Mendez told Jefe to jump off his couch and he sat by Mendez's feet.

“I’ve thought about it, really thought about it and I think you guys should wait. If you wait a little longer he’ll never see you coming. Come at him right now, you’re shooting your wad early.”

We looked at him not really sure what to make of this new wise Mendez. In jail there’s nothing but time. It moves slow and when you feel like you can’t take anymore of the silence something happens that makes you welcome the silence. You’re grabbing your lunch tray and behind you a homeboy gets shanked when he was a month away from serving his sentence. Everyone fights at first, there’s chaos and you jump into it. There’s not really a choice. If you don’t back up your crew, you’re a pussy that can’t be relied on. You’re not deserving of the name or the palma anymore.

Mendez pointed to the palm tree tattoo by his eye.

“The day after the fight, with all that time to think of how you’re going to get the guys who did your boy and fuck them up so bad they’d regret ever having lived. That day, the day after. That’s when you learn, you learn not to go with your first reaction. The first thought that comes to mind. Eventually, you learn to go after the dudes who fucked you over after going through every idea you have. You don’t just go over them, you think of everything they might do and you make sure there’s no way for them to retaliate. That’s the way to end something like this.”

Mendez said I should act like his friend to get more intel on him. I refused on the grounds that he was the reason I’d spent five years in jail. Mendez shook his head.

“I’m not trying to fuck around with you, I seen too many homies locked up over bullshit like this. You don’t want to become part of the system like me, there’s no way out. When you guys get what you need, the info on Flip, come back, I’ll be ready.”

When I got back home my parents had my clothes in a box. My dad came up and knocked on the car window, but I wouldn’t open it. I sat in the car and knowing I was fucked I popped open another Budweiser and sat there drinking it. The vein on my dad’s forehead looked like it was about to rupture. I sat drinking, savoring the flavor. I took another sip. My mom was talking on her cell phone and I knew it was the cops on the other end of the line. I finished my beer and got out.

I didn’t feel my dad’s fist when it hit me, I only knew I was on the floor. My face stung. I got up to hit him back, but I stopped. I turned around and ran. I ran down the back alleys of the neighborhood, jumping fences and outrunning dogs. I ran past the screams of neighbors. I ran past the dogs that barked at me. I ran until I was in the middle of the orchard where I’d smoked, where I’d spent afternoons and evenings with K. I threw up in one of the plants, the taste of bile lingered in my mouth. I fell into the dirt and laid there for the rest of the night. I looked out at the starless night and felt nothing. My face was swelling on the left side. I could feel dirt all around me and that felt appropriate. I slept in the middle of the Orchard that night. It was the best sleep I’d had in a long while.

Part Three

I would have stayed in that orchard if I was smarter. There was enough fruit to keep me from starving and nobody messed with me there. It was still winter so it didn’t get too hot. In the mornings I’d lie back and hear the trills of the birds and I’d forget everything that was happening.

I owned the orchard and everything around it. The trees, the soil, the flies and worms were all mine. I was in a meditative state after I smoked. I took two of the twenty-one bars I had left. I heard the wind white against the sky. It was breezing cool against my skin. I lay back against a patch of grass and wondered if I should toss my phone. I wasn't sure if my dad would try to track it or anything, but I decided it wasn't necessary.

My dad didn't want to see me. My mom had narcked me out first chance she got. I heard cars passing by all morning in the field, some sounded like engines I recognized, engines I could have sworn were a friend's. I waited to hear a car slow down—hoped a car would pull over and maybe be a friend. I was broke besides my bars and weed. I was getting thirsty, I wiped at my clothes to get the dust off and shook my head. My hair was greasy with small specks of dirt drying up, it was becoming encrusted on my hair.

I walked out of the orchard. The sunlight was a warm yellow halo that I walked towards while cars honked at me. I was sweating. Beads bubbled up at my brows and the salt water bled into my eyes. I walked in the middle of the road, horns blared and I waited for the sirens to begin. I'd never been arrested during the day so I was looking forward to seeing what being arrested early would be like.

I knew her house was a couple of miles down the road. If I kept walking I knew I'd get there. Maybe she'd take me with open arms, her fingers combing through my hair, the scent of her drowning out the filth. Lyme to mask the scent of the dead. Listerine after alcohol. The illusion. I kept walking and went to the side of the road eventually. Most of the cars that passed by recognized me. I'd get the head nod or someone would yell out faggot or pussy or Jacky. I'd nod my head to all of them. I didn't have anything to see.

Above, the sun rose higher. The white clouds circled around it in some empty dance of hope lost. Empty thoughts of a future that was forever a loop of the present, forever circling, boxing in every good thought you'd ever had and pirouetting into a cyclone of dirt that shot up into the heavens.

K was outside smoking with Jessica when I made it to her place. Her fingers gripped the joint. Mists of smoke blew around her face and she was a foggy dream of a morning. I walked down the dirt road. I waited till she went inside and I knocked at her window. There was no answer. I knocked again and I heard movement in the room. I heard her talking on the phone, laughing. I wondered who it was that made her so happy, who it was she was giving the look to now. I knocked harder and then she looked out the window. She looked at me, confused at first, and then she motioned to go towards the front door. She opened the door and asked if I was okay. It was cold outside so I asked if I could come in. There was a pause, trepidation, and then the door swung open.

“You should probably shower, Jacky,” she said. “You look like shit.”

I grabbed her by the shoulders and tried gave her a hug and said she should come in with me. She gave me a pair of her brother's basketball shorts and a white undershirt. I must have looked like I'd seen a close friend die because she leaned close and pressed against me. She bit my ear.

“I still love you, Jacky,” Krystal said handing me a towel. “I still love you, I hope you don't hate me.”

The way she looked at me that morning, the straight-eyed look, I would have died happy. Boyfriend or no boyfriend. Why would she let me in and let me shower if she didn't still have a

thing for me. I showered, the water heated and jarred my body into alertness. The coats of grime washed off me. In the background I could hear K's voice and she was laughing again. Her laughs echoed into the shower stall, with every laugh I felt distance growing between whatever it was we had. I dried my hair and went back outside. Jessica asked if I was hungry.

I asked her if she had a beer. I called all the friends numbers I knew by memory. Eventually I got a hold of Puma. He was down for the holidays. I told him I'd be walking down the main road in Weslaco and to honk at me when he saw me.

When I walked down the main road, I thought of the old times. I'd shown up to his house with 140 bucks worth of coke in my pockets. In the Valley, coke was as easy to get as cigarettes and much cheaper. I'd been up all night, sniffing, my eyes on the crack between my bedroom door on the floor. I kept seeing shadows passing by and I knew that my parent's could hear every line I snorted. I kept looking outside of the window in my room. I jerked the curtain and took a short look outside. I felt my skin crawl that night, bugs under the flesh. I'd hear knocking and open my door to peer out and see an empty hallway. When the sun finally blew red light over the top of the canal that overlooked my house I felt at ease.

I smoked a cigarette, and slowly, the trembling in my hands lessened. I still looked like shit. In my bathroom mirror, swollen arachnoid eyes stared back at me. My eyes were bulbous and twitching at the corners. My pupils were straight black. I knew I wasn't going to feel any better and wouldn't be able to sleep so I went down the street to my dealer Whammy. I showed up at his house pale, shaking, and stuttering. He came back out and I gave him 140 bucks. I drove off using my knees to steer the car, I used my hands to take bumps from a guitar pick to calm me down.

I wrapped the bag of coke with a red twist-top and licked around my lips. I couldn't feel my teeth. I stopped for a pack of beer in a mom and pop store. They didn't look up or tell me anything. Being coked out wasn't a problem for old school "senores" at those stores. They could care less how you handled yourself or how old you were. They didn't even bother trying to intimidate you, They'd sit back, hands on back of their necks and sell you beer anytime of day as long as they knew you or someone that could vouch for you. The old man smiled at me when he bagged the beer and said, "bien dia."

My hands shook when I knocked at Puma's door. Slivers of light struck me at all angles, I shielded my eyes with the palm of my hands. I knocked. He opened his mouth when I showed him the two eight balls. I sweated yellow and salt blew out my pores. Inside, he licked his lips and brought out a straight razor.

I followed him inside, up his staircase and down the hallway into his room, his eyes followed me with suspicion. I grinded my teeth. Puma looked at me and shook his head. His parents were gone for the week so we cut class and chilled at his place, waiting for everyone else to show up. We took a few lines. My hands stopped shaking. My eyes bigger. We ran our tongues against our teeth. We poured out some more into a Burger King dine-in tray. After the first five or six lines we decided we needed more beer. Beer would calm us. It would soothe the fragile monster.

After we got the beer we made more lines—seeing that we would never finish the lines with the two of us we called Charlie who showed up a half hour later. We made him a line. And we snorted. And drank. There was smoke burning our nostrils. We drank. After a while we forgot whose turn it was to hit the coke. We'd planned a bbq for later on that night, and we

wanted to try to get the word out to as many girls. We wanted the party to be one people talked about years later, after they'd finished high school. When they were in some state university or some crappy server job, we wanted them to remember this party as being the highlight of high school. The thing was we were all too high from the coke and were getting paranoid.

We decided to go for a cruise. Charlie hopped in back and we drove off onto Expressway 83. The fields we passed looked peaceful and the workers were done for the day. That was good, seeing those dudes working all day depressed me sometimes even though I could picture myself doing that if worse came to worse. I told Charlie to roll a joint. We were about 3 miles from Puma's house when we hit a little station wagon and sent it flying into a gate next to one of the stores we always stopped by. We were fucked. I already saw two older ladies trying to get out of the car and there were store employees tending to the other car. Puma was like a statue. I was covered in cocaine after the impact had made my 8 ball spray all over me like chalk. If a cop came up to us and got our statement we were done.

Puma peeled out before anyone could get our plates. A white truck followed and honked at us. I saw an angry looking older dude driving and what looked like two or three of his friends. Charlie opened up Puma's back window and started throwing beer bottles at the truck. One of the bottles hit the middle of the truck's front window and Charlie whooped. We were on a straight way going about 90 and even though Charlie was distracting the truck enough to give us some distance, I knew that unless we pulled some James Bond shit we were done. The dude was driving a V6 and my dad's suburban was a family car, it was lucky if it could hit 100. The car pursued. When they got close enough that I thought they got our plates I realized there was a way out.

Puma started to say maybe it would be better if we surrendered and just pulled over. Charlie and me mean mugged him. We passed the orange grove we always smoked by and the truck was closer than ever. They might have given up on catching us, but after Charlie denting their truck and smashing up their window, I didn't think they just wanted to get our plates anymore. Puma swerved onto a dirt road that led to an old friend's house that was up for sale. It was one of the best smoking spots in Weslaco and dudes would take their girls there to bang. It was one of the cooler places in town.

I'd grown up with the Valdez's before their dad went nuts and threatened to kill me after finding the Valdez twins. I passed out with some girls and his liquor cabinet empty. He'd yelled, saying he didn't give a fuck who my dad was. In drunken pride I flicked him off while I walked off with Lynn that night. He tried chasing me and I ran off into some dry brush that was across from his house. It was chest high and if you ducked and ignored the scratching of thistle and thorns the path wasn't so bad. I remembered his shouts that day. He was going to kill me.

It was cold inside of the wrecked Suburban. We'd been there, still, hardly breathing while the guys with flashlights searched around the Valdez's house. There were three of them. The driver had on a wife beater and kept yelling for us to get our asses out of the house. His other two buddies looked like schoolteachers or something. They wore nice collared shirts with ironed slacks. They were sweating, they looked nervous like they'd never been to this side of town before. They kept jerking their eyes to the fields and into the bushes where we hid, as if they expected a horde of cholos to come rushing at them at any moment.

One guy's hands were shaky and I heard him tell his friends he'd pay for any damages to the truck, he just didn't want any trouble. The driver looked like he wanted to slap the shit out of

his friend. He was in the other dude's face, the double chin of the driver bouncing up and down while he yelled. His face was red as tampon blood. The short dude with mustaches looked like he was trying to calm everyone down. He grabbed the driver by an arm. He backhanded the dude who'd grabbed his shoulder.

I looked at Puma and Charlie, all of our eyes were lit up. Charlie mimicked the driver dude's backhand slap and we laughed, not really caring if they got us anymore or not. They way the guy's friends looked, we could beat their asses before they had any time to call the cops. We passed beers around, and tried to find any pieces of coke on the floor. I ran my fingers through my teeth like they were a toothbrush. After a while I couldn't feel the inside of my mouth.

After another twenty minutes all the dudes from the truck get back into their cars. The driver walked with a swagger, like he'd just kicked some serious ass and the other two hung their heads. The driver looked out at us before he got into his truck and for a while it looked like he was staring straight at us. I felt like I was a deer frozen in place. There was some punk music playing in the background. I wished we hadn't gotten careless and decided to party when we were almost done. The driver sighed and turned back to yell at his friends in the car before he drove away. After a couple of beers we figured it was safe and did a u-turn around Valdez's house with the car headlights off.

I got into his car and smelled cherry smoke. Puma had the radio on, he listened to some rap music that made my head throb. I couldn't think. I was shaking. I didn't really know what to do. Puma kept looking at me through his rearview mirror, I pretended not to notice. Puma drove without asking any questions. That was the way it was with all of us. The way it'd always been.

If one of us was in trouble, the crew would come running to your aid. I hadn't believed in my friends in a long time. I thought they were all traitors for talking to K and ruining her for me. I hated her for making me hate them. It was good to be around Puma who didn't have any real opinion on the matter. Since he still lived in San Marcos, he could care less about the bullshit in Weslaco. He was here for me. He was here for his friend and that was the way it had always been growing up.

When K would talk to me, sometimes I'd picture us living in Austin, New York, Miami, Europe, I wanted to travel the world with her—get out of the Valley. And I let her know a few times. I'd tell her I loved her and how I wanted to marry her one day. When I became famous I'd take care of her so she'd never have to work. She was dating some other dude again, real douchebag, but she called every other day. I didn't know she was mocking me or that she felt something after all the years. Maybe I'd told her something pretty once. Each one of my crew had fucked her at some point during our relationship. It's been five years since the last time we fucked regularly, the times when she'd stay at my house and I'd drive her around town.

The first time K came to my house I was hanging with my crew. We'd been drinking all day and I eventually told them I was seeing some girl. It was New Years Eve and we were celebrating outside of my parent's place. My family was celebrating the New Year with my brothers in Austin. I didn't want to go. I'd never respond and would go into my room and listen to Nirvana while chugging beers. I tried to hide my drunkenness, but they knew. They knew as soon as I went into my room and closed the door that I was popping. They finally grew so tired of trying to tell me how to live that they looked the other way. Knox had Precious coming over

and Charlie had invited some little boy looking girl named Mimi to hang. Joey's girlfriend was out of town so he was smoking out. The smell of smoke waded the air and the sky showered in reds and yellows. New Year Eve was always pretty in the Valley, and the view from parent's house was one of the better ones. There was the pop of firecrackers and you'd hear gunshots whistling through the air. Automatic fire and single shotgun blasts intermingled. Empty beer cans were all over my lawn. I texted K again to make sure she was coming.

She didn't respond and an hour later she texted back, 'some bitch is after me, wants 2 fight , help...'. After reading the text several times I pounded my chest and asked where the whiskey was. While Joey went into his car to get the whiskey I told them the situation. In no way could we allow K to get hurt. Everyone nodded. They understood.

K's sister dropped her off and I saw all my friends giving her the eye. They looked back at me like they couldn't believe I could pull something like that and then they looked back at her.

She wore short shorts and a white top. Her auburn hair glowed and reflected light in the night sky. She walked up next to me and I introduced her to everyone. Knox walked up to her first and asked how she knew me. I gave Knox a look and he stopped with his small talk and walked back towards the bench by my garage. A car sped by on the street by my house and then braked. It backed up and stopped by my driveway, it flashed its lights at the house.

K looked barred out. Her pupils were huge and she was talking about how she was going to kick the other girl's ass. I motioned for the car to pull in and they got about halfway down my driveway. Three girls got out, they were all huge and had arms as thick as men's. I told K to be careful and she said ok before a squat, linebacker-shouldered redhead went and tackled K. K

kept yelling for the bitch to get off of her and the redhead's friends were yelling. I saw that K wasn't going to be able to get up, she was pinned on the ground calling the redhead a fat bitch.

I saw Sarah about to hit K and I grabbed Sarah's arm. She was strong, she broke my grip and punched K in the face. Her girls started to run over to try and rush at K, but Joey stepped in front of them. The girl who spoke was as tall as Knox and looked heavier than him. Knox said she didn't look like a girl, she looked like the purple dude from *Sesame Street*. The girl tried to tackle Knox, and Knox moved out of the way. There was screaming and yelling everywhere. The moon shone yellow on all of us. Charlie ran up and poured his beer on Sarah. She still didn't get off of K.

I didn't want to hit Sarah, but she wasn't getting off of K. I was about to shove her when Charlie kicked Sarah in the gut. She cried out and got up to fight with Charlie, and Charlie slapped her in the face. She swung at Charlie and hit him. He grabbed her by the hair and started to slap her while he opened another beer and poured it all over her. Charlie slapped her again and they all ran back to their car. They yelled and said they were going to bring their boyfriends tomorrow to fuck us up. We threw empty beer bottles at them. I checked on K and she got up and dusted herself off.

"How do I look," she said.

"You need to get over that bitch, Jacky," Puma said, driving the back streets of Weslaco.

I quit daydreaming about the past. The orange groves and bright flowers were all muted.

"You just need to find yourself someone new. Get your dick wet again. You're obsessed with her you know that," he said to me.

I asked him if he wanted another beer and grabbed him a Miller. He popped his and so did I. Dogs barked in the background. We toasted to no more sluts and I felt like I was at home for the first time in a while.

“Did you really throw her from your car?”

My initial instinct was to throttle him, but he was Puma so I nodded my head not really listening. I tried to laugh it off. Teeth gritted and joint rolled, I took a chug from my beer. There was stillness in the car. Puma’s hands were on the clutch. He looked at me and back at the road. He asked me for a second beer and asked if I wanted to go home or crash at Knox’s or Charlie’s.

I swear I didn’t push her. I do. I can’t see it, I loved her too much. She’d brought over her new boyfriend Sergio, and I, being a fool, believed I could handle it. All my friends were around, too. We were in my backroom where smoke blurred the distance like fog—it looked like we’d gotten up early on a cold day. She sat next to him and she ran her fingers across his knee. Puma took a chug from his Miller and asked how things had been lately. Sergio was running his fingers up her thighs, I felt everyone’s eyes on me. Charlie came in close and whispered if we were going to jump the guy, he didn’t like the way he was disrespecting my house.

She got up and in the smoke she looked like two people, not two people, but two faces: One smooth, the other puckered in contempt. Contempt that she’d ever met any of us, contempt for this guy she was with now. She looked at me. Sergio asked us if we had any boxing gloves. My eyes stung from the smoke and I felt myself floating. K danced around the room like a coked out chimp. When Sergio left the room I went up to her. She got close to my face and asked if I still loved her. Her eyes shone green. They pierced through me. I told her I did. Her pupils

danced and she kissed me on the lips. I could still taste saliva and beer when Sergio walked back into the room.

Sergio's eyes moved back and fourth, like a pendulum. We had on a Kanye West cd and it shook the room. I gagged back the last sip of a Mickey. I wasn't that good of a boxer, but I wanted to teach Sergio a lesson. I didn't expect Charlie to pull his knife and get in his face. Charlie paused and the hum of the AC kicked in. Sergio grabbed K and held her closer. "We not going to kill Charlie," I said, " I promised him nothing would happen to him if he came and I'm sticking by it." Sergio let go of K and stood up. He faced all of us and said who was ready to box. Before any of us answered he turned around and punched a hole in my wall. And then he made another one. There were a few holes in the walls from times we'd fuck around, see who could punch hardest, who could hit without their knuckles bleeding out, but this guy with K, he had no right to touch anything in my house. Charlie walked up to him and punched him in the face. "Fuck boxing," he said.

Sergio was dazed, wobbled on his feet, but I'll give him credit he was a fighter. Him and Charlie were throwing down, loud thumps and blood echoed across the walls. I grabbed the last of the blunt by the burned edge and put it against Sergio's skin when he finally managed to pin Charlie. He screamed. I didn't care. That was when K screamed and everything went to shit. I heard my parents banging at my door and I saw K tending to Sergio. She looked up at me and even though she was mad she still looked a little turned on. She was always weird like that.

Around 2 AM that night I got a call from K from County. She was asking if I'd ratted her out and given Sergio's license plate numbers. I don't know what was wrong with me, but my first thought was to save her. I heard her crying on the other end saying she couldn't stay there

the whole week. Even though I was barred out and could barely open my eyes I managed to convince my dad to give me money to bail K out. He looked at me and shook his head. He handed over two hundred bucks and didn't say anything else to me. I knew from my own stays at county that it would take anywhere from fifteen to eighteen hours to get her processed so I decided to take someone with me to help me kill the time.

It was getting close to five when I called K's best friend Nikita. She answered and laughed when I told her K was in jail. "Again," she said, laughing, "that bitch never learns." I hated Nikita but I knew her fat ass would go with me to pick up K, they'd known each other since they were kids and also was one of the girls that had tried to beat K up the night she showed up with Sarah. I hated her but I didn't want any of my crew to know how much of a pussy I was being. She was fucking Sergio and I was rushing to bail her out of jail. I took off in a Neon my dad had gotten for me recently.

From the get go picking up the fatty was a bad idea. She asked if I had any weed and when I showed her a nickel sack she took it from me. She poured the bud onto a magazine. I looked straight ahead. The orange from the street lamps illuminated the streets. In the distance, I could see the pale yellow of the sun rising. There was hardly any traffic. I tried not to think about guy cops strip searching K or watching her shower in a camera. The smell of the smoke calmed me. I held it in my lungs and each time I exhaled it was a form of meditation, a type of catharsis. Even Nikita's jawing and jawing wasn't bothering me so much anymore. I looked at her and started laughing a little. I didn't mean to, but I hadn't smoked all day and she really looked like some type of monstrosity. Her teeth leered and the flaps of fat thumped to the rhythm of the music.

I fumbled inside my jeans looking for my mint case and grabbed it. I had eight Xanax inside for the wait and a couple for K when she got out. I popped a couple. I gave Nikita half of one, hoping she'd stop talking so much if the Xanax did its job. We were a few miles from county, which was on the outskirts of Edinburg. Dust flew in small swirls and the cars on the road thinned. Nikita tensed up and asked if I was good to drive.

“You want to grab a couple of brews before we post bail for K,” I said, pulling into the drive way of a gas station.

Nikita looked at me like I was an idiot.

“You want to show up drunk to county, that's stupid,” she said, shaking her head. “And people say you're smart.”

I could feel her gaze following me as I walked into the store. I sat down in my car and popped open a Mickey. I asked Nikita if she wanted a chug. She shook her head and after watching me drink a few swigs, she grabbed the bottle and chugged it down her lips puckered and sucking. I looked away from her and walked back into the store and came out with a six-pack of Naturals. I didn't want my lips touching anything Nikita's were.

The waiting room at county was white with a few rows of black seats. They were uncomfortable cause cops like to make everyone feel ashamed. I figured this out a long time back. The more they made you feel like you were not worthy of their time, the slight convinces you take for granted are taken away. They'd brand you in the forehead they would, those pig bastards. I sat down next to Nikita who had passed out. I tried to get comfortable. Nikita snored beside me. I kept trying not to look like I was drunk or passing out. My teeth felt grimy and the sour, bitter smell of malt liquor hung from my shirt collar.

When we finally saw K she looked pretty much like her usual self. She glided across the room and didn't say anything and I don't think she looked at me once when she was getting processed. Nikita kept asking me if I was going to bail Sergio out. I ignored her. I focused on K. With each set of rooms I'd see her walk through I knew that she was closer to being done with booking. I don't think she ever saw me sitting in the cold waiting room watching her, but she knew I was the one bailing her out. I don't know what I thought, I thought if I could free her from being locked up and talk to her I'd be able to convince her that being with me was the best and only option.

I felt a shuffle beside me and Nikita woke up, her stomach was making groaning sounds. I told her to go back to sleep. I didn't turn to look if she'd fallen back to sleep or not, I didn't care. My eyes were fixed on that steel door, the mesh wires on the bulletproof glass. I stared through the windows and eventually I saw her getting her shit handed back to her. She had her heels and jewelry. I saw her sign papers. She looked up a couple of times and stared like she was gone. It was like she was lost in the woods somewhere and had learned to live by herself, as if she were some primate that relied on instinct and had lost human emotions.

When she finally finished with booking, she didn't say thank you or show any affection towards me. She asked if Sergio was out yet. Still drunk, I ignored her question. Nikita followed us and we got into my car. The whole ride back to Weslaco, K kept bitching about how we needed to get Sergio out. It was one when we got back into Weslaco and I'd already given K two Xanax. I had taken another two myself. I bought another sixer. Nikita wanted to get dropped off, she slurred something about needing to be home before her baby daddy got there.

I drove slow and stole sideways glances at K the whole time. She wasn't looking back at me. Her fingers were texting and she kept asking about Sergio. She wanted a ride home and I told her, ok, after we dropped off Nikita. Nikita lived by Krause's old house. On the way there, I saw him and Flip at a Valero holding up signs that said "will work for food." I wanted to pull over and mock them, but K wouldn't stop talking. Nikita was snoring like an obscene pig. I wasn't sure if I was swerving or not and didn't want to end up in jail because I'd been in jail before.

I did a u-turn in the middle of the road because I passed the right house. Cars honked at me and I saw a few guys flick me off, but I didn't give a shit. My hands shook and I thought maybe I'd done some cocaine or something cause my mind wouldn't stop thinking. It wouldn't stop. I looked over at K while she texted on her phone and realized she was gone. Everybody knew it but me. She'd been sleeping around with my friends, but I didn't really take that seriously. I just cut off all my friends or got drunk enough with them that I could pretend I'd never heard anything about her with Charlie, or Joey, or Knox, or anyone. The look in her eye when she texted Sergio though scared me. Sergio, the little prick. Sergio, the guy who'd pulled a gun on her. Sergio, who sold coke and made her into his coke whore. Sergio, the asshole that left her with black eyes and who'd taunted me since they'd started dated. I missed Nikita's house again and after having them yell at me I told Nikita to just walk home. She looked at me with that stupid smile she always had on her face, like she knew something I didn't. She made a motion with her hand for K to call her when they got home.

"You would think you'd be a little more grateful," I said after a silence, "I bailed you out and all you do is text trying to get your faggot out. You're a whore, you know that, always have been."

She slapped me. She wanted to go home. I didn't take her. I drove around the back roads of Weslaco. I took her through fields and canals with the sun's heat intensifying as it approached noon. She kept hitting me and threatening to jump out of the car. I was tired of putting up with her shi. I chugged my beer and ignored her.

"This is kidnapping you know," she said.

"No, its not. You agreed to be released to me. You signed your papers and left with me voluntarily. It's all on the police cameras. You can't claim anything."

She hit me again and started crying. I didn't care. I kept driving. I don't know why I was talking the way I was talking to her, but I kept thinking of Sergio, how he hurt her and left her crying. I thought that maybe if I treated her like shit she'd come back with me. It was late afternoon, I'd finished off all the beer and we'd been smoking a joint when she opened the passenger door. She jumped out. I didn't push her.

We were doing fifteen miles cruising through that neighborhood when I saw her body hit the gravel and roll around a couple of times. My hand was by the door, but I couldn't remember if I was trying to stop her from jumping. I thought she was dead at first. K's hair was strewn on the pavement and I didn't see her chest moving. I thought about leaving her there like that, but I couldn't. I loved her. I got out of my car and she stood up. She started yelling for help and ran from me.

Neighbors watched us from their windows and I saw a couple with phones in their hands. I stalked down towards her and told her I was sorry. At the end of the neighborhood, there was a group of guys and she ran to them. There were about four or five of them. When they saw her running they asked her what was wrong.

“You gotta go,” one of them said,”

The other guy looked at his friend and said, “we’d better call the cops.”

I saw the other guys huddled around K, probably trying to figure out who was going to fuck her first. I went crazy. I punched one guy in the face and he fell quick. The other one, who was trying to call the cops, I smashed my fist into his nose. He bled on the floor while I walked up to the other three. My hand gripped on the knife I always carried. K was scared. Trembling. The biggest of the three guys was coming towards me, a dude about Joey’s size, six foot plus with an athletic build.

“Homie, you need to go home. We didn’t see you push your girl out of the car or anything, but she’s saying you did.”

“I didn’t do shit.”

The guy shook his head and he looked at me with pity.

“I don’t believe what she’s saying, but one of my homeboys already called the cops and they’re going to get here soon. I know how crazy bitches can get, man,” he said. He stared at me the whole time he spoke and it looked like he was stretching his arms out ready to throw down. I saw the other guys watching us. K had a guy on either side of her. I walked back towards my car and stopped at the end of the street where that crew’s house was.

“If anything happens to her I’m coming back for all of you. The one tall homie, he spoke with respect, that’s the only reason I’m leaving. Out of respect for him. But I know where you guys live and I will destroy all of your lives if you do anything to her or ever try to punk me out again.”

I didn't wait for their reply, I peeled out and heard them shouting. A couple of rocks hit the back of my car. When I got home my dad asked what had happened. I walked to my room like I didn't hear the question and he grabbed me by the shoulder. I almost punched him out of instinct, but I caught myself. I smelled eggs and chorizo and my stomach ached, it had been a while since I'd had a real meal.

I broke down and fell to the floor. I started crying like a little girl. My dad kept telling me everything was going to be okay, he believed me, he knew I would never do anything like that. He warned me to lay low for a while. He made some calls and tried to make things disappear with his brother.

There was knocking in the morning. They were short, sharp raps that rattled the air. I recognized the sound, the urgency behind those knocks. There were loud and incessant yells to open the door. I could've ran, but I was tired. Tired of running from everything. I'd bite the bullet, why not? There was nothing they could do to me that they hadn't already done. My spirit was broken. They had all pierced through the soul like shrapnel. I walked out of my room. At the door my dad was telling a couple of cops there was no way I'd done what she said. I smelled bacon and eggs. I made myself a tortilla before going to the door way. My stomach rumbled and I felt good, my stomach felt good. I hadn't eaten in a few days, so I ate the whole thing in about 2 bites. There was a beer in my room, but there were also cops at the door. I went into my room and popped a Xanax and sipped on some backwash from a Mickey. I rinsed with mouthwash and went towards the door. My dad saw me, with his eyes he motioned for me to go back to my room. He wanted to take care of it. I stood beside him.

It was Ruiz and another cop outside of the door. The sun hurt my eyes but I didn't blink. Any little thing and you gave the bastards an excuse to storm through the house. They'd toss everything around since there'd be no repercussions. Ruiz wore sunglasses. His partner was wearing too much cologne and looked drunk. He nodded his head at me. I didn't say anything. I heard cars pass by us on the road. I saw that the police cruiser's headlights weren't on and relaxed a little bit. If they wanted to arrest me they would have done it by now.

"What did she tell you guys?" I said to Ruiz.

He looked at me funny, like he was surprised I could talk.

"We were coming here to arrest you for assault and kidnapping. But, she called this morning. She dropped all the charges against you," Ruiz said.

A shriek from a pigeon hurt my head and I asked, when she'd dropped the charges. They didn't answer me. They thanked my dad for his time and looked at me with smirks and said to stay out of trouble. I wanted to talk to my dad after they'd left, but he was ignoring me. He went straight to his room and shut the door. He didn't slam it. I stared at his door and wanted to knock. I was even by the door, fist clenched about to knock, when I thought how he probably needed time to himself. I went to my room and I wanted to call her. I watched the phone as I fell asleep.

"You pushed me out of your car? Why would you do that," she said. "How could you do that."

I didn't respond.

"My arms are real cut up, I have scrapes all over. It was my sister that wanted you arrested. I know you didn't mean to push me, but you did."

“I didn’t push you,” I said after twenty minutes of hearing her. “I didn’t push you out of the car.” I said, “ you jumped.”

I was staying at Knox’s house when I saw two cruisers pull up and block off his driveway. I nodded at Knox and I thought I should try to jump the fence in back. At the screen door I saw a couple of cops through the steel mesh fence. I heard the cops banging on Knox’s door and didn’t know if I should make a break for it or just give up. I heard the banging like echoes of the first time they’d arrested me. It had been four years, I wasn’t ready to go back.

I heard Knox start to say he didn’t know anything when I decided to walk towards the door. I opened it and asked Ruiz what he was arresting me for. Ruiz shook his head and his sunglasses reflected my image back. I looked calm. And drunk.

“Jacky,” Ruiz said, his voice measured and deliberate, “that girl you’ve been around town with, her sister pressed charges on you this morning. She says you pushed her sister.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

My heart burned in my chest and I wished I’d popped a Xanax. I wished I hadn’t bailed K out of jail.

“This is serious shit, Jacky,” Ruiz said. “You’ve messed up when you were younger, but I always thought you were one of the good ones. I still do.”

He must have wanted me to confess or apologize because he got all mad without me saying anything.

“Jacky, you’re going to be a felon, if you get convicted. Might as well kiss your life goodbye.”

“I surrender. Take me in,” I said.

Ruiz’s partner started to cuff me before Ruiz held out his hand and shook his head.

“That’s all right, the kid’s been cooperating. He’s not under arrest yet anyways. We’re just bringing him in for some questioning. And you’re not going to give us any shit on the way over there, are you Jacky?”

I shook my head and walked the back of the cruiser. The car was a lot more comfortable without handcuffs cutting off circulation to my hands. It was like being in a taxi except I knew I was probably going to be back in jail pretty soon.

I had been in their interview room for a few minutes when Ruiz came back and told me I could go. The light in the room glared at me and I felt it white against my skin. I got up and followed another officer who walked me through the usual. I got all my stuff back, signed some papers and felt everyone was looking at me the whole time. Maybe they’d seen K. The cuts on her arms were worse than I remember. They all thought I was the biggest piece of shit in the city. I kept my eyes low to the ground. When they let me out through the last door, into the last room where I’d usually have family or friends waiting for me, I didn’t see anybody. They must have thought that I was really guilty or sure they were going to keep me locked up for a while. They figured they’d wait till after I’d seen the judge. It was cool. I’d gotten used to people giving me the cold shoulder.

At Knox’s apartment, I called her.

“Don’t call here again. K has that new boyfriend and he’s out looking for you. He’s ready to go fuck you up for what you did to my sister.”

A few minutes later I got a call.

“Pinche puto de Maricon. Sabes con hablas? Sabes?”

“I’m guessing Sergio, you fucking bitch. Can’t hide that bitch accent by switching languages.”

“My cousin wants to fuck you up ese, torch your house, we’re coming for you carnal.”

I heard his breathing on the other line. My head felt clearer than it had in a while. “You going to come to my house and fuck me up? Threaten my family, fuck you wannabe gangster. You’re just a bitch ass Cholo. You wan’t gangster, I’ll show you gangster.”

He kept saying some shit in Spanish and started yelling. I hung up and went through my contacts. I found the numbers I was looking for. I dialed. The phone rang for a good thirty seconds and I was about to hang up when I heard his laugh.

“What the hell you want, Jacky boy?” Mendez said.

I explained the situation. I heard a girl yelling in the background for Mendez to finish fucking her. I heard the sound of an ass slap. I knew Mendez had that look in his eyes. It was the one he’d get after the jocks had fucked with one of us.

He was coming to back me up. A true Wesloco.

By the time Mendez showed up, Eric and Justin were there with bats and knives. Charlie smoked a joint and had a switchblade and brass. Knox was at his house in case we needed a

place to hide later. Outside of Eric and Justin's house the air was still. The song of cicadas and birds preparing for battle rang throughout the air. Fireflies lit the sky. We lit up two bonfires on each side of the Galvan's house. Smoke rose into the dark sky and shot upwards as if we were in some ancient ceremony preparing for battle.

Mendez stepped outside of his Navigator and at first it was hard to see him. He walked towards us smoking a Camel. I recognized two of the guys he was with, the Aguilar brothers. I'd been friends with one of their cousins in high school, but after seeing how they'd took some kid's eye out with a pair of safety scissors I kept my distance.

"Que onda, Jacka? Been a long time since you've hit us up," the older Aguilar said to me.

"Ain't he the son of a cop?" the younger one said.

Mendez looked at him and the Aguilar brother put his head down. Mendez kept looking and eventually the brother said he was sorry. Mendez came up to me holding a rifle and I saw his friends had shotguns and an Uzi.

"You strapped, Jacky?" Mendez said.

I shook my head. Mendez handed me a 9mm. The Galvan's asked if he had any extra guns, but Mendez smiled and shook his head.

"I don't really know who you guys are besides Charlie, and I'm not about to get shot by that dumbass. I've seen Charlie shoot."

Charlie looked away and drank from a Mickey, he didn't care. Him and Mendez always talked shit to each other. The Galvan brothers just nodded, they didn't care about guns, they'd fought with knives and whatever weapons they could grab. While we waited I kept getting calls

from Sergio and his cousins. They said they were going to kill me and everyone with me. After a while it just started to sound like a bunch of kids trying to measure each other's cock size. I didn't know how to talk back to them cause most of it was in Spanish, so I handed the phone to the Galvan brothers. They were laughing and calling the cousins little bitches and faggots as far as I could make out.

Mendez kept pacing back and forth. In the moonlight you could see the palm tree tattoo by his eye, he was a higher up in the Vachuco gang that'd formed in prison. He started muttering to himself and then grabbed the phone from the Galvan's. They'd pissed him off when he heard them mention being Vacuchos.

“Shut up already, you guys ain't real gangsters, you're just a bunch of pussy ass faggots. You bring up the name, but you don't back it up. Come by, I'll show you the real meaning of The Palmas, bienches jotos.”

They stopped calling after that.

We waited all night, boozing and smoking and talking about how we were going to kill the shit out of Sergio's crew when they showed up. But they never came. Mendez told me he'd be listening to see if he heard anything about any of them. He told me to keep the 9mm he'd lent me, in case I needed it. Drunk, I pounded fists with everyone and rode home. The white glare of the morning flew right past me and floated upwards into the sky. I had a dream of her that night. And then I didn't dream again.

Sometimes when you talk Jacky, you sound like I could really believe what you're saying. You get this look in your eyes, like you're really determined. I love that about you, once you set your mind on something, you never quit, I love you.

I'll meet you there one day. I promise I will.

Do you remember the gum? I know you kept it. I saw you looking at it in your box once. The one where you keep the shit no one wants to see. I felt good that day, Jacky.

I like it when I imagined a future. I saw it. We weren't in Weslaco anymore, you believe that? We got the hell out of the Valley. You were a hairstylist, and I was playing music sometimes and other times I'd be writing books. We had a daughter who looked just like you, same smile and everything. A little girl angel with a golden halo and the whole nine yards who made us smile every time we saw her. I sleep too much sometimes now. I'm imagining shit that never happened between us. In one dream we were staying in Cancun with your uncles and your sis, smiles all around. I woke up and I swore it was real, a dream of what maybe was real in some other universe, or maybe the whole damn world is fake. I thought about the time we first met. I tried to recreate it.

You met her? Where? / you left me here/ feeling/ like a –the pictures are only for you and me. Don't you know I missed you. The gun he shot at me with was black. I didn't now what to do. I was scared. I walked up to him and that's when he'd grab my hair and kiss me. Bite my lips. He beats me at nights.

Jacky, you stupid fuck, don't do anything stupid.

Part Four

“I heard this story from a friend of mine,” I said to Jacky. “You don't remember cause you weren't there. Wait, have I told you about the time the Aguilar's and Galvan's finally got a hold of Sergio? You don't know his name? bullshit, Jacky. That's all you talked about, over and

over you'd bring that dude up. How you were going to kill him and his whole family. So you're not talking now, fine. I don't care we can just sit here all day. That's all we have anyways. Time."

In the corner of the room Jacky sat on a wicker chair facing the window. His head was shaved and he shook back and forth. I rapped my hands against the walls to try and get his attention, but he didn't move at all. It was like some taxidermist had stuffed Jacky up and left him in the room to mock me. Silence. The click of an aircon unit kicking in. Silence.

"Dammit, Jacky, you weren't there, you're not here, where the hell did you go," I said.

I poked him with a tree branch that had blown in from the front and demanded he talk. He didn't move. He looked at me, but he didn't say anything. I left him alone and went to grab a beer. I took another cup down from the cupboard and poured a cup for Jacky, too. I walked next to him and placed it by the coffee table to his left. There were cigarette burns all around the carpet that smelled of piss and beer. Jacky reached for the beer and took a sip. He took another sip and I wanted to slap the cup from his hand. But, it was the first time I'd seen Jacky move all day. I let him sip the beer like it was the mother's milk.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. Drinking up all my beer and you don't even talk to me. Hell of a friend you are," I said.

I went back to grab another beer and reached for Jacky's cup. He jumped up when I took the cup from his hand and looked at me wide-eyed. The eyes rocking back and fourth like someone had just broke a game of pool. I walked to get us another couple of brews when I heard his voice. It sounded like he was talking from some loony bin. His voice was shaky and he had a slight stutter.

“Knox, you remember K right?” Jacky said.

I didn't answer him, I walked and poured us another couple of drinks and then I sat down.

“The one that made you the way you are now.”

Jacky stood up and I saw his pupils dilate, like he wanted to see all of me before he killed me. He eyed me with suspicion, like I was some undercover or something, or like maybe he thought I'd been in contact with K or that Sergio dude. I felt like slapping him. He was acting like a bitch, nothing like the Jacky I knew. I slapped him. I waited for him to hit me back but he didn't do anything. I could feel the heat from the sun outside when I opened the door and then his voice.

“You remember that story I told you, huh? The one about the Aguilar's. The Galvan's. I looked at him, not meeting his eye. That Sergio dude had it coming, Jacky. You couldn't have helped him. He looked sad, like he wanted to cry. If I hadn't known Jacky since we were kids, I would have left him there crying like a little faggot. I had to go and bang Brenda, and all he did was waste my time with all of this PTSD bullshit. Like he couldn't get over a girl. What a pussy.

“When we *finally* found him, you wouldn't believe the shit I saw. I didn't know they were going to do him like that, Knox, I swear,” he said.

Jacky made the sign of the cross like his mom always used to. I listened. I sat there with my arms folded against my chest and took drags from cigarettes while I heard Jacky tell the story again.

“When the Aguilar's called that morning they told me to walk outside of my house. I didn't know what the hell to think or why they were calling so early, but I got out of bed, half

asleep, my face numb and cold. When I looked at myself in the mirror I looked like Flip and Krause, junkie skin. Yellow and pale as the fading sun. I cupped my hands and threw water against my face, hot and cold. My face was still numb. I thought about buying some coke to wake me up. I jumped up when I heard the car horn. I ducked and covered my head like I was in the middle of some type of nuclear fallout. My phone rang incessantly. My dogs barked outside and when I came out I saw The Aguilar and Galvan brothers. They stood by the SUV smiling and chugging beers. I smiled back at them and asked if they had any coke. Eric Galvan patted me on the shoulder and told me to get in the car. We got you a present, he said. I got in the car and we drove off. The car felt like a jackhammer. Constant and steady someone was kicking from the trunk. They handed me some coke and a beer. After a few bumps I thought the kicks were funny.

“What’s the surprise? I asked, smacking my hand against the trunk. We drove way out and I lost track of time. The kicking never stopped though. It was a constant thump that whole afternoon.

“We drove out to some field in Donna. Everyone in the car was expressionless. Small dust tornadoes blew past us and still the kicking did not stop. The Galvan’s had taped his mouth shut, when they finally opened the trunk and let him out of the car he’d chewed through pieces of the tape. His eyes moved from one of us to the next and they settled on me. He looked like a dog that knows it’s about to be euthanized. He was trying to talk so I went up to him and tore the tape from his mouth. He was shaking.

“He pissed his fucking pants. He turned away and made a gagging sound. One of them took out a knife and asked Sergio if he wanted his cock cut off. Sergio started to scream. Eric and Justin kicked his knees until he fell. Sergio begged. Adrian unzipped his pants.

“The whole time this was going on I was looking for a way to stop it. I looked at around and realized there was nothing I could do. I didn’t want the guy dead, but my friends didn’t believe in letting anyone go. They knew they’d go to the cops or get some of their crew to retaliate. They might find themselves tied up, beaten, and humiliated.

“Adrian put his dick close to Sergio’s mouth and asked him how much he liked to suck cock. Sergio was crying. The other Aguilar brother told him to open his mouth up. Sergio shook his head and Adrian handed the knife to his cousin. He put it against Sergio’s throat. Eric punched him in the sides of his stomach and Justin kicked him till he was on the ground. His skin was covered in dirt. I looked away when they brought him back up to his knees. His mouth was open. I heard gagging sounds and Adrian was moaning.

“The sun burned against my skin and when I looked back Sergio was on the floor, spitting. Adrian had his dick in his hands. He told Sergio to lie down. Sergio listened and then piss hit him straight in the face.

“Justin got my eye and motioned for me to walk up and do something. I stood still. I didn’t want to do nothing, but I could tell by the way they were all staring at me that if I didn’t do anything that I was just as much of an enemy as Sergio. I walked over and the smell of piss made me cough. Sergio looked up at me and the bastard smiled. You believe that, the bastard smiled. He said nothing mattered since he’d fucked K real good dozens of times. I punched him without realizing it. I kept punching him. My knuckles were raw and bloody. I saw the Galvan’s and Aguilar’s nodding their heads. I stood up and kicked Sergio a few times along with Justin and Eric. Eric was smoking a cigarette, then he put it out on Sergio’s cheek.

“Sergio’s eyes looked off like he was sedated or something, I don’t think he realized what was happening to him. Adrian came up to me. He asked me if Sergio had had enough of an ass beating. I nodded my head and then Sergio yelled he was going to fuck all the Aguilar’s sisters and nieces and the Galvan’s and all of our families. Adrian shook his head. They stood him back up again. Adrian walked up to him and smelled. He wrinkled his nose.

“He told his cousin to get a shovel from the trunk of their car. Flies floated around the dripping and caked blood on his face and it looked like he’d forgotten how to talk. The Galvan’s were smoking cigarettes on the bed of Eric’s truck. There hadn’t been a sound of a car engine since we’d brought Sergio out here. I saw a pack of blackbirds pass by us, the sky stark blue with clouds that shifted and cast shadows down on us. Adrian told his cousin to get him a shovel from his car trunk. The cousin came back and handed it to Sergio who trembled and whose face was swollen.

“Adrian pushed Sergio until he started to dig. I went to smoke a joint and chugged a couple of beers. I was getting a headache from the sun. It hurt my eyes. When I was younger I used to burn ants with a magnifying glass and for some reason it reminded me of what Sergio was doing. He was the entertainment, I’d stopped looking at him, but he’d been digging for at least half the day. The sun was even starting to set. Cool wind brushed against my skin and I wanted the taste of dirt out of my mouth. I wanted to be home, not here.

“Sergio screamed. One of the Galvan’s had a knife in his hands and was cutting a Vachuco tattoo into Sergio’s face. Justin threw whiskey in his face and I swore that I saw smoke steaming off his face. They gagged his mouth and then Adrian walked in front of him and asked

if he remembered prison. Sergio nodded. The whole was pretty much done by then and it was getting hard to see outside. The stars were dim and there were no lamp posts nearby us.

“Sergio took off his shirt and pants and looked around at us to see if he could find someone that felt sorry for him. No one looked back at him. When he was naked Adrian told him to get in the hole. Sergio said no and he was lifted up by his arms and legs. I felt the pulse of his heart with my fingertips. It beat rapidly and he was screaming again. Sergio shook by the whole and Adrian asked if he wanted to be thrown in or was he going to be a man and climb down himself. Sergio nodded his head and went down into the hole.

“It was hard to see him down there, but I could hear the sound of his teeth rattling. Mosquitoes and flies were buzzing down there with him. I heard a coyote yell and the sound of a gun being cocked. Adrian handed the gun to me. I took it and I aimed. I aimed to teach him a lesson. I took a shot into the darkness and I heard him whimper. I thought I’d killed him. They told me to shoot at him again and I shot into the air. He threw a shovel down and it was still dark by the time Sergio had finished digging. It looked like he’d fallen down a well. We left him that way, him yelling for us to help. Him yelling and us walking to the cars. I think a ghost of me watches that pit. He can’t look away. I know that the ghost can never leave because he was buried down there with Sergio.

“You killed him,” Knox said.

He looked at me. I looked back and tried to move my fingers. I got tired of not talking and of Knox accusing me. He was acting like he knew what he was talking about. A finger twitched. Knox kept looking at me, a smile on his face.

“The guy was a douchebag, Jacky. No one cares if you killed him.”

I got up and went to get another beer and sat there, ignoring Knox. Outside the hotel window cars sped by. There was an expressway next to the hotel and I'd open the windows with my back against the wall. I'd peer through the sides and tried to make sure no one got a good luck at me.

“You should just turn yourself in,” Knox said.

I grabbed a bottle and threw it towards him.

“Shut your damn mouth for one minute,” I said.

“If only that bitch hadn't called the cops,” I said.

“That's what I said too,” Knox said.

I saw red and blue headlights outside of the hotel. The sound of sirens cut through the air. I went for another beer and heard the familiar cop thud. I didn't listen to the rest. I popped my beer and all the Xanax I had and kept drinking until they busted open the door.

How is it you can see the past so clearly, like sudden hot flashes that hurt your head, bring you to your knees. How dare you be alive, drug addict succubus that feeds on the misery of others. To have the nerve to live here in this Valley, your Valley Jacky, that you love so much that not even the love of an insane woman could keep you from leaving, nor the departure of your friends. You observe their slow descent into the pits of living hell and the whispers. Degradation. Grimed in dirt, those who've chosen to stay now smoke from thin glass pipes.

Charley prostitutes himself to gay men. Knox has taken to smoking the rock. You smell the burning paper the crack and nod your head along. There is no disease quite like the disease of denial. Perhaps they should have locked you up, you do nothing here, but watch as everything you hold dear is snatched out from beneath you. There is no honor living here anymore, and yet you stay. Are you proud of staying. As if by staying you proclaim your dominion over the land, as if you are Moses from the Old Testament. You will strike at the checkpoint that separates the rest of the Valley from the US and say, Let my people go, for they are dying and there is no future in the Valley. But there is no sanctuary for those born past the checkpoint. You live and die according to your own codes and customs. Your stubbornness. As everything fades around you, as it crumbles and turns to ash, you insist that the Valley is your home and will always be your home. To leave would be admitting defeat. You have some nerve to call this place home, Jacky. But this is home, I say to myself, while I wait for the trial.

They did me good at the re-trial. The Aguilar's and Galvan's were already in jail for attempted murder and now they were doing me, too. The judge wouldn't even look at me. I knew by the way my attorney talked that I was pretty much done for. Well, what I got was ten years for attempted murder, obstruction of justice, assault with a deadly weapon, and kidnapping. There were cameras recording me, shaming me. I stood tall, determined not to let them know I'd accept any type of defeat.

At the end of the sentencing I got a surprise, the judge put my bail at \$100,000 bucks. I didn't think they'd give me a chance for bail, but since they had I instructed my attorney what to do. He was to go to my parents and ask them each for a thousand dollars so I could visit them one more time before I turned myself in. He was to sell my car. I told him if he lent me the rest, I'd pay him back twice as much once I got access to my bank account.

They were leading me back to my jail cell when I saw K. Her hair was straight and her belly was swollen. She smiled at me. I tried not to think about all the old times. I smiled back at her. We held one another's glance until I was out of the courtroom.

"You're going to put me in that goddamn trunk," I said to Mendez.

"I ain't part of that game no more, Jacky."

"Why didn't you call me that day?"

I hadn't thought about that. Why didn't I call Mendez when I went to meet with the Galvan's and Agular's? I sweated in the dry air and he asked if I wanted a cigarette. The smoke filled my lungs. Spirals of smoke shot up into the sky. The sounds of birdsongs built into a cacophony and then transformed into a symphony. It was the most beautiful song I'd ever heard. Then, I was floating into Austin with K. I'd never been arrested, and I wasn't trying to leave the county.

"I knew you would've said no. You're an actual gangster—were—an actual gangster. The shit we did didn't follow any of your codes. I knew you'd have said no."

"I ain't a gangster, that shit only exists in the movies. What we was doing was small time shit. You're right though, I would've stopped you. Saved your dumb ass from spending another ten behind bars," Mendez said.

"Put me in a trunk and get me to Mexico, or past the checkpoint to SA. Something, I can't go back."

"All right, Jacky. You always treated me like a brother, I'll get you out of here."

I was sweating like a damn fieldworker in the back of Mendez's trunk. My hair was matted down on my face and I could smell the stale smell of sweat and armpit. I felt the car slowing and the rumble of the engine. I heard dogs barking outside the trunk. I started to shake. I prayed to a God I didn't believe to just let me get past this one check point. I'd be good forever. I wouldn't do stupid shit anymore. I could barely make out Mendez's voice, it sounded like he said he was going to go work the oil rigs in Oklahoma.

There was silence, and I heard them telling him to open the trunk. I closed my eyes and felt the car move. I didn't know whether to shout at Mendez to let me out right then or there or to wait until we'd made some distance from the checkpoint.

I felt Mendez pound on the other side of the trunk.

"You're free, Jacky boy. Just like I told ya."

A few minutes later we pulled into a Dairy Queen and Mendez told me to follow him into the restroom. He told me to keep growing my beard out and to shave my head. I wanted to thank him, to say how I could never repay him, but Mendez would've just called me a bitch. He tossed me his car keys.

"Get your ass out of Texas, they'll be looking for you pretty soon. Might be safe to stay with Puma or someone in Austin for a night, but after that you head north and don't stop until all you see is white and black people. You've always been smart, Jacky. I know you'll find a way out of this shit."

I ordered a snow cone and some steak fingers and ate with Mendez while we waited for his ride to pick him up. A big grey van eventually pulled up and Mendez pumped my fist with his before he got into the van.

You live in small pictures. They're memories, nostalgia, whatever you'd like to call it. The whole experience of day to day life is a dream. Only dreams float in the oasis of the past and future, future-past where you can catch a hint of the sublime. The sun shining on you. In the under-the-table waiter gig I'm doing now, I'm happier than I've been in a while. Sometimes I think of K. Or, I think of mom and dad, and all of the friends I haven't been able to contact. I catch myself sometimes trying dialing the numbers to K's cellphone, or to one of my brothers, or my parents. I always stop myself—I can't let them go down like me. I won't, even though every day has become grinding clockwork. A grey dream that I drift around in. I'm not sure what's reality and what are visions of what might have been. I don't go out much for fear of being recognized, but I'm all the way in Nevada. In a desert just outside of Vegas. I see the silhouettes of neon lights at night, watch the girls in their tight dresses, watch drunken men stagger through the streets, and I feel that if anyone were to come looking for me, they'd never find me here. On the outskirts of a desert of sin and debauchery, people like me fit right in. It kind of reminds me of home.

I always wondered where Jacky went. How he got away from the cops, they bothered me for a couple of months, parked their cruisers outside my house and would ask if I'd seen or heard from Jacky. I'd say nope. One day his dad came and it was the first time I'd seen him look like a regular guy. Not just some dude who was always yelling at us and Jacky. He could've helped if he'd hadn't been such an asshole to all of us.

I swig from a Mickey and pour one out for my brother, Jacky. It was another two years before things heated down and he got in contact with me. I was going through my mail and found an envelope addressed to me. I opened it and read what was inside. Besides a ticket to Vegas, there was a note. It read, “Knox.”

I smiled and kept drinking. The wind outside blew towards the west under a pale blue sky, and I stood there, motionless for a while, just thinking. I looked across the street and Israel the crack head started coming towards me. I got into my car and drove off, the leaves crackling under the tires of the car. The sunlight was fading into a yellow-orange as I kept driving. It was a starless night by the time I got into the airport. I shut the door to my car and started walking towards the entrance. I hadn't been out of the Valley since I was a kid. The bright lights when I walked into the airport blinded me. I blinked and it was boarding time. I chugged the rest of my beer at the airport bar and then walked towards the line of people getting out of the Valley.

A couple of girls were cheering. It looked like they were throwing some type of bachelorette party. I saw rich looking dudes and old men with their wives, all talking about how much they were going to win in Vegas. Maybe they'd win so much they'd never have to come back to this shithole.

Everyone looked blitzed. Like by just being there—by being given the chance to leave the Valley for a few days—had changed them. It gave them a chance to see bright lights and permission to be as fucked up as they wanted without having to answer to anyone. I noticed a chick from the group of girls in the bachelorette party staring at me. I approached her and she smiled. She asked if I'd drink with her on the airplane. I said sure. She ran her fingers across my shoulder blades and I smelled. She had lime and salt on her lips.

“What’re you gonna do when you get to Vegas?” she asked.

“Just want to kill some time, live life.”

I looked out of the tarmac and saw planes shooting off towards the sky which was full of stars that glowed dim. They were a ghost white.

“Really, I just want to get out of the Valley for a few days,” I said.

She wasn’t looking at me when I finished talking, but she did sit next to me on the plane. I insisted on the window seat. The whole flight I couldn’t get over how pretty the Valley looked from up high in the plane.

I really couldn’t believe it.

(9-18-16 to 2-26-17)

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