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## I won't die

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I WON'T DIE

A Thesis

by

AZAEL VILLARREAL

Submitted to the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2014

Major Subject: Creative Writing



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May 2014



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## ABSTRACT

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Sid is 22, and like the rest of the men in his family, he will die when he is 24. Sid will take his brother's identity, money, and college degree to get ahead in life before death takes it away again. Sid will travel to the other side of the world in pursuit of adventure and meaning. In the final stages of his short life, Sid will try to make sense of his curse, and try to figure out what is left worth pursuing.





## DEDICATION

Thank you Johnny, Kevin, Eric, Jaime, and Austin for showing me a good time and giving me all of my stories. Mijin, you are the most interesting woman I know, and I want to dedicate my Master's thesis to you and the boys. I love you all.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The point of my novel, *I Won't Die*, was to capture the state of mind of a man in his early 20's. My early 20's were equal portions joy and sadness, pain and pleasure. It was easily one of the greatest times of my life, but it's difficult for me to remember what it was like back then, and I'm only 30. I look at the younger men around me and I remember that before marriage, a full-time job, and kids, there are men who see the world in a particular way. The decisions of a young man who hasn't dedicated himself to a profession, family, or some religion may look reckless or self-indulgent to the rest of us until we remember our younger selves. There is a breed of young men who have long been a constant source of material for writers of every generation.

Bret Easton Ellis' first novel, *Less than Zero* (1985), is filled with pages and pages of sin and debauchery meant to portray the excesses of youth. *Less Than Zero* reads a lot like some of the Marquis De Sade's more sordid tales. Extreme in every measureable respect, most of the characters' actions in Ellis' novel lie well outside normal human behavior. Constant drug use, complete indifference to the pain and suffering of others, and a total disregard for self-preservation may characterize some young men on the far end of the spectrum, and while their tales may be a lot of fun to read, there is little in these types of stories that I can personally identify with.

John Fante writes a more relevant character in *Ask the Dust* (1939). A young man named Arturo Bandini heads to Los Angeles to pursue a life as a writer. Better at capturing the

hardheadedness of youth, the instability of love, and the absolute certainty of failure, *Ask the Dust* succeeds in portraying the young men I see all around me. These are the men struggling to pay for school, doing their best at keeping their cars or bicycles working, and fighting to stay in or get out of relationships. These young men are everywhere, and they are who I was not too long ago.

Writers like Jack Kerouac, Milan Kundera, and Jim Thompson all contribute to this particular vein when they write about young men doing what many of us did. Somehow, these great writers manage to turn the young men of their stories into gods.

Now, you may not see yourself in this type of literature. You may be a young man who grew up with two loving parents that taught you the difference between right and wrong. You may have learned these lessons early, so you shared your toys, you never cursed, and you said your prayers before bed. You may have stumbled upon a novel with distasteful characters doing unpleasant things and you put it aside. You may have warned others against reading it too.

Or not. You might have grown up in a broken home, you liked getting high, you hurt the people around you because you got hurt, and you hated reading books. Or you might be like me. You hang around with that guy who gets high all the time, and you went to church with that other guy who warned you about that book. But you like books. You like the books that remind you of you, and you understand that when you and I, when we read these stories, we laugh and shake our heads remembering all the things *we* did when we were 20.

Or you're probably not like any of these guys. It doesn't matter. You've known someone like us. You may have wondered about some of the decisions we made, even asked us what we were thinking. It's not so easy to recall what we were thinking. We might come up with a *why* we did it, but it comes after the fact. We can blame the drugs, hormones or stupidity, but there is



something we tend to forget. It's not what we were thinking that leads to our bad behavior. More often, it's the fact that we *weren't* thinking that got us into trouble.

The nobler, higher pursuits that now occupy our time are the result of too much foresight. As children, we don't have enough consideration for the future. We can only see up to our next piece of candy. We look forward to events like the next time our favorite program will be on. As we get older, we can see farther out. We get fixed rate mortgages and plan out our retirement. At some point, near the end of our lives, we can look out into infinity. But between infancy and death, at around age 20, we're at the point where we plan things out for a couple of years. We might be able to see ourselves finishing school or getting serious with a girl, maybe. However, anything after that is too far away to worry about. There are too many possibilities. Who knows what we'll be doing?

This lack of foresight is why we do the dumb things we do. We quit our jobs, have unprotected sex, drink and drive, fight, take up crap jobs, couch surf, eat raw meat, steal, ignore wounds, and tolerate pain. The moment of our lives that I've chosen to write about is unique. It's when we first have the potential to radically influence our future. We can prepare ourselves for a long and prosperous life, or we can ruin ourselves forever.

### **The Beginning**

I am jealous of those healthy 20-year-olds who don't worry about death. For them, there is only life and new experiences. They will make life altering decisions on a whim. They'll throw away what is most precious to them because of a bet or over pride. They'll turn their life upside down because of a girl they hardly know. The young will quit everything and reinvent themselves

because of something they see on television. Strangely enough, I imagine a 20-year-old with death staring at them would exhibit the same type of behavior.

In my first chapter, Sid, the protagonist, knows he will die in the next few years. This is exposition meant to carry the reader to the next conflict which comes in the form of a question. Is Sid's job legitimate? Then comes a series of unexplained events. How is Sid's girlfriend breaking into his apartment? Who stole his passport? Who cut Sid's hair while he slept? Where did all the blood come from? Even with all of these unanswered questions occurring in the first 100 pages, it's obvious the story is missing an overall plot. The many conflicts and complications are meant to keep the reader's attention, but they do little to let them know where the story is going. I don't believe that plot will hurt a story, but it seems many contemporary writers no longer find plot all that essential.

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) follows the life of the Kid in a largely plot-less journey. The Kid joins a small U.S. Army unit to fight authorities and Native Americans' throughout Mexico until he is arrested. He is conditionally released to join a gang of scalp-hunters where he continues to indiscriminately kill peaceful villagers, soldiers, and warriors alike. The Kid completes his journey and becomes the Man. Many readers have enjoyed this story, some not knowing what kept them going from page to page, because it certainly wasn't a plot.

McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) has a simplistic plot. The Father and Son had to reach the coast, but their anti-climactic arrival reveals to the reader that the point of the journey had little to do with its actual meaning. These journeys often represent our own travels as we navigate through life. Many of us have no plots in our lives. We will have conflicts and complications, but we don't know where our story is going.

The lack of plot in my novel is apparent because of how the story is written. Written mostly in the first person and in the present tense, this story, again, is meant to get the reader into the perspective of a young man. The story couldn't be written any other way to capture this state of mind. It's in the present tense to create a feeling of immediacy for the story. It is all happening right now, because we don't look back and we don't think about the future when we're 20. It's in the first person because that is how we see the world. We lack empathy, remorse, and perspective. We have tunnel vision everywhere we go and with everything we do.

But Sid isn't going to die right away. He might have a few years, and two years is a long time. Having the reader imagine what it would be like knowing they were going to die in the next couple of years was the easiest way to make them fall into the mindset of a 20-year-old. For Sid, two years is short enough to hinder some caution but not short enough to warrant self-destructive habits like hard drugs or depression. That comes later. Sid will still need work. He's experienced homelessness and loneliness before and he won't let himself have either again. He wants to avoid long bouts of unemployment. Sid also wants to make his brother proud. He uses his brother's education to get ahead in life and strives for money and comfort.

The fact that Sid knows he's going to die soon doesn't make him special. It makes him hedonistic, and like many of us, Sid refuses to acknowledge his unfortunate circumstances and reckless behavior. Nonetheless, he welcomes opportunity if he sees it.

### **His Brother's Gift**

The protagonist's older brother, the original Sid, also knew he was going to die at 24. He, however, sought out an education. The younger brother cannot fathom why his older brother

would want to spent the last part of his life in a classroom. There is no explanation, but old Sid gives his identity, bank accounts, and degree to his younger brother. The gift of Sid's education allowing him to "get ahead in life" was an obvious enough analogy.

An education can give you a lot. To some, an education means a job and money. Others appreciate the opportunity for personal growth most of all. In the weeks after assuming his brother's identity, the new Sid finds out what an education is worth to him.

This story allows me to separate two major benefits of an education. Sid first gets a job. It's a job that requires a degree, and it offers Sid money, housing, and the possibility of adventure. Following his brother's advice of reading as much as he could, Sid is able to extract that second benefit out of his brother's education.

In the beginning, Sid is only able to elevate himself so high. Eventually, Sid switches between the usual casual chatter and a deeper, more finely worded dialogue. Depending on who he's with or the situation he's in, Sid will take on a different type of speech pattern. Educated people have a higher tendency of doing this because they've achieved a greater range of eloquence.

In Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (1997), Michael Berg works for many years as a researcher of legal history. He is intelligent and self-aware, yet when retelling the story of his love affair as a 15-year-old, he is careful not to make his pontifications too wordy or deep. The first part of the story is filled with simple fears, wants, and needs. In part two, when Michael Berg is first studying law, the range and depth of thought portrayed begins to expand. Nonetheless, the story is told in the past tense by Michael Berg, the accomplished legal historian we meet in the end. So while the retelling may not be so introspective, it remains consistently brilliant in its expressiveness.

Even in novels covering a large span of time, the narrator will recount the tale and attempt to personify the person they once were. They will attempt to restrict the retelling of stream of consciousness to what was possible for them at the time. *Flowers for Algernon* (1959) aside, I can't remember a book where a narrator's speech patterns evolve throughout the course of the story.

That can hardly be said about our own lives. Every time we look back at who we were years before, we won't be able to deny how stupid we once were. As high schoolers, we'll remember how completely clueless we were in middle school. In college, we'll know what complete fools we were in high school, and so on. Some of us peak in college and degenerate for the rest of our lives. Others can't help but strive for competency, always learning new skills, always reading. It was all the reading I had in school that gave me a sense of how little I actually knew and a sense of what I should be trying to understand.

Of course, readings aren't the only things to be had from an education. The discussions you have with professors and fellow students, especially at a graduate level, are equally important. Even so, why wouldn't you be able to compensate for the lack of a good discourse with more good reading and a bit of adventure?

### **The Setting Change**

Changing the setting and all the supporting characters in the middle of a novel is something I've read only once before. It was a Tom Robbins novel. *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates'* (2000) dust jacket claims to follow Switters, its leading man, across four continents, but in reality, there are two major settings with two distinct casts. Switters is introduced in Peru where

he spends most of his time with the Boquichico Indians. He returns to the city of his boyhood, Seattle, to be near his grandmother. It's exactly halfway through the novel when his job with the C.I.A. takes him to a religious compound on the Turkish, Syrian border. He spends the second half of the novel with a group of nuns until the end when he returns to Seattle.

Not intentionally, but I have almost completely mirrored *Fierce Invalids'* story arc when I introduced Sid at his father's old house, but didn't begin to develop tension or characterization until after Sid reached Korea. Again, like Switters' move from Seattle to the Middle East, a major complication forces Sid into a drastic change of location and company in his move to Austin, TX. There is even a prodigal return to Korea in the final chapter.

I had originally located Sid's father's house in the Rio Grande Valley but eventually removed any mention of the Valley. I don't think it's a good idea to reference a place as unique as the Valley and describe it only superficially. I thought it better to leave out any mention of the RGV and focus on the other two. I love Austin and Korea and I tried to make both of these places seem as welcoming as possible. Part of their appeal is that it is so easy to get into trouble in both of these places.

While it may not be conventional to so drastically change the setting and supporting characters in the middle of the story, it is more common to have the author write an introduction of the protagonist in a particular setting only to be promptly relocated. In these types of story arcs, we learn something meaningful about the protagonist, and then the wind will scatter them every which way. Then, we watch them as they land, pick themselves up, and grow in their new setting.

Hunter Thompson and Jonathon Ames do this in *The Rum Diary* (1998) and *The Extra Man* (1998). Paul Kemp of *The Rum Diary* begins his story in New York. We see Paul dresses

well, likes to drink, and appreciates good looking women. Next, Paul is hurled off to Puerto Rico. *The Extra Man* begins with young Louis Ives at a day School in Princeton, NJ. He is caught in an embarrassing situation, handling a co-workers undergarments, he's forced to retire, and Ives spends the rest of his adventures in New York City.

The exposition in the beginning of my novel reveals that Sid, having now taken the identity of his dying brother, will also likely die in the next few years. In retrospect, the introduction of Paul Kemp in New York aligns well with his future behavior in Puerto Rico where he continues to pursue women and drink. Louis Ives also follows suit of his introduction when he continues down a slippery slope of sexual taboo. In my story, Sid reveals an open-mindedness towards the unknown and a fear of imprisonment. It won't be until the end of the novel that the meaning of that fear is revealed.

### **The Flashbacks**

There are two flashbacks that occur, one at the beginning and one in the middle of my novel. Both happen during flights. I didn't want to make up a silly story to warrant telling what happened on a plane, I didn't want to write about a boring flight, and I didn't want to immediately jump cut into a completely new setting. I padded the transitions with the two flashbacks and eased into Korea and Austin.

Going over the books in my library, there are two that stand out because of their effective use of flashbacks. One is the internationally renowned, *Let the Right One In* (2004) by John Ajvide Lindqvist. The other was a ridiculous novel by Chuck Palahniuk titled *Pygmy* (2009). Aside from the obvious telling of backstory, flashbacks can reveal the motivations of characters.

The history of a character can tell you what is going on inside their head. For example, in *Let the Right One In*, one of the supporting characters named Hakan murders people for the child vampire Eli, but it is not clear as to why he would be helping Eli. With one flashback, it is shown that Hakan is fond of young children and is willing to procure the blood of his victims in exchange for sexual favors from Eli.

Chuck Palahniuk's *Pygmy* intersperses about a dozen of the anti-hero's flashbacks of a terrorist training camp. First come several scenes of indoctrination and anti-American propaganda. We now understand why the young terrorist posing as a foreign exchange student constantly fantasizes about killing his host family along with every stranger he encounters. Then the second series of flashbacks of physical combat training show that he would be more than capable of killing them. In the end, he defies his totalitarian state by foiling the terrorist plot he was sent to execute. Only by taking into account the last several flashbacks, in which his comrades were killed during combat training or executed to be made examples of, can the readers understand why the anti-hero was able to take such a dramatic turn.

The first flashback in my novel was a quick family history. This serves as a possible origin story for the curse over the men in Sid's family. In the original draft, the protagonist's looming death was revealed much more casually. Sid's father tells his sons they will die young, and his brother reiterates it for him. With the flashback sequences added in the final draft, an early death seems more inescapable for this family because of the manner in which every man is picked off. Every man will die before or at age 24. I found the number 24 symbolic, and I tried to tie it to the 24 hour lifespan of fruit flies.

The first flashback only goes so far. It does not explain why his brother is dying. Sid's recollections also fail to explain his father's death. However, these memories leave several clues



about how Sid might die. They reveal Sid's greatest fear, imprisonment, and foreshadows Sid's upcoming conflict.

The second flashback takes Sid to the memory of another one of his brothers, Pabs. Like in *Pygmy*, the memory of Pabs is supposed to be the explanation of why Sid is attracted to unpredictably irrational people. Pabs is abusive and selfish, and he uses 13-year-old Sid to get some drugs across the Falfurrias checkpoint and into Austin. Sid watches his brother deal drugs and almost kill someone. Pabs' cool manner desensitizes Sid, and soon both are drinking and smoking at a party in the woods outside of Austin. Sid only sees the excitement afforded from individuals like Pabs and not the dangers they bring.

Some people associate deeply engrained behaviors to past events or childhood experiences. While writing this scene, I was conscious of Sid's admiration for his brother and his wild behavior. I correlated this to some of Sid's later decisions. Someone looking for meaning in Pabs might see how his brother played an important role in Sid's outlook. The reader might also recognize Pabs' flippant attitude in Sid and understand how calmly Sid handles some of his more serious problems.

I understand how your childhood can have a permanent effect on you. And even if you don't buy into psychoanalysis, there is no denying people are a culmination of their past experiences.

## **The Girls**

One of the worst female characters I've ever seen written was Larry Brown's Fay. In *Fay* (2000), titled after its protagonist, the leading lady is an uneducated trailer park beauty setting

out to make it in town. I was told in my gender studies class that Larry Brown set out to create a strong character with enough street smarts to compensate for her lack of education, but I found her to be mostly Forest Gump-ing her way through the novel. There is nothing resembling intelligence or strength in Fay's character. Whether intentionally or not, she survives off the pity of others and just barely.

Nel and Sula of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) are two women that are described in enough detail to create a real sense of strength. I've always regarded Sula as the protagonist of the novel, though it may not have been intended that way because of her willingness to break convention. Sula's irreverence, her combativeness with the town's folk, and her promiscuousness make her a very different character today compared to what she would have been forty years ago. But whether you read *Sula* today or forty years ago, there would be no denying the strength of her character.

But I didn't want either a Sula or Fay type character in my novel. These are lead roles, and I wanted a different type of female presence for my novel. There was a reason for leaving out any mention of Sid's mother or sisters, and there was intent when I limited the scope of both the two female characters' backstories. This story is supposed to be about young men. And while a significant part of any young man's life are the women he meets, there is a reason for minimizing the development of the female characters. Or rather, I meant to develop their character by limiting their exposition. The women's motives, desires, and behaviors are meant to be shrouded in mystery.

Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* (1988) is as close of an example to what is meant by character development through limited exposition. Readers of *The Piano Teacher* have all formed their interpretation as to what motivates Erika Kohut, a voyeur, sexual deviant, and

control freak. The book offers some compelling details to substantiate any type of analysis. Erika Kohut's masochism and her sexual depravity can easily be attributed to her overbearing mother, to biological inheritance (her father is in an asylum), or to a traumatic childhood. There are hints dropped throughout the book, but, by and large, the book remains in the present with little explanation as to why Erika does what she does.

Erika has a resemblance to a real life person I knew. I included a similar character with the introduction of Bak Sunjin. Sid knows almost nothing of this character when they meet, and in fact, he knows nothing after she's departed, but she has a lasting impact on Sid and on the story. I included Bak Sunjin because I was able to base her on a real living person. I prefer to create characters this way. The women I wrote were all women that appealed to me. This is preferable to using archetypes found in literature, because while there may exist many women in literature I find intriguing, there aren't many I find attractive.

There was a girl I dated in college. She was a pretty white girl with blue eyes coming from Mexico City. In the half-year we dated, we didn't have a single argument, we never fought, and nothing bad ever happened between us. It was the most boring relationship I ever had. Then I met a girl who was really crazy. She would destroy my things. She cut up my clothes and smashed my TV, amongst other things. I didn't like that sort of thing, but that relationship was more interesting than being bored with Marialicia. I stayed in that insane relationship for several years before we decided we weren't healthy for each other.

The interesting women I knew were not restricted to my intimate relationships. Because I worked at a residential mental rehab center, there was no shortage of fascinating people in my life. I met pathological liars and thieves. I worked with kids who killed their parents, and I sat in therapy sessions for teenagers who were addicted to huffing brake fluid or drinking gasoline. I

also knew of one man who tried to have a sexual relationship with one of the young residents but was quickly arrested.

I wanted to write about all these people, and in fact I had, because you write what you know. I wanted to include a scene where one of the lady characters smashes up Sid's apartment. I wrote out the scene like I remembered it, and I was rereading the first half of the story to see where I might be able to fit it in. I found a spot just before the murder in Sid's apartment. That's when I realized that it would probably be best to keep this entirely a work of fiction.

I didn't want my story to be part memoir, because readers may assume it's all factual. It does not help that the story is written in the first person present tense. In the final draft, I removed everything autobiographical from the story. The slaps, the sexual attacks, and the drug escapades that remain never happened to me. I won't lie and say there aren't some similarities between my and Sid's attraction to the girls in the story.

I did create female characters that I found attractive, and they exist in settings that I knew very well. Yunee is surrounded with mystery because the most interesting woman I know is one that I can hardly understand. This is what I meant by developing a character by restricting their exposition. Sid isn't supposed to know much about Yunee or what her motives are. Sid never finds out whether it's her that cut his hair. He doesn't find out how she keeps breaking into his apartment. He assumes she is the one who steals his passport but later discovers he's wrong. And most importantly, when he learns it is Yunee that kills Bak SunJin, he doesn't see it coming.

Alane is a younger version of Yunee, only cooler and more intimidating. The first time Sid meets her is in the laundry room of a mental rehab center. She's immediately confrontational with everyone and unpredictable to an insane level. Sid is supposed to be attracted to that too. On the surface, she may be like any other teenager, but Sid sees her insanity as something worth

pursuing. There is no single character whom Alane is based on; rather she is a mixture of the many fractured personalities I've met in rehabilitation centers.

### **The Friend**

At first, Sid spends most of his time with Yunee but he has no real friends. Costa only comes in at the second half, and Sid quickly gains a deep appreciation for this character. The obvious comparison to make here would be *Don Quixote's* (2009) Sancho Panza, but Sancho is never fully appreciated by Don Quixote and it is a friendship built on too many falsehoods. Alonso does not know himself, Sancho, overestimates the Don as well, and their journey together is a big farce.

I wanted the value of Costa to be clear and fully appreciated. I wanted Sid to understand how it is that friends can make any situation tolerable. Friends can alleviate guilt when they partake in your vices. They distract you from your boredom and lift you out of sadness. There is a purity in friendship that does not exist in sexual relationships.

Take Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1987). Valentin and Molina are radically different from each other but they are imprisoned together for better or worse. The two enter this relationship with clear motives and intentions. Valentin uses Molina and his stories as a distraction from his life as a political prisoner. Molina uses Valentin to be able to assume the role of mother or wife, something he's always wanted to do. The two increasingly depend on each other until they appreciate and accept each other completely as friends. Valentin and Molina succumb to the mutual desire to please one another and engage in a sexual relationship. Complications thereafter result in the torture of Valentin and the death of Molina. This story is

not intended as a parable warning readers about the perils of homosexuality. It is about love, but I want to give love and friendship separate but equal weight in my novel.

Anyone who says a man's girlfriend or wife can also be his best friend is lying or doesn't have any real friends. It will often be the woman in your life that causes guilt, boredom, and sadness. A friendship can be the most significant relationship in a man's life. A friend can be more satisfying than a lover. A friend can be more important than a relative. Someone who you spend time with for no other purpose other than for the pure pleasure of their company is the best type of friend to have. Being that type of friend is similarly something worth aspiring to. You can give your woman all your free time, she may be a lot of fun, and she may mean the world to you, but a friendship, without the constant need for attention or the complications of sex, is something else entirely.

Sid becomes attached to Costa because of the resemblance to Sid's brother, Pabs. Again, Sid is fascinated with the unpredictability of this new character. Costa is the fun friend that puts Sid into stimulating situations. They may not always be great situations, but they're never boring.

It is always easier to inject humor into a story through a supporting character like Costa rather than the protagonist. Costa allows me to try to be funny while minimizing risk. Making the lead character funny is risky because it's easy to cross the line and make the story ridiculous. There are stories where it is not necessary for the reader to take the protagonist seriously, but I don't think it appropriate here. There are two large chapters I cut because Sid seemed sillier than usual. I want the humor, but the only way to keep the story on a semi-serious level is to leave the stupidity up to Costa, most of it anyways.

## The Sex

To the virile young men I write about, nothing is more important than sex, but sex will get us into all sorts of trouble. It will keep us in bad relationships, ruin friendships, and land us in jail if we aren't careful. I appreciate when a writer is able to adequately capture the power of sex in their writing. It's one of my guilty pleasures. Some people read vampire books, others love wizard boys. I find sex entertaining in literature, and out of the whole slew of writers penning sex, Philip Roth and Georges Bataille I find to be the most fun.

Philip Roth captivates audiences with his particular blend of academia, psychosocial commentary, humor, storytelling, and sex. I've read many of Philip Roth's novels, but *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) feels like writing on a different level. Sabbath, the novel's protagonist, is an exaggeration of everything we are and everything we do, but he contains faults of the very worst kind, and so he drops to a human level. His character is driven by insane purpose but lacks conviction. Sabbath has a superhuman intelligence but makes the stupidest decisions. He is a conventionally conservative antagonist using all manner of rationalization to excuse deplorable behaviors. This is one of Roth's later books and it is incredibly dense. Most readers would fail to completely comprehend its meaning without a deep, careful analysis. On the other hand, a superficial reading would also provide the casual reader with a highly entertaining experience. This is due, in part, to his displays of brilliant dialogue, vibrant characters, perceptive commentary, but mostly, I would argue, it is because of the inclusion of superbly written sex.

Georges Bataille's ninety year old novella *Story of the Eye* (1977) chronicles the sexual degeneracy of a young pair of lovers. While I believe that this story has survived primarily because of its ability to shock and awe, I won't deny its potent imagery nor Bataille's influence

on contemporary writers like Carlton Mellick III or Jordan Krall as they strive to create incomparable story sequences. Some might compare Bataille's work to the prolific Marquis de Sade. But only in a non-fiction reference book, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1955), a compendium of 238 case studies of maladaptive sexual behaviors, have I ever seen so comprehensive a study on sexual deviance. It may have been easier for Richard Von Krafft-Ebing to have completed so thorough a study with *Psychopathia Sexualis* than it was for Bataille to create it in *Story of the Eye* because of limitless resources Krafft-Ebing had available to him, namely, real people.

With regards to fiction, even when cheaply written, I am easily left satisfied. Unfortunately for me, most writers know that if the details of their characters' love making is of no use to the story, if it is wholly gratuitous, then it's best to leave it out. Explicit sex is also difficult to execute tactfully. On the off chance that it is done well, well written sex leaves a lasting impression on readers not easily accomplished by other means.

A big problem I have trying to write sex was in making it interesting. Repetition and poor word choice were my first obstacle, but later, making the scenes unique became an even greater challenge. I don't want to have already read something similar in another book or to have seen it in a movie. I figure if it's new and original, chances are it's good. A man teaching himself the basics of rough sex, a couple of lovers unable to speak each other's language, and a girl masturbating with a tumbling laundry dryer are all things I've never seen or read before. Hopefully, that is enough to make my sex scenes interesting.

In our own lives, it's important to keep the sex fresh and always be trying something new. Even then, sex will be relevant for only so long. Eventually, sex takes a backseat in life and we shift our focus towards other things. There is no sex in the second half of my story. I purposefully left the sex out. I wanted the reader, who hopefully appreciated the sex scenes in the



first half, to want Sid to “perform” again. It never happens, but the reader is left with himself wanting something sexual to happen with the younger Alane. I think the sex is important for the Korean half of the story, but most of it is there because of the effect it has on the reader.

### **Drugs and Alcohol**

Similar to the sex, there is another clear split in the story. While the first half is completely devoid of drugs, the second half is distinctly saturated. The heavy drinking that takes place in Korea is replaced with constant drug use throughout Sid’s stay in Austin. One vice replaces another.

With over-indulgence, younger people run the risk of becoming their vices. They’re called drug addicts, drunks, and nymphos. Then there isn’t much to be done for them but wait it out and hope they outgrow their bad habits.

In Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993), it takes a near death experience for the protagonist, Mark Renton, to stop using heroin, and even then, it isn’t for very long. This novel was not written as some afterschool special where the protagonist struggles with an addiction and conquers it in the end. If anything, Mark Renton uses his hiatus from drugs to convince himself that he is in control only later to hit it harder.

In contrast, Thomas De Quincy offers readers a bit of caution in his autobiography, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1907). The author acknowledges the firm hold opium has over him, but most readers would readily agree that De Quincy’s coverage of the pleasures of opium far outshines the pains. Like in *Trainspotting* and *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, the self-destructive habits in our own lives don’t offer much in the way of life lessons, but

occasionally, they do allow for a bit of insight.

There is one chapter in which, in the midst of all of Sid's drinking and drugs, he has a moment of clarity. He sees his drinking and drug habits for what they are, a waste of time. He gets this feeling that comes to many of us at one time or another.

It can happen when we're spending time with friends trying to have a good time. Suddenly, everything changes. Like *déjà vu*, it's an overwhelming sensation that comes over us without warning. Everything becomes meaningless. This mental state can come from drug induced paranoia. It might be from a rapid drop in dopamine levels. It can come from something as simple as boredom. But everyone gets that feeling at least once. That sense that everything that used to be important, they, their friends, and their interests, are now stupid, worthless, and trite. Unfortunately, these feelings are often fleeting and we return to the same old, same old within a night.

I thought the drug use would help make Sid's decisions more believable. He spends a great deal of time getting high and making poor choices. His behaviors become more erratic, dangerous even. This will eventually lead him to confront his greatest fear, getting arrested. Not only is he locked up, but he is sentenced to a date well past his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Prison can have a detoxifying effect on people. Like a heart attack, prison has the potential to scare someone straight. Now approaching the end of his life, Sid can no longer delude himself with the idea that he is going to live forever.

## **The End**

Sid is different in the end. He no longer fears imprisonment. He chooses prison over becoming

destitute, and while that may not be much of a choice, he accepts it. Sid accepts prison like someone dying must accept their own passing. Many people will deny their upcoming death. Sid faces his death like he faces the stronger, unfamiliar characters in the final chapter.

In the end, Sid is transported into a Korean gangster story, not unlike the movies he is so fond of watching. Sid will be detained in a Korean prison for a minimum of six months, but he will be celebrating his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday in four. At first, Sid plays the role of a spectator. Both pensive and aloof, Sid is slow to become involved with his inmates. When he finally does interact with them, trouble emerges.

It is the first real trouble that Sid finds himself in, and for the first time in his life, he does not choose the path of least resistance. He stands up against the very man who would be the one most likely to kill him. This final confrontation takes Sid towards his first step of enlightenment.

Almost every book mentioned throughout this introduction contains a similar moment of self-discovery. In the end of *Kiss of a Spider Woman*, Valentin learns that anything that makes Molina happy will make Valentin happy. Valentin also wants Molina to partake in his struggle, along with his comrades, in the cause.

In Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, Michael Berg has his moment halfway through the novel when he's grasped that Hanna Schmitz, his first love, does not know how to read. The second half of the novel is his struggle in coming to terms with what her illiteracy meant and the role it played in Hanna's actions as an SS prison guard in Auschwitz.

For Thomas De Quincy, the revelations come much too late. It is almost in the final pages of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* when he realizes that he has no control over his opium addiction, he finds no pleasure in anything outside of opium, and his life is utterly devoid of meaning without opium.

In *Less Than Zero*, Clay comes to terms with never having found what he was looking for in L.A. He accepts that everything he was chasing, pleasures with Trent and love through Blair, does not exist.

Erika Kohut of the *Piano Teacher* discovers that the fulfillment of her greatest desires, freedom from her mother and complete gratification of her sexual masochism, offer her no satisfaction and it has not helped her find her place in this world. She does not know what she wants so she'd better get back to mother soon.

The end of *I Won't Die* is supposed to symbolize that terrible question all men have at some point in their lives. Many people get this sensation after graduating from college, once they get married, or when they've landed a job. It's the feeling of, "Now what?" That is the ending of Sid's story. Some people see life coming at them and they lose much of their enthusiasm. "What do I do?" They feel fear and dread.

In the end, Sid has nothing going for him. He is trapped in prison and there may be some very dangerous people after him. He could also die at any moment. If somehow he did make it out of prison, he would be on the streets penniless. He might also be arrested for another crime if he ever makes it back to the States, but he doesn't care. Sid, who's faced death for the greater part of his life, has his "Now what?" moment, but he's able to face it with optimism and confidence. Every moment Sid has from this point on, he will cherish, and come what may, he'll deal with it.

And that's the way it should be.

## CHAPTER II

### MY BROTHER'S GIFT

My brother Sid calls me saying he needs help getting sorted. I don't really have anything going on, so I tell him to pay for my bus ticket, and that I'll be there soon. He tells me he has something he wants to give me. I wouldn't have come had I known he was going to be like this. When I get to his apartment, I let myself in because no one answers. His apartment is like a festering wound. I smell rot and dead air. I leave the door open and take a deep breath. I open the one window he has and turn on his ceiling fan, but it doesn't do any good. There are flies hovering over the moldy dishes and roaches on the grimy floor. Following my brother's voice, I go into his room. Dark and damp, the sweaty lump on the bed asks me to take him to Dad's house.

My brother Sid and I are heading over to our family's property now. I remember this one dog we had that got trapped underneath the house. Because I was the smallest, my brother made me go down and get it. It was almost dead. Wet and shivering, I pulled it out of a puddle of its own piss and shit. I hated Sid for making me do this again. I was there to see my other two brothers die. When Sid's gone, I'll be the last one left.

My brother's lips are cracking and his skin's losing its color. He's having trouble catching his breath, he's soaked in sweat, and he's been complaining about stomach pains the whole way. I can't do anything for him other than lie and say we we're almost there. If I'm lucky, I can get to Dad's house a little before midnight. I'm going farther and farther south through Texas and

except for smashed turtles and rattlesnakes there's nothing to see on this highway for the next fifty miles. My brother can't stop crying out. Every bump in the road, every turn, even the air conditioning hurts him. He finally passes out, and I turn the music back on. His heart's too weak for me to feel for a pulse, so I put a hand on his belly to make sure he's breathing.

Sid is the first born male, named after our father. He was conceived a little after my father's fourteenth birthday. Our mother was seventeen. They went on to have five more children together before my father's death eleven years ago. The year of his death, our father told my siblings and me that he was going to die soon, that no male in our family had made it past the age of twenty-four. My brother, Sid, is twenty-four years, ten months, and fourteen days old, and except for our great grandfather Speedy, he's lived longer than any other male in our family.

When Sid wakes up, he tells me that I stink like weed and I that I look like a hippie. He's right when he guesses that I have no job, car, or job. He tells me that I don't look too good, which is almost funny considering the state he's in. Then he tells me that I'm a disappointment. That I've disappointed him, and that I would have disappointed dad had he seen me like this.

"Fuck that," I say.

"You always were the least favorite," Sid tells me.

"That's all right, I'm not here to entertain you."

"Shut up Damian and listen," he tells me between grips of pain, "You were always a disappointment because you never—"

"Fuck your lectures," I say.

Sid tenses every muscle in his body and says through clenched teeth, "You don't know a goddamn thing about anything, Damian. You're ignorant, and you suck at life."

"I suck at life?" I ask. "I'm alive. It's more than I can say about you."

“Goddamn it, Damian. I’m not trying to piss you off. I’m trying to—”

“Fuck you. You need me you dead fuck. You need me to tuck you into bed. You need me to wipe your ass. You—”

“Stop talking like that, Damian. You sound so stupid.”

“You knew this was going to happen. You know what happens to us, and you left us anyways,” I say, “for six fucking years. What did your smart ass do with all that learning, huh?”

“Forget it. You’re just being dense, and I’m not gonna waste my time trying to get anything through to you. I do need you, but I want to give you something. That’s why I called you.” He hands me a bundle of papers.

I ask Sid what I’d want his birth certificate and passport for.

“You can use them for you,” he says, “I want you to use my name,” he says.

“Why the fuck would I want to use your name?”

He takes a deep breath, and gives me this cutting look that tells me to shut-up, “The more I talk to you, the more I think it’s a waste of effort. No one’s gonna believe you went to college.” I should say something smart back, but I know what he’s saying and I want to know if he means it, so I ask, “Do you think I’m stupid, like I couldn’t go to school?” I try to sound angry but I do want to know because Sid was the first to ever try college. I think my other brother Pabs and I both figured he wouldn’t be able to do anything with it if he did finish. I think we were also both pissed because he was the dumbest of us last three. We didn’t want him to do something we were either too afraid or lazy to do, but he did it. He did it in three years. We never found out if school made him any smarter because after he graduated, he kept getting more schooling. We never talked to him after he left. He does sound different. My brother asks something that cuts worse than saying the degree would be a wasted on me.

He asks, "Have you ever read a book, a whole book?" It's a simple enough question, but I'm having trouble answering it. He tells me, "You're either born smart or not. You can either handle yourself or you can't, but the easiest way to fake being smart," he says, and I lean in, "is to read books. Just always be reading and people will think you're smart." Sid gets a little more excited talking about books, so I can't help but take what he says a little more seriously.

"What books?" I ask.

"Anything," he calls out. "There's over a hundred books in the trunk of my car."

I'd seen them while loading a bag of his clothes. I ask, "Did you read them all?"

"More than that. Listen, when you read a book, your chances are one in ten that it's gonna be any good, maybe one in twenty. The stuff that I have in my car is the five percent that's any good. That's why they're in the car. You're getting that too, the car and the books." A car.

I've never owned a car, and I've always loved my brother's car. The Bird is mine now.

Sid doesn't let me dwell on that too long, because he keeps talking about books. He's really making an effort to tell me these things. He's taking deep breaths and his eyes are bloodshot, "Because you sound like such a dumbass." I don't normally get a chance to talk with people who got extra schooling, and this is doubly intimidating because it's coming from my older brother.

"Please don't waste it," Sid tells me between groans, "I... You've got my driver's license, my passport, and my bank cards. Use them and when..." I hear my brother shit himself.

"You want me to get you something?" I recognize this smell. The way toenail jam smell can sometimes remind you of old pizza, the smell of my brother messing himself reminds me of a car passing too close to a dead dog.

He shakes his head, "when they expire, get them," he stops, trying to breathe.

"Your ID says you're 5'8". I'm 5'11", and I'm way better looking than you, too." It's



true, but I do kind of look like his ID pictures. I say trying to not focus on my brother fouling himself.

“Nobody’s going to care. Just fix ‘um when it’s time to renew,” he tenses up again and grabs at his stomach, “then use your own photos.”

My brother throws up everything he’s got. Then he starts puking up bile. Then when he’s out of that, he brings his knees up to his chest. His whole face turns from goth white to a bruised red. Every muscle contracts with each heave, and he waves me out of the room. I scramble up and out to close the door behind me. I hear him screaming and cursing, then panting heavily. This goes on for about ten minutes. When he finally stops, I think he’s dead and I’m grateful. I don’t want to go back inside but I do when I hear something crash to the floor. He’s knocked over the bedside table trying to get my attention because he’s already become too weak to call out.

“Get me into the shower,” he chokes out.

I undress him on the bed and I can’t help but wince at the sight of his naked body. Puss-filed sores cover his groin up his crap-covered ass and up to his belly button. I help him into the bathtub. I rinse him off first before stopping the drain. I never understood the need until now, why the bathroom floor was equipped with a drain, so I let the warm water run. The water will spill over, but it will stay warm. Again, I close the door behind me. Back in the room, I throw my brother’s clothes onto the bed then roll the sheets and blankets into a ball. I stuff them all into a garbage bag and take them to the trash pile out back. I flip over the mattress, replace the sheets and pick up the overturned bedside table.

I go back and check on my brother. The water is pink with his blood. I reach into the tub anyways and pull the stopper, but I scrub my arm at the sink. After I rinse him off, he seems

refreshed, and surprisingly he's able to make it back to bed on his own.

Watching Sid die, I think about how long I can last off the streets with his money. I think I'll try Austin again. I could try to find a job online or from a newspaper. I wonder whether I can get a hold of an Austin paper. Has Sid ever been to Austin? I ask him and he tells me to start looking anywhere, but online is the fastest, and yes, he's been to Austin. It's better than San Antonio or Dallas, and Houston's a hell-hole. I've never been to any of those other cities, and I'm jealous of my brother. Then, Sid and I talk about everything else. He talks about dogs wearing Kevlar, Thailand, and college discourse. He talks about books again, about sexually transmitted diseases, and what's to become of my resume. He goes to sleep calling me Sid, and wishing me a good night. He's clear and coherent. Again, I consider the chances of seeing him alive in the morning.

I don't think we would have as many laws today if nobody lived past twenty-four. If I had known earlier that I was going to die at twenty-four, I would have paid them less mind. Because life, life-life, real life, doesn't start until after puberty, earlier for those sad people, but by this point, with what's left, who would care about drug abuse, becoming rich, having a family, or staying out of trouble. Fruit flies have a twenty-four hour lifespan and all they worry about is finding food and getting laid. I think our lives would be a lot more like fruit flies' if we knew we were going to die in twenty-four years.

I am twenty-two with an assumed bachelor's degree. I'll be twenty-three soon. If you're twenty-two and nothing horrible has happened to you yet then you don't develop a sense of cause and effect between your actions and your life. You tend to make stupid and rash decisions.

I'm surprised to see my brother alive in the morning. I don't know if it's because he too

weak or if he doesn't have much else to say, but he doesn't talk much anymore. A few days later, he looks even worse which I didn't think possible. He's more skeletal, and his breathing seems to be taking more effort. He mumbles at me to kill him at one point. I don't hesitate. I grab a knife and his arm. I think bleeding him out would be the least painful. I imagine we could even have a short conversation while his life poured out of him, but he backs out when I lay the knife against his skin. He can't say anything. He just pushes me away.

We're together for another week. I don't leave him other than to go shopping for groceries. He's only drinking tea or milk. He sleeps fourteen or eighteen hours straight. He might be coherent and talk for a few hours a day. I try to sit with him and talk when he's up. I'll tell him of some of his books I'm reading. I don't tell him they were the smallest books I could find. I tell him about *Budo Secrets*. He says that was a good first choice, then a book called *Warfighting* written for Navy Seals. I read this one book I really liked called *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*, and I found another book by the same author, but I had trouble finishing that one. I tell him of the ads I've applied to online, the jobs posts I've been calling to from the newspaper, and to their lack of response. I've never had trouble finding work in the past. I feel like I've done everything, but now, for some reason, it seems pretty hard. Probably because before, I could take my time. Now, I have a sense of urgency, like I want to prove something to Sid. Eventually, I received a reply from the following ad:

ASAP: A native teacher wanted in Suwon-Si, South Korea!  
Working schedule: M ~ F/ 02 :30PM ~ 09 :30PM/ 120 Hours per month  
Contract period: 1 year  
Salary: KRW 2,600,000 per month + Overtime pay 20,000 Won/Hour  
Accommodations: Housing studio apartment provided  
Benefits: Severance/ Paid Vacation/ Round Trip Airfare  
Requirements: Bachelor's degree/ English related majors a plus/ Must have passport from English speaking country - U.S.A., Australia, England, South Africa, Canada/ Certificate holders of TESOL-TEFL preferred but not necessary/  
Clean criminal background required.

Email to [Johnnykim@yahoo.co.kr](mailto:Johnnykim@yahoo.co.kr)

I thought it was a long shot when I sent Johnny Kim the email. It was the last gig I expected to get, but I get it. I get Sid to eat some yogurt and drink some coffee, because I want to talk to him about it.

“How long are you going to be gone?” He asks.

“The contract’s a year.”

“And you’re gonna be teaching?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure it’s not a scam? You’re not getting sold into sex slavery?”

“Maybe.”

I don’t know if I’m being sold into indentured servitude or not, but I’m sure I can get out of it if I am. It would be different if I was a girl, or old, or unsure of my ability to handle myself. The more Sid asks me about it the more set I am on going.

“What do you lose if it is a scam?”

I think it over again, “Nothing, the school buys my plane ticket. My apartment there is paid for, too. No money up front, nothing taken out of my wages, and the money’s good.”

He thinks it over, “Fuck it.” He nods in acceptance. I feel more optimistic about the future with his blessing.

He’s dead in the morning. I try tying his arms to the shower curtain but it doesn’t support his weight. I finally get one of his arms tied up to the air vent. I slit his Achilles and let his blood drain for about a half day. He loses, maybe, fifteen pounds. I thought it was going to be more. I wrap him in a sheet and bury him next to my other brother’s tombstone, Pabs. I don’t say anything. I finish the beer in the fridge and I read over our bank statements again. I get a little

angry at my family, but decide not to dwell on it. I think I've got everything I need.

I sign a contract with an English school in Suwon. I ship out a box of books ahead of me. It's gonna take the books a few weeks to get there by boat. It's not cheap to ship books because they charge by weight. I think Sid's words made more of an impression on me than I'll ever give him credit for. At least I know his words lasted a hell of a lot longer than his money did. Had I known the money was going to disappear this quickly, I'd have sold the car. By the time I leave seven weeks later, I have \$1500 in maxed-out credit card debt, \$4000 in school loans, a negative \$120 checking account balance, and a \$268.80 unpaid bill from my and Sid's cell phone providers, but I have \$550 cash in my pocket, and I'm not planning on parting with any of it until after I get to Korea.

## CHAPTER III

### THE LONGEST, LOWEST BRANCH ON THE FAMILY TREE

Great Grandpa Speedy always had people trespassing through his property. This was to be expected being so close to the Mexican border. He typically paid them no mind. He had hundreds of acres of property, but there was this one group that kept pulling up his fence posts to build fires. He would repair his fence, but every two months the same section of fence at the far end of his property would be pulled and burnt. Speedy had an idea to deal with this. It was a good idea, but it's what led to a problem that's now stretched over four generations, nearly 100 years. Speedy preferred dry wood from dead or fallen mesquite trees for his fence posts because they were easy to get at and didn't require much cutting. In the end, he cut down a healthy mesquite tree and replaced the posts with fresh green wood. Two months later, the day before his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, he saw the smoke billowing from a fire burning green wood at the edge of his property. He grabbed his gun and went out to have a talk with the trespassers.

When they found Speedy, he'd been bled out. He was naked and his gun was gone. There was more than just his blood around the scene, but there were no other bodies. Our great uncle Jose Luis, Speedy's younger brother, moved onto his land to care for his and his brother's family but died from an infected leg wound when he was 22. Cesar, the youngest of the brothers, who seemed to have photographed best, was 18 when he moved to his big brother's ranch to help his sisters-in-law. Kytsia and Arlin did not remarry but went on to have nine more children after the arrival of Cesar. The cause of death was unclear for Cesar. He became bloated, turned yellow,

and died. He was 24.

Kytsia and Arlin lived on what was to become our father's ranch raising twelve girls and eight boys. Only one of the girls, our great aunt Selena, died at a young age. A domestic argument took her when she was eighteen. From the boys who made it to adolescence, Jacov died at 14 of a spider bite, Sergio at 17 from an alcohol induced coma, Armando was kicked in the stomach by a mule and died two weeks later from complications when he was 17, Speedy Jr. died in a whorehouse fight when he was 19, and Jose Angel died at 20 when he was making some home repairs and fell through the roof. Jacov, Sergio, Armando, Speedy Jr., and Jose Angel all died without any legitimate children.

Our great-aunts, Kytsia and Arlin did not take the loss of their boys well but attributed their deaths to the hard life of single ranch men. They had hope for their three remaining boys, Damian, Marcos, and Pepe Luis who married young and were well on their way to establishing good family homes of their own. Damian and Marcos, both younger than Pepe Luis, were working at an oil refinery in West Texas when they disappeared leaving behind their wives and four children including our father. The Texas Rangers were always suspect but nothing was ever proven. The ominous disappearance of her last two boys left a malingering hurt in Arlin and she took sick. Kytsia was happy and hopeful with Pepe Luis' return. He was planning on building his house on the back of their family plot. Her hope died young in a lightning storm when a fire took Pepe Luis' entire family. Damian, Marcos, and Pepe Luis were 22, 23, and 24 years old.

I don't remember much else from my father's stories, because I was young back then. He never told us what happened to his own brothers, though. I know they all died young. We got notices when they died in prison. I didn't think much about those notices at the time, but I had nightmares after that. Nightmares about being thrown into windowless concrete rooms forever.

Growing up, I thought the worst possible thing was knowing you're going to die and being locked up in prison. That idea still scares me.



## CHAPTER IV

### BOSS KIM KEEPS A LOOKOUT

I'm picked up at the Incheon Airport by Johnny Kim. The first thing he says to me is, "Wow, good beard. Will you keep your beard?" That's when I look around the airport and I notice some differences between the foreigners and Koreans. The Koreans all dress well, pressed suits, nice shirts, and ties. They're all clean cut, all clean shaven. I'm not making a generalization, every Korean face I see is clean shaven. I've got to get me one of those three quarter coats the Koreans have on over their suits too, because my leather coat is worthless in this cold.

"Why don't Koreans have beards?" I ask him. I see other foreigners, dressed in shabby cargo pants, sandals, or worse, clogs, nappy hair, scraggly beards, and they're fat. There aren't any fat Koreans. Now I'm generalizing, but it's not much of a stretch. The Americans talk loud and hang in groups, making a production out of everything like picking up luggage or asking for directions. It's tough identifying with a group like that. I see another American guy wearing the exact same outfit as me, black t-shirt and jeans, who's also got a full beard and ponytail and I tell Johnny Kim, "I'll shave my beard before work," but I'll be keeping my hair.

Johnny Kim tells me I must be tired, "It is 4 A.M. in Texas, now."

"I slept ten hours on the plane. I feel alright," and I do.

"I will take you for some food. It is my favorite food in all Korea," Johnny tells me.

Johnny Kim tells me that normally to get to Suwon you drive around Seoul. It makes

sense that the 20 million people in the way might slow you down, but if we were going to get Johnny's all time favorite food, we might as well take the scenic route through Seoul.

“What do you think about Korea?” Johnny asks.

“It looks like you're under construction,” I tell him. Everything on the way to Seoul from Incheon is being worked on. Roads are being built, mountains are getting carved up, buildings are being erected, bridges are being spanned, but it is beautiful. I'd like to take a look at the towns we pass on the way, but huge partitions block them from sight. Johnny tells me that it's to block the noise from the highway. Smart. The earth the workers cleared for the expansion of road is green. Johnny Kim tells me it's painted that way and that grass seed is mixed in. The mountains are also green, even in winter. “It looks way better than Texas, that's for sure,” I tell him. “Is everything here written in Korean and English?” I ask, talking about the road signs, billboards, buildings I've been seeing.

“Mm,” he affirms, “most all things have both English and Korean.” Awfully convenient.

The road is mostly a straight shot despite the mountains because Koreans don't build winding roads that snake their way up and down mountain sides. They build four lane tunnels that go straight through these mountains, sometimes for miles. The headlights don't come on when we enter the tunnels because they're pretty well lit with color changing LEDs. Massive fans circulate the air which would otherwise become toxic with auto exhaust. It's engineering that makes people look like ants, trees look like broccoli, and Koreans look like geniuses.

I forget about the tunnels once we start approaching the Seoul skyline, skylines. You see two skylines from the outskirts of Seoul. There aren't any houses, or favelas, or ghettos trickling out into the surrounding forests of Seoul. There is a solid line of high rise apartment buildings, shopping plazas, and industrial complexes set up against the tree line. Then behind these 20 and

30 story buildings, in the centers of Seoul, you see the second skyline.

“There are 5 or 10 or 15 downtown areas, I think,” Kim says.

Offices, apartments, and department stores all mixed into the 40, 50 and 60 story buildings.

We’re headed for Myongdong, one of the 5 or 10 or 15 downtown areas Johnny Kim was telling me about. His favorite food in all of Korea turns out to be a Turkish Kebab from a street cart.

Kind of a let down, but I tell Johnny my Kebab is good, “It’s like a spicy taco,” I tell him. I don’t mind the drive through Seoul at all.

The detour through Seoul takes all day and we arrive in Suwon after dark. After a couple different phone conversations, Johnny Kim tells me my apartment is still being cleaned and that he can take me to buy groceries and then after, to meet my future boss.

“What’s my boss’ name?” I ask him.

“Mr. Kim, but you should call him *WonJangNym*,” he tells me.

“*WonJangNym*?”

“Yes, *WonJangNym*. It means boss.”

Grocery shopping’s not all that different, other than the departments are separated into floors, one floor for food stuffs, another for house stuff, and another for clothes and nonessentials. I need to be careful with my cash. I know my cash won’t last long if I eat out everyday. I’ve got five hundred bucks and I’ve got to make it last until my first paycheck. I buy a pot, a pan, a single set of utensils, shampoo, soaps, and food, a lot of food. I’m careful about not buying too many fruits or vegetables. I don’t want them spoiling on me. I go crazy with meats. I can always freeze meat.

Everything gets rung up, and it dawns on me while reaching for my wallet, I don’t have Korean Won. I go through the motions anyways and pull out my dollars. Johnny Kim and the

cashier have a quick conversation and he swipes one of his cards.

“I will exchange money with you, okay?” he asks me.

“Yeah, thanks. I probably should have done that earlier.”

Back at his car he looks up the current exchange rate, 1130 Korean Won per U.S. Dollar. It seems I own him \$201.57. He takes \$200 even and asks if I want to exchange any more. He gives me an out telling me that I can exchange my cash at any bank without any fees.

“I’ll wait,” I tell him not really suspicious but still reluctant about handing over anymore cash, “Maybe just \$20, if you don’t mind?” He gives me 25,000 Won. He’s rounded up, and I accept it.

*WonJangNym* Kim meets us at the door of my new apartment and he tells Johnny Kim my apartment isn’t ready. I try to take a look inside my new basement level apartment. It’s dark, maybe there’s no electricity, but there’s a tiny window high up on the wall letting in some of the street light. A tiny old lady is scrubbing something dark off the walls. *WonJangNym* takes my groceries and luggage and leaves us standing in the hall. He emerges smiling, taking a hold of my hand and walking us out of the building.

Boss Kim and Johnny Kim have a conversation outside, and Johnny tells me that Mr. Kim will walk me to my place of work and then he will take me to a *JimJillBong*.

“What’s a *JimJillBong*?” I ask.

“It is a bath sauna. You can sleep there tonight,” Johnny tells me.

“*JimJillBong* good~,” Boss Kim adds, giving me a thumbs up.

“I will walk with you to your work. You must remember so you can come there tomorrow for work.” We walk out of the residential building area and go a few blocks into a business square the Kims call *YongTong*. There are 16 glass buildings arranged into a four by

four square. I am not going to mind working here one bit. Every building, even though built the same, is done up in neon and flash. One lights up entirely in blue then pink with advertising that looks to be for either a hair salon or brothel on the ground floor. One building has a StarCraft character pasted 10 stories big on one side advertising the game's latest release. My building, the one where I'll be working, has a coffee shop and fish restaurant on the ground floor. The fish restaurant has tanks all along one side of the building filled with a squid and bluefish swimming about, easy enough to remember.

"You said this is called YoungTong square?" I ask Johnny Kim.

"*YongTong*," Johnny corrects.

"Mm, *YongTong*," *WonJangNym* agrees.

"How do I tell a taxi driver to take me to *YongTong*?" I ask them. I know how to get to my apartment from here, it being just a few blocks. I figure if I ever get lost, I could always just hop in a taxi and ask him to bring me here.

"*Yongtong jung shim sangga ga juseyo*," Johnny tells me.

"*Yongtong jung shim*," I start.

"*Yongtong jung shim sangga ga juseyo*," Johnny tells me again then Boss Kim repeats, "*Yongtong jung shim sangga ga juseyo*."

"*Yongtong jung shim sangga ga juseyo*," I repeat.

"Oh, very good," Boss Kim tells me slapping my back.

We walk around the fish restaurant to two garages with key pads at the rear of the building. I've just noticed there aren't enough cars on the streets. How are people getting here? There's got to be more cars than this. The Square is packed with people. They couldn't have all taken the bus or a taxi, could they? Even these two garages are empty. Boss Kim talks to the

parking attendant who punches something in on the key pad. The garage's steel door close and then after a moment, opens with a black sedan inside. While Boss Kim pulls his Sedan out of the garage Johnny Kim tells me, "Your *WonJangNym* does not speak good English," then adds, "but it is okay."

"Okay," I say nodding my head half listening half staring at the magically appearing sedan. I turn towards Johnny realizing that this is our farewell. Johnny Kim is leaving me in the hands of my *WonJangNym*. Trying to come up with something better than just 'Okay,' I say, "Hey Johnny, it's really cool that you chose me for this job. I—"

"It's okay. Your boss likes you. He says that you are very handsome. This is my number," Johnny says handing me his card. "I will see you in a few weeks, but call me if you need anything," and with that, Johnny Kim walks back in the direction of his car and I step into my boss' sedan.

My boss says, "*Hanguk-mal hal jul aseyo?*" probably asking if I speak Korean.

I do not speak Korean, but even if he wasn't asking that, the appropriate response would still be, "No, I do not speak Korean."

"Ah, okay," he tells me shooting me another thumbs up.

We ride listening to a Korean station, not talking to one another until we get to another garage in another building. This time I can see how these garages work. Stepping out of Kim's sedan, I look up to see rows and rows of cars lined up above me. There are more lined up below. Outside of the lift, a glass door comes down letting me see the mechanisms that lift our car tucking it away somewhere.

I'm still marveling at the parking garage when Kim calls me inside. In the lobby of this building sits a tiny old lady at a desk. She and Kim exchange words and money. She hands Kim

a change of clothes who in turn hands it to me. Looks like a set of brown pajama shorts and a shirt. The old desk lady points us towards the elevator. We ride the elevator up to one of the top floors where a corridor leads us to another elderly lady sitting at another desk. She hands us some numbered keys and points us towards a stairwell. At the top of the stairs, there is a locker room and the keys turn out to be locker keys. Mr. Kim seems excited when we get to the lockers. He tells me something in Korean, but I don't catch it. Then, he begins to undress.

“*Showa hase yo,*” he tells me, “*Showa,*” he repeats, standing naked in front of me.

“Shower?” I ask.

“*Ne,*” he says, nodding his head, “*Showa hase yo.*”

A shower sounds good after the international flight. I undress. I'm not normally self-conscious, but looking at Kim's horrified face makes me nervous about being naked. Kim looks around as if making sure no one's seen my naked figure. I look at my ass wondering if I've messed myself or maybe I've got some gaping wound I didn't know about. Other than being a little hairier than normal, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary, but Kim, still looking around, hands me my pajama clothes and seems to be urging me to dress again. I put on my pajamas and watch as he puts on his clothes again. I only catch a glimpse of the showers we seem to be bypassing, but now I know why Kim seemed so worried. The sign above the glass shower doors, written both in English and Korean says, NO TATTOOS PERMITTED IN SHOWER ROOM. So it's the names, stars, and Old English I have on my torso that bothered him.

I really wanted a shower and going to sleep now seems impossible. Too bad, I follow Kim up another flight of stairs into an auditorium style sleeping room. Kim, the only person dressed in anything other than the khaki colored jammies, tells me a set of instructions which I don't understand despite his best at mixing in as many English words as he could. I nod and tell

him okay, throwing him one of his own thumbs up.

He was probably telling me to get some sleep, don't go into the shower, and that he would either pick me up in the morning or not. Either way, my plan was to sleep as best I could and if he wasn't there for me when I got up, I'd get dressed in the same clothes I left in my locker and take a taxi back to my place of work where I'd wait for Kim to be able to get back to my luggage and hopefully take a shower before work.

Lying on the floor amongst Korean families, couples, and individuals, I say to myself, "*Yongtong jung shim sangga ga juseyo,*" take me to Yongtong plaza, "*Yongtong jung shim sangga ga juseyo,*" I repeat over and over. It's the first Korean sentence I've learned. I have no watch, but I can tell it's still early. Most of the people in the auditorium are still awake, some eating noodles on top of their sleeping mats, but jetlag is starting to hit me, and hard. I carry my mat and bamboo pillow to the farthest corner where I find a row of tunnels carved into the cement wall. Some of the tunnels are occupied by sleeping Koreans. Awesome. I crawl into one of the empty holes and let everything set in.

This is not a scam. I've still got all my cash minus the \$200 I spent on groceries. I don't think I'll have any trouble handling myself in my day to day stuff, and I can't imagine teaching English to Koreans will be that difficult. My biggest worry, a fear I've had preparing for my trip here and that still lingers, is that I might get bored. I might not meet anyone to spend time with, and I'll get lonely. I don't want to spend a year of my life sitting around some apartment reading books and never seeing anyone outside of work. If I'm going to make the most of my time here, I'm going to have to make the effort of going out and about, making an effort at meeting people. I feel tired.



My boss, Kim, pulls on my leg and I reverse out of the tunnel.

“What time is it?” I ask coming out of a deep sleep.

*WonJangNym* Kim looks at his watch and says, “Eleven,” raising all ten fingers and then a one, “Eleven o’clock.”

I stretch. I feel like I’ve been asleep for ten hours. I wonder how long it would have been had Boss Kim not woken me. My back is a little sore from sleeping on bamboo, but I’m relieved I was able to adjust my sleeping hours so easily. It wasn’t much of a stretch. I was staying up all night and sleeping throughout the day back in the States. I’m sweaty and my beard is itchy. I could really use a shower. “Is my apartment ready?” I ask him, “I need to get my stuff.” Boss Kim doesn’t catch this. “Apartment okay?” I ask, simplifying.

Wide eyed with excitement he nods his head and again takes a hold of my hand. He pulls me half way across the auditorium before turning back to my sleep tunnel. There he grabs my bamboo mat and pillow and returns them to their rightful place then walks me to my locker.

Kim keeps an eye out again while I undress. I put on my greasy jeans, t-shirt, and leather coat, balling up my under clothes under one arm with the khaki pjs. I check my wallet for my cash, all still there, and we head downstairs. Just going with the motions. I feel like I’ve not tried real hard to get where I am, and somehow, I’ve ended up on the other side of the world going to an apartment that’s paid for to get ready for a job that’s paying me more than I’ve ever made before. I’ve got cash in my pocket. I’ve got groceries at home, enough to match my appetite, enough to last me until my next paycheck. Living so close to my work, I won’t have to worry about not having a car. Even if I can’t make any friends, even if I’m just wandering the streets with my head buried in a book, I’ll be doing okay.

My apartment is awesome. It’s cold, but still awesome. An efficiency with a kitchen

separated with glass sliding doors and a bathroom with red everything; red toilet, red tiled walls, red floor, red sink, it's everything I could ever want to call my own. The main room has a queen sized bed, unnecessary for an apartment this size, a wardrobe, and desk. It seems as if the only thing my new place could use is some bedding. The books I had shipped and the ones I had packed are stacked on the floor and on the desk. My luggage sits on top of my wardrobe, but someone has taken the liberty of unpacking my stuff and hanging up my clothes. They've also put away my groceries into the cabinets and fridge. I've got a two burner gas range in the kitchen and a toaster oven. The cabinets are also stocked with a fair amount of pots, pans, and kitchen utensils including the ones I bought last night. I can't decide whether to take a shower first or cook myself some breakfast. Whatever I decide, it looks like Kim is going stand watch from the doorway the whole time.

## CHAPTER V

### I TAKE A GUESS

The first legal job I was able to get after turning 16 was as a carpenter. A shop that built tables, chairs, humidors, jewelry boxes, cutting boards, coat racks, even pool tables, took me on at minimum wage. I learned to build everything they made. I learned how to work most every tool they had in the shop, but there was something else I learned which was more valuable.

The first day in the shop, I didn't know how to do anything. One or two of the guys in the shop took some time to show me where the sandpaper was and what needed sanding, but that was it. Working 70 hour work weeks for almost a month. I was sanding all of the finished products they made. There was another guy there, Juanito, who'd been working there for almost a year and all he did was sand stuff.

No way I'd waste a year sanding stuff. I watched a guy work the planer. Rolando would run the boards brought in from the mill through the planer slowly shaving off all the rough grain until it got to the width he wanted. Whenever he ran boards longer than 12 feet, he'd have to prop the boards up when he started the feed then run to the other end as it finished passing through so the board wouldn't split under its own weight. I go over and help him, grabbing the boards as they finish their pass through the planer. Rolando didn't have to be running around the machine anymore. Eventually, I started to work the planer on my own, and that's when I noticed a difference. The planer wasn't over heating anymore. It wasn't jamming, and the boards weren't

losing any unnecessary grain. I was working the planer better than Rolando.

I was smoother at the lathe. I was faster with the table saw. The routers never slipped on me, and the band saw never cut me. Everyone in that shop lost at least one finger tip, but aside from scraping a few knuckles, I never got a shop injury. I eventually got out of wood labor by working my way into the epoxy room. The epoxy room was where copper, turquoise, and other semiprecious stones were worked into the woodwork. I was able to work the metal and stones into the wood without setting any air bubbles in the epoxy, without burning it yellow. They kicked the other guy out of the epoxy room because he was making fourteen bucks an hour. I'd been there less than a year, so they only had to pay me eight.

By then, I'd have something important figured out. If someone else could do it, I should give it a shot. I might be able to do it better. Except sanding, I was never able to top Juanito at sanding, but he'd been sanding straight for nearly two years. Fuck that.

On the elevator to our academy on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, the top floor, *Wonjangnym* tells me I look good without a beard.

"Thank you. I feel more handsome," I enunciate.

"Cut hair?" Boss Kim asks me.

I shoot back at him, "I've had my hair long most of my life. I've grown attached to this style."

"What? Speak more slowly, please."

The elevator opens into the lobby of C.E.E., Center for Excellence in English, where a beautiful young receptionist assists some young children, pointing them down different hallways. The lobby is filled with colorful cartoon looking furniture. Some look like giant eggs eating

children. The walls are painted in bright colors. There are some interesting quotes etched into the glass partitions separating the rooms. I read one to the right of the receptionist's desk while she and Mr. Kim start up a conversation. *Hope. If hope persists that can try for this something. Because the time is desire*, and that's it. There are two periods in the middle of the quote but none at the end. I'm reading and rereading the phrase trying to put pauses at different points, but it still doesn't make sense.

“*Jinja.*”

The receptionist and Mr. Kim finish up their talk, and she reaches out her hand, “Hello, nice to meet you. I am Sooly.” The kids have stopped moving about. Some of them are giggling, others gawking, a few look frightened, but all of them are staring.

“Sooly, I'm Sid. I'm the new English teacher.” I can see a lot of the kids getting excited.

“Nice to meet you,” she says and returns to her seat staring at her computer screen. A bit cold. A boy of about ten or eleven introduces himself and asks me where I am from.

“I'm from Texas,” I say to him.

“Oh, Texas?” the boy questions, “Do you have gun?”

“Yes, I do,” I say reaching into my coat pocket, “I have it somewhere...” I continue searching my other pockets, “I think I left it at my apartment.” The boy looks amazed and begins translating to a lackey he has standing at a distance. *Wonjangnym* rushes me off towards the teachers' room. I'm going to flat out deny having said that. If that kid tells his mom, I'll say I thought he said ‘gum’.

The teachers' room has six desks in it, all of them facing the wall. Kim walks me over to one in the corner. It looks occupied, but by his gesture, I'm guessing it's mine now. Mr. Kim types into his phone and reads off the screen, “Teaching utensil?”

“I didn’t bring anything?” I say, adding as many gestures as I can.

“Okay, okay.” He grabs a plastic bin out from under someone’s desk and begins rummaging through the drawers. First, off the desk I seem to have occupied then out of the others. He’s filling the box with dry erase markers, erasers, pencils, pens, paperclip boxes, post-it notes, colored pencils, and a stapler. He drops the box back down on my desk and asks, “Okay, you?”

“Looks good,” I tell him, not touching anything in the box.

“Looks good,” he repeats, giving me two thumbs up and walking out of the teachers’ room.

My official start time is 1 P.M., but it’s 12:30 P.M. right now. After Kim picked me up from the *JimJillBong*, I felt rushed getting showered and eating breakfast because Mr. Kim waited the entire time in my apartment. He sat at my desk pretending to read one of my books. I should be using this time to prep for today’s classes, but I have no idea what I’m supposed to be teaching, what materials to use, or what classroom I’m in. I don’t know what to do, but I’m sure someone else did this job before me, and if someone else can do it, I might as well give it a shot.

Pinned to the wall above Sandy’s desk is a class schedule. I know this is Sandy’s desk because all of the classes labeled Sandy are highlighted. There are also two classes labeled Alan that are highlighted. There’s another schedule sitting on the desk nearest the door. This schedule belongs to someone named Judy. There are a lot of notes written on this schedule, and it also has two of Alan’s classes highlighted. I’m guessing the last American teacher they had was named Alan, and after he left, the other teachers divvied up his classes. I’ll probably be getting all of his classes now.

I take Sandy's schedule to the copier sitting in the hall between the teachers' room and the lobby. I've never used a copier, and I don't know how to read the Korean on the display either. Push the big green button.

I return the original back to Sandy's desk, and I highlight all of Alan's classes. Classes don't start until 2. My last class of the day finishes at 10:55 P.M. and I was told that this floor is locked up by 11. It's a long shift but according to this schedule, I'm given an hour lunch break and a thirty minute dinner break. I hope I'm allowed to leave the building. During the initial interviews for this job, Johnny Kim told me that I'm limited by contract to teaching a maximum of six hours of class per day. So aside from lunch and dinner, I get two and half hours of extra down time.

Looking around this floor, I see the kids occupying the rooms sitting at their desks reading or resting. No one is making much noise and no one seems to be having much fun.

By the time 1 o'clock comes around, I've figured out that I am not going to have my own room. I will be moving in and out of different classrooms throughout the day. I check out the books the kids were holding. I take those books off the shelf, and I'm checking them out when *Wonjangnym* approaches my desk with a woman.

"Hello, nice to meet you, I am Chloe," she tells me, exactly as Sooly had said.

I stand. "Hello. I'm Sid," and then straight to the point, "Chloe, do you know if I am going to be teaching Alan's classes?" I show her the schedule I've copied, then the books I've grabbed, "Are these the books for my first class?"

She grabs the schedule and talks with Boss Kim. She fires off several different questions in Korean, and he keeps shaking his head. Maybe I was wrong about teaching Alan's classes. Then, looking startled, Kim asks, "*Jinjja?*" I've heard this word before. The receptionist said it

before we were introduced.

Chloe asks, “How do you know you have teach Alan’s class?” I explain about the divvying up of his classes. “How do you know this book,” she asks. I tell her about the kids waiting in the first class I—Alan—was supposed to teach and the books they were carrying. She explains what I’ve said to Mr. Kim again.

“*Jinjja?*” he says.

I have to ask, “What does *jinjja* mean?”

“*Jinjja?*” Chloe repeats, “*Jinjja* means really.”

“Really?” I ask.

“Yes. Really, with question mark. Like, you are not sure.”

“So, am I going to be teaching Alan’s classes?” I ask again.

“Yes,” she tells me. Boss Kim begins feeling my arm as if he’s expecting me to flex.

In the next hour, I am told how the classes have been divided up into MWF and TTH schedules. The first classes are the kindergarten kids, then elementary, then the advanced students. All of the books I’ll use are on the shelves in the teachers’ room. The tests, quizzes, homework assignments, and answer sheets are on the academy’s cloud drive, but there are hard copies on the shelf too. I don’t know what a cloud drive is or what hard copy means, but I’ll figure it out.

I figure out as much as I can before the start of my next class, but I get distracted. Another young lady comes in. She doesn’t make eye-contact with anyone and she seems not to have noticed the new person in the room so I introduce myself, “Hi, I’m Sid. I’m going to be teaching Alan’s classes.”

“Sure. Hi. I’m Sarah.”



“Do you know if we are allowed to eat out during our meal breaks?” I ask.

“Sure. Two breaks, we lunch,” she says counting off something on her hand, “Sure. We can eat dinner for thirty minutes,” and then smiling she looks away and starts typing vigorously at her keyboard even though her laptop still seems to be loading.

“Sarah,” I ask her, “where did you get your accent?”

Breathing a little heavier now, Sarah pants back at me, “Oh, sure. I live English in Hong Kong,” I think I hear Chloe giggle. Sarah struggles on, “People say I have British English.” She does not have a British accent, but I don’t want to challenge her any longer.

“Okay, thanks Sarah,” I say, getting up off her desk, “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sure,” she says, still not looking at me.

An older woman comes in. She could be 30, maybe 50, I couldn’t be sure, but still very attractive. Sarah still looks like she’s on the verge of tears, so I don’t want to push the conversation too far. I leave it at introductions. I find out the other’s name is Judy. One other teacher comes in as we are all gathering materials for our first class. She stomps into the teachers’ room, grabs what looks to be a bunch of random paperwork from her desk, then stomps back out. I don’t get to talk with her. She looks upset, but she’s by far the best looking one. Her eyes, though, they’re so tiny. Not the whole eye, only the center, the black part. Her black irises can’t be any bigger than a pencil eraser. They look almost evil, but a sexy evil. Her bob cut, also black, looks like a doll’s wig. That’s what she looks like, a sexy, evil doll.

“Hey Sarah, who was that?”

Already walking away, Sarah tells me, “That is Brandy teacher.”

Brandy teacher? Why do all of these women have American names?

I step out during my last class of the day because I think there's some sort of mistake.

Whoever designed my classes really broke it down for me:

*1.) First 15 minutes: Review homework, Pgs 14-17 of Workbook 11, and 20*

*vocabulary words listed online.*

*2.) 1 or 2 minutes: praise children who completed homework.*

*3.) 10 to 12 minutes: hand out dictation worksheets and read story from*

*Houghton Mifflin text pg. 287.*

*4.) 7 minutes: Check dictation—*

And it just keeps going on and on like that for every one of my classes. They really made this job idiot proof, so I was hesitant at first to believe that this was actually a mistake. My 10:00 PM class is supposed to be the most advanced and indeed these kids are bright, but this couldn't be right.

"Chloe, I think this is the wrong text book for my last class," I say showing her the printed classroom schedule.

"Oh, really?" she asks looking over the sheet.

"I think this book might be too advanced."

"Oh, really?" she asks again. I don't think she's being sarcastic. She seems genuinely concerned that these books might be too advanced.

"How old are these kids?" I ask. I haven't been too good a judge in that respect lately. I thought I looked older than both Johnny Kim and Boss Kim, but Johnny was approaching forty and Boss Kim was forty-three. So I may be wrong in assuming—

"They are eleven and twelve in Korean age, ten and eleven in American age," she says.

"American age?" I ask.

“Mm-hm. Babies are one,” Chloe tells me, holding up a finger, “when they are born in Korea.”

“Huh.” So these kids are younger than I thought. Either way, this only further supports my assumption that these books are too advanced. They are American text books, a Houghton Mifflin series taken from California schools’ curriculums, but these books are meant for eighth graders. “Well I think, at most, they should be using fifth grade textbooks, maybe sixth.”

“Oh, no they finished fifth and sixth level last year,” she tells me.

“Really, how do you level them up?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“How do you know the students are ready to level up?” I clarify.

“They take cat test.”

“Cat test? What’s a cat test?” I smile imagining a cat sitting on a throne asking each student a series of questions. Answer correctly and the cat knights them with his sword. Fail, and the cat—

“California Achievement Test.”

“Oh. Damn.”

It took one day to figure out how these kids got to be so advanced while their teachers are not. These kids are getting massive workloads, whole chapters of readings, pages and pages of homework, dozens of vocabulary words to memorize, and they’re doing it, too. I’m going to have to learn what subject-verb agreement is then, and prepositional phrases, and pronouns, and a whole lot of stuff I never paid attention to during my high school equivalency training. It pisses me off that these elementary kids are correcting me, too. They don’t seem to be correcting Sarah teacher, but listening through the door, it sounded like she was teaching almost entirely in

Korean, “*Korean-Korean-Korean-Korean-Korean*, this is linking verb, *Korean-Korean-Korean-Korean-Korean*, for writing, *Korean-Korean-Korean*.”

Since I don’t have that luxury, I might have to take some of this work home with me. That, or I’ll have to come in a little earlier to do some more prep work for tomorrow’s lesson. For now, I’ll just pair these kids up and have them do the work on their own.

At 10:55, back in the teachers’ room, only one other teacher remains. Bossman Kim is herding the kids down the elevators, helping them with coats.

“When do you think it’s going to start getting warm, again?” I ask Brandy teacher. This isn’t completely idle conversation about the weather. I’d like to ask someone for a ride, either Kim or Brandy, to a dry cleaner I found. I gave them my leather coat this morning to repair, and it should be done by now. I’d like to have it for tomorrow. A leather coat doesn’t do much about the wind or the cold, but it does keep the wet out.

“I don’t know. Do you not have coat?” She asks, heading out the elevator.

Perfect. “I do, but I took it to the dry cleaner,” I tell her, “over on the other side of the subway,” I say, making a long sweeping motion.

“Oh.” We step into the elevator while Kim turns out all the lights and pulls down the steel partitions blocking off the lobby. It looks like he’s almost finished locking up, but Brandy pushes the close door button anyways, and sends us down to the first floor. Kim’ll have to catch the next one then.

“I hope it gets warm soon, because I—”

“I can drive to you dry cleaners, if you want,” she tells me, “I have car.”

There are a few people waiting to get their cars out of the lift garage, and it isn’t too long before Kim is waiting behind us. He looks a little agitated. I can’t tell if it has anything to do

with us closing the doors on him in the darkness of the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, but he's not saying anything, not until he sees us getting into her car, then he shoots off a couple of questions to Brandy. They might have been questions, maybe just a, 'I'll see you at work tomorrow,' but she doesn't say anything and continues to look upset.

"Your name is Brandy, right?" I say hoping to impress her a little by already knowing her name.

"Yes. You are Sid," she tells me. I see her smile for the first time.

"Yes, you can turn right at this light." I ask, "Do you know *Wonjangnym's* first name?"

She gives me a curious look, "JonSu. Why?"

"Go past the dumpling cart, and take another right," I say, "Why do all the teachers have English names? Why don't you have a Korean name like Mr. Kim?"

"My name is Seong Yunee."

"Seong?"

"Seong is family name," she says.

"Go left at the chicken restaurant," I tell her. We drive into a residential neighborhood. It's still mostly apartment complexes, but there are fewer businesses. "So your first name is Yunee?"

"First name? Yunee is my name. Seong is family name." She slows down at an approaching dry cleaners.

"It's not this one, go one more street and turn left again," I tell her.

"How did you find here?" she asks me.

"Just walking around. Do you think it'll still be open?"

We get to the dry cleaners, and they're still open. The same woman I met yesterday is

pressing a pair of pants. Yunee greets her and asks if my coat is ready. The woman retrieves my coat hanging outside with all the newly pressed suits. I ask Yunee how much it would cost, as I was unable to do so yesterday.

“Two thousand Won,” Yunee says.

Less than two bucks? Not bad. I inspect my coat, not a bad job on the coat either. Yunee and the dry cleaners are laughing with each other when Yunee tells me, “She says you look more handsome with no beard.”

“Thank you. I feel more handsome, and thanks for the coat.”

“*De*,” she says, bowing a little.

Back in the car, I try out my Korean and ask Yunee, “*Yongtong jung shim sangga ga juseyo.*”

“*De*,” but Yunee doesn’t take me to Yongtong plaza. She drives me all the way back to my apartment without my having to give her directions. She might have given Alan a ride a few times when he lived here, maybe. I don’t linger in the car too long. I tell her thank you again, and I lean in quick to give her a peck on each cheek like they do in Mexico. I don’t normally do that, but Yunee doesn’t know that, and I want to keep her guessing.

Stepping out of the car I say, “I’ll see you tomorrow at work,” and I close the door.

Yunee lowers the window on the passenger side and says something to me in Korean. It’s three or four sentences fired off in rapid succession and she’s making a circular motion with her finger. Then she drives off.

“What?”

## CHAPTER VI

### I STAND HER UP

It's Thursday of my first week and I've already run out of clean socks and underwear. The washing machine in my kitchen has four buttons on it. The Korean English dictionary I bought is geared towards Koreans, so the words are alphabetized in order of the Korean characters. I can't look up the words I'd normally assume would be on a washer, like wash, stop, spin, heavy, soak. I have to look at the first character, a square with a sideways T attached, and look for the group of words that start with that character, then look for the next character until I've found the entire word.

I find the first word. I don't know how it would be pronounced but it means: 1, seasons; 2, a time of change; 3, a cycle event. It's gotta be for the washing cycle. The next word means: to purify, to rid of impurities, to make white or to clean. I guess this word means to wash and the previous word was to set the type of cycle. The next two buttons are clearly pause and timer. Damn, I'm good. Took me an hour to figure it out, but it gave me a good idea.

Friday after work, I ask Yunee, "Yunee, can you come over to my apartment and help me translate the instructions on my water heater?" The other girls in the office start giggling and giving her a hard time in Korean. I should have waited until there were fewer people around, but I might not get—

"Yes. I can," she says to me with a smile, but then throws a couple of hard words at the other girls. The other girls mumble something that sounded like an apology, but I can't be sure.

No one's looking at us anymore, though.

"I'm done at 11:00. If that's too late, or if you have something else to do?" I ask, trying to break some of the tension. I hope she doesn't have to wait up too long for me. I know my class is the last one and most people are out of the building by then.

"11 is okay, I see you in 11:00," she says.

At 11, after my last class, the only other people in the building are Mr. Kim and the Vietnamese cleaning lady. It's a little disappointing. I slowly pack up my stuff, hoping Yune'e'll turn up. I go home hoping she might be there waiting for me. She isn't.

I'd already figured out how to make the water hot, but I'm not exactly sure what I'm pushing. I set to translating the hieroglyphics, but I get pissed off again. The words on the digital controls keep changing depending on the order and the number of times I push them. I have no desire to sit here all night trying to figure out the timer and temperature gauge on this thing.

I try to read *Evolution*, one of my brother's better nonfiction books. Zimmer knows his stuff, but more than that he knows how to keep the reader interested. I tried to read some older nonfiction, *Wealth of Nations* or Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. For as smart as these guys were, and for as hard as they tried to spill out something worth reading, they sure made it boring. I think, today, there's enough brilliant guys who know their stuff and who are willing to put it to paper that publishers are able to filter out those that aren't that fun to read. That said, *Evolution* is losing my attention. I've been rereading the same page for a while now. The bitch Yune'e really pissed me off. She's hot, but she's got something up her ass. The way she snapped at the other bitches at work, I bet she'd cut my dick off in my sleep if I pissed her off.

*Knock Knock*

Who could that be? It's past 1 A.M.



“Hi Yunee.”

She’s changed her clothes, and she’s got on more makeup than usual. It’s actually a lot of makeup. The hard line of powder along the side of her neck makes it look like she’s wearing a mask. I wouldn’t say she looks sexy, but it’s obvious she’s made an effort, and that’s hotter than looking good.

“Hello,” she says letting herself in. I don’t say anything else. I don’t show her the way to the controls, but she seems to know where everything’s at. She walks to my desk and starts rummaging until she finds a pen and paper. She draws up a diagram of the controls and details what the displays are saying and how to work them. She goes back to my desk and fishes out some tape. She lets herself into my kitchen to translate my kitchen appliances, I put on some music. Nothing too obvious, no Lovage or Thievery Corporation, but I think The Dandy Warhols might be alright, kind of cool, kind of upbeat.

Yunee laughs at the start of the third track and says, “You like strange music.”

“What do you mean? This is good,” I shoot back. Yunee shrugs it off and keeps looking around for stuff to translate. I offer her some beer, but she asks if I have any Soju.

“I do.” I bring her a bottle and offer her a tall and short glass not really sure how Soju’s supposed to be drunk.

She takes the tall glass then asks me, “Can I have some beer?” I go back to the kitchen and retrieve the beer I’ve just put up. Yunee mixes the two in her glass and says, “This is *Someck*,” before taking a big swig.

“*Someck*,” I say mixing my beer and Soju, “*Someck*.”

“It is Soju and *Megju* mix,” she explains.

“*Mekju* is beer?”

“*Megju*,” she corrects. I don’t try to figure out how I’m saying it wrong, I just clink her glass.

“Cheers,” I say.

“*GeonBae*,” she says and we drink.

I keep cycling through my music hoping to find something she might show some sort of reaction to. MGMT, Vicente Fernandez, The Faint, Los Bukis, the RocknRolla OST, I’m going through my CD case pretty quick only playing two or three songs from each. She just sits on the edge of my bed and drinks. She doesn’t seem to be in any rush to leave despite the lull in conversation and my not having a TV. We’ll be finishing up all my alcohol soon. I need to think of something to say, because I’m going to make my move and not having something to say after a fail can make things uncomfortable.

I get up off my desk. I don’t do anything ridiculous like chug the rest of my *Mekju* before sitting next to her. I just sit to her right, and wait for her to look at me. I lean in and try to kiss her. Nope, she pulls back and takes a swig from her glass.

“What kind of music do you like?” I ask her.

“I like everything,” she says unphased.

“What songs did you like from my music?” I ask.

She shrugs, “Everything is okay.”

“I don’t believe you,” I tell her going back to my CD case. I put on another CD and ask her, “Do you like this one?”

She laughs and asks, “What is this?”

“White Ghost Shivers,” I tell her. “It’s dancing music.”

I stand her up off the bed and start dancing. I don’t know how to dance the way I should.

Everyone in my family was a dancer, they could swing to anything. Pabs could really kick up a storm, but I don't think I need to be that good right now. Yunee doesn't seem to be able to keep up with my skill set as it is, but at least we're moving. We dance and shake and twist and stomp and swing. I keep making up moves and Yunee follows as best she can. She picks everything up and runs with it in her own way. We're getting sweaty but we're laughing. The CD finishes and we collapse onto the bed panting. I don't know what time it is, but neither of us gets up off that bed. I don't make a move. I lie still trying to catch my breath.

I hear Yunee fall asleep. I kick off my shoes but I keep on all my clothes. I wake up once covered in sweat, but I turn off the heat instead of undressing. Yunee doesn't move until late in the morning. A phone call wakes us both up, but she doesn't answer. I sit up on the bed while she fixes her hair in the bathroom. She comes out and stands in front of the door waiting for me to say something.

"I had fun," I tell her.

"Mm," she nods.

"I'll see you at work," I say waving.

"Mm, I see you at work today. Goodbye." She bows and lets herself out.

I go to the toilet and throw up. Someck sucks. I feel like I've poisoned myself, but I'm laughing with each upchuck. I try to go back to sleep, but I end up spending most of my morning sitting on the can. I've got *Evolution* in the bathroom here with me. I'm laughing now because I still can't get my mind to focus on these pages.

I'll have to get ready for work soon. I finally stop laughing when I set a pot to boil. I play the White Ghost Shivers again and sneak in a couple shuffles before my morning coffee. I throw up again, but I feel better now. I feel pretty damn good.

## CHAPTER VII

### KEYLESS ENTRY

Oral sex is sex, right? If it is, I had sex for the first time when I was fourteen, but it wasn't that great. It was alright, but the ending sucked.

Edith was a softball player at the college near my house. I think I met her at some high school party. I remember it was weird that she was there because it was a bunch of us kids sucking whippits and playing *Magic: The Gathering*. She was the only adult there. I don't remember who she came with or why she was there, but she ended up giving me a ride home. Edith stopped at the end of the block before my house and asked me if I wanted to see her tits.

“Well, yeah, I guess.”

She picked up her shirt and bra. Because of her mannish build and because Edith the softball player had her elbows up, there really wasn't much to see, but that image still burned into my mind.

“Cool, thanks.”

Then Edith asked me to pull out my pecker.

“Um, okay.”

I wasn't hard or anything. It didn't seem like the thing to do at the time, but she started handling my stuff. She had softball calluses, and she was a little rough but she still got the effect she was looking for. She handed me a condom and told me to put it on.

“What's this for?” I asked her. She wasn't ugly but I wasn't sure I wanted to do it. At the

time, I thought if I had sex with her, she'd have to become my girlfriend, and I knew I definitely didn't want her as my girlfriend. She told me that she just wanted to give me a blowjob.

“Okay.”

I can't remember the brand of condom, but I remember the lettering on the aluminum wrapper read, 'For Maximum Protection' so it wasn't your most sensitive of condoms. Edith was working it and working it, but I wasn't really feeling it. I started to feel myself going limp, so I started grabbing at her tits. At least with her hunched over like this there was something to hold. I was rolling her nipples around between my fingers feeling their weight sitting in my palm. It was alright. After a while she asked me if I was going to come.

“No.”

So she kept at it, and she started working harder and faster. She was working both hands, cradling my balls, tugging at my shaft, and she really started bobbing, but really going. It started to get good. Edith asked me again if I was almost finished.

“I don't think so.”

She grabbed me by the hips and turned me towards her a little bit. She also readjusted herself to get a better angle and she kept going. Sitting like that, I was able to get both my hands on her titties. She was sucking full on, up and down, up and down. I'm sure the sucking and smacking noises could be heard from outside the car. She was starting to get sweaty. Her tits were all slippery. It was getting good, but I guess she got tired because she whipped off the condom. I think she was trying to slicken me up first, but all it took was one or two runs with her bare tongue and lips and I shot everything. Everything, right into her mouth, and she was down deep. She jerked up off my handle and dribbled all over me, all over herself. Edith smacked me hard with one of her meaty softball hands and slammed my head against the glass. She got cum

all over her arm trying to wipe it away from her mouth. I saw it all clumped up in her arm hair. She started screaming at me why I hadn't told her I was going to come.

“I didn't know.”

I didn't. I didn't know I was supposed to tell her. I didn't know I was going to cum. She told me to get the fuck out of her car. Man, there was a lot of cum everywhere. My head hurt walking home. I don't know how, but I got scratched on something when she slammed my head. That scratch turned into a scar from the tip of my eye across the temple. I don't have that scar anymore. It's mostly faded. It's more of a discoloration now, but I think that night caused some other problems. I couldn't come.

I changed after Edith, not because of Edith but because it was just time. I was fourteen. My clothes fit better. I started to run with the right crowd, started to act a little cooler, and I got laid more. I even hooked up with Edith again. One time, she snuck me into her house and made me hide in her closet until her family went to sleep. Then she took me out and did all sorts of filthy things to me. But I never came. I couldn't. For a while I thought it was a body thing. Later, I thought it was a head thing. Eventually, I figured out what the real problem was.

I want to ask Yuneé to come over again. I know she'll say yes, but unless I can think of a good reason for it, I don't think I can ask her over in front of her co-workers. I hope I get a moment alone with her. That doesn't often happen in the teachers' room. I need to get a phone, is what I should do. I don't know what a phone will run me, but I know it's not something I can spare, not until after I get my first paycheck.

As it turns out Yuneé leaves around 7:30, way before my last class, and I don't get a chance to talk to her. She's just a part-timer here, and she takes off to another job after this one.

It's the weekend and I was hoping to make some plans with someone but Yunee most of all.

Before the start of my last class, as the rest of the teachers were getting ready, Chloe asks me if I would like to have lunch with her and the other teachers this weekend.

"Sure. Who all's going?" I ask.

"Excuse me?" she asks.

"Who else is going to go to lunch?" I clarify hoping Yunee will be there.

"It will be me, Sarah teacher, and Sandy teacher."

Not looking disappointed, I say, "Okay, sounds good. Where are we going?"

She asks, "Do you like TGI Fridays?"

"I don't know. I've never been to one," I tell her.

"Really? You never been to TGI Fridays?"

"Do you like Korean food?" I ask her trying to change the subject.

"Yeah. Sure. Of course."

"Can we go to a Korean restaurant? I still haven't eaten anything Korean," I say trying not to smirk. Like she'd know, anyways.

"Yeah. Sure."

It's not long into my last class that I realize, we didn't exchange phone numbers, we didn't set any kind of appointment, we didn't plan anything, really. I said, yes I will eat lunch with you tomorrow. Or was it the weekend? Either way, I snap at the kids during class. They pick up on it and they're extra careful, making sure their pencils are sitting straight on their desks, raising their hands even if they don't know the answer. They know when I'm upset.

I end class at 11 on the dot. Mr. Kim waits for the last batch of kids at the elevator while I go pack up my stuff. I find a note sitting on my desk. It's from Chloe. It's got her phone number,

the time, date, and address for the lunch appointment on Saturday. She's even written out a note for me to hand to a taxi driver to take me to the restaurant. Not bad. It's my first weekend here and I've already had a dancing date and made plans for the weekend. I take it I won't have to worry much about getting lonely.

I feel like taking a walk around the neighborhood, before going home. I might try to find a street cart that's got something hot to drink. Maybe the coffee shop on the first floor is still open. It is, but it's cold outside, and I'd rather save my money. Coffee starts at four bucks inside, and I've got coffee at home. I want to explore a little bit, but I've really got to get myself a better coat. I take a different route, but I go straight home. I find a video store along the way I might hit up later.

Because I have no car or bicycle, no bike lock, no mailbox, and because the door to my apartment is keyless entry, requiring a six digit password to open, I don't have to carry any keys. I knew Mr. Kim had the original password, so I did a bit of deciphering and reset it. Despite this, I go inside to find Yunee sitting cross-legged on my bed, drinking Someck.

"How did you get in?" I ask her.

"I saw your password. Is it okay I am here?" I don't know what she means by she saw my password. I was already inside when she visited last night and she didn't see me leave this afternoon.

"I don't mind," I tell her. She looks good. She's got on a knee length skirt. It's not exactly provocative, but it's the first time I've seen any of her legs.

"Do you want some someck?" she asks, holding up her glass.

"No, I'll just get a beer." Yunee's restocked my fridge with beer and soju. She bought good beer. Name brand stuff in glass bottles, not the cheap stuff they sell in two liter plastic jugs.



When I went shopping for groceries, I thought it was convenient that they sold the bottled beers individually, so you can pick up one bottle of Tsingtao, a couple bottles of Heineken, one or two of Asahi, or whatever. Create your own sixer or twelve pack, and unless you're picking out higher proof rare import stuff, beer bottles will average at about a dollar each. I grab a bottle with a gold foiled top, something I've never had called Cusqueña. Damn, it's good.

"This is from Peru?" I ask looking at the label.

"I'm not sure," she says finishing off her drink.

"Where did you get it?"

"E-mart," She tells me. Same place I got my groceries.

I don't waste any time. I get back on the bed and try to kiss her again, and again she refused me. At least she's smiling this time, but I didn't think of something to say afterwards. I really thought she was gonna go for it.

"You can touch anywhere," she says. I'm thrown by her syntax and I don't do anything right away. She takes my hands and places them on her breasts. Oh, that's what she means. We grope and straddle each other for a good while before I try taking her shirt and bra off. She pulls away again and gets up to mix herself another someck. I get up and follow her to the kitchen.

I ask her, "Are you hungry?"

"No, not now."

"I haven't eaten today so I'm going to make myself something to eat," I tell her pulling out pasta, tomato sauce, mozzarella, chicken and spices from my cabinets and fridge. I also grab another drink, a Tsingtao, also a great beer.

It takes me 20 minutes to make chicken spaghetti. Yune stays in the kitchen and watches the whole thing. The tomato sauce is bland so I kick it up with a little oregano, some parmesan,

and a fresh, crushed pepper I've never tasted before. It's a Korean pepper. They were labeled hot, so I bought a bag. They aren't bad. I throw one in while I fry the chicken, too. I serve up two bowls of pasta covered in sauce, add the chicken, then top it all off with lots of mozzarella. It isn't bad. It's pretty good actually, but not my best. I should have added some sugar to the tomato sauce, but I don't have any. Yunee wolfs it down, though. She calls it amazing. After she clears her plate she covers me in kisses. It's funny because I have my mouth full of pasta, and more than a little sauce on my face. She licks her lips, and I can see her beaming.

I grab another beer and walk back into the bedroom. Yunee messes with the temperature controls for the floor then jumps up on the bed. She reaches out for me. I know what's coming so I try to finish as much of my beer before setting it down on the desk. She lies me down flat on my back. She shuffles off her panties and pulls up my shirt.

She doesn't finish taking it off, and neither do I. She stares at my tattoos. Then, sitting on top of me, she asks, "Do you want condom?" She must have really liked that chicken pasta.

"No, I don't use condoms," and that completely unromantic declaration preceded my penetrating her for the first time.

It was more than a couple years after Edith when I had my first orgasm with a woman, maybe three years. It's not the worst problem to have. The hardest part is having to deal with whiny girls— "You don't like me?" or "What am I doing wrong?" —and carpet burns. Then finally, I find a girl who's responsible, who takes matters into her own hands, who takes the pill, and I cum again. But I cum fast, and that sucks.

Pedro, a busboy at a restaurant I use to work at, told me about a trick he'd picked up from his dad. Pedro was a player. He was a skinny, dark Mexican kid, but Mexican-Mexican, Mexican

proper, he would serenade his ladies and write poetry for them. He could get any girl he wanted, and he wanted them all.

Pedro told me, “You know how when you cum, *buey*, you’re shooting your shit, your *meco* comes out like this, *phfich phfich phfich*,” he did a motion like he was stabbing a guy three times, “It’s like when you’re pumping the breaks, you know what I mean, *buey*? Well, what you gotta do, instead of pumping the brakes like that, *phfich phfich phfich*,” he stabs the guy another three times, “you gotta slam on those brakes, and hard.” He turned his fist around and did one hard jabbing motion, “You still shoot your mess, but it’s easier to keep on screwing.”

Not a bad analogy. I’d later find it’s a Kegal exercise. It’s also called internalizing an orgasm, because you end up shooting most of your semen back inside your body, that’s why it’s easier to keep screwing. I’d also later pick up a few tricks of my own. Like stroking yourself while eating the girl out if you start getting soft. Or if you’ve got a fetish, mine’s sucking on their tongue, wait until after you go limp before you indulge on it to get yourself hard again.

All in all, Yunee and I make love for eleven hours. Eleven hours is by far my best performance. Five was my second best. There’s a lot of groping, and kissing, and fondling, and jacking, fingering, sucking, licking, rubbing, straddling, and massaging going on, not just sex, and there was a thirty minute nap somewhere in between. Neither of us leave the bed until I get up to use the restroom after the sun’s come up. She turns on the water heater and we have sex for the last time this morning in the shower. I’m gonna have to get ready soon and meet the other girls for lunch. I don’t want to go. I’m not tired, and I was excited about hanging out with the other girls, but laying around in bed all day sounds better. That might not be the healthiest choice, though. I’m sure I’ve just warped my mind. I’ve fell into a sex hole.

It’s like if you play billiards for eleven hours, you see the world around you differently.

When you leave the pool table, you'll see yourself like the cue ball maneuvering through a world of bank-shots. Everything that moves becomes a pool ball. The movement of bystanders or oncoming traffic will be measured in velocities and vectors. The world becomes one big pool table.

A life saturated in sex also gives you perspective. The subtle body language and facial expressions of people speak volumes, and simple phrases carry heftier connotations. I hope I don't do something stupid at lunch.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THREE HAIRCUTS

I had this uptight uncle on my mother's side who had this maid who used to watch us from time to time. I really liked this maid, Clandestia, or Canny. Canny used to tell us scary stories, but the best part about her stories was that she never told us they were just stories, she'd just pitch them to me like they were true. She'd say things like, "Damian, come here quick!" and she'd rush me into the restroom. Both of us would be looking into the mirror, I'd ask her what we were doing, and she'd say something like, "I was looking at myself in the mirror and my reflection started making faces to me," she'd tell me, "it was doing it like this," and she'd contort her face into the most hideous or pain-stricken look she could muster. And then Canny'd just turn out the light and walk out. I wouldn't be able to look at a mirror for weeks.

I heard Canny explain to my cousin how to get a boy to fall in love with her. Canny told her that she should take a lock of his hair and a piece of his clothing. My cousin should always keep the cloth on her. Canny also gave her a prayer to read while she burned the hair. My cousin told her father and Canny got fired because she was doing witchcraft. She wasn't really fired. My uncle was too much of a coward to straight up fire her. He told her that money was tight and he could only pay for her to come over until the end of the month.

I'm not very good at sex talk, but Yunee starts asking me questions, "Do you want my pussy? Is it your pussy?"

I say, “Oh yeah, it feels really good.” That’s terrible, I sound so fake. Maybe it’s the music. I shouldn’t be listening to Queens of the Stone Age. It’s too good, and I’m not focusing. I get up to put on some good mood music, some Gotan Project, but I still feel like a disappointment.

Then the album starts. Gotan Project has got this female singer they’ve used for a couple albums now. I don’t know her name but she gives me an idea. I start kissing Yuneé everywhere, and between each kiss I say, “Ay, *Chiquita. No sabes lo bueno que se siente adentro de tu panochita. Es como comiendo crema de atole en la casa de mi abuelita y viendo caricaturas en las mananitas. Es como mi cumple-años adentro de mi verga. Ay chinga, ala chingada. No sabes, Chiquita.*” This comes out with all the words strung together. It sounds so much more natural, it’s almost poetic. I know she can’t understand my sweet nothings. Probably wouldn’t have had I said them in English, but the Spanish is effective.

The Spanish does something to her and she starts getting rough. She’s using her nails. I don’t like the way she’s grimacing. I’m having trouble maintaining control of the situation. I tell her to slow down. She ignores me and I approach climax. I tell her I’m going to come. She tells me not to. *What are you going to do about it?*

I pull out and finish on her belly. I control my spurts making a ‘Z’ around her navel. I slap her hip and yell, “Zorro!” She doesn’t laugh, and she tells me to put on a condom. I do, but it makes me go soft. I try to get up. I tell her I want to change the music again, that I want to listen to Linda Rondstadt sing in Spanish.

“No,” she says, “let me borrow your leg.” She puts my leg in between hers, and nestles on top of my thigh. She starts grind humping my leg like a pile of warm laundry. I thought she’d get bored with it eventually, but she keeps at it. She ignores me completely and continues

grinding. She buries her face in my chest applying more and more pressure to my thigh. “This feels different,” she mumbles, “this feels diff... different.” I can see her whole body moving in that harmonious way it does right before she is going to climax.

“Don’t come,” I tell her. I try to push her off but she gets a tighter grip. “No, this is...” She shudders and collapses on top of me. I have trouble breathing with her hair on my face. I shake her off me. She’s having trouble catching her breath.

My face and hair are covered in Yunee’s sweat. I don’t think Yunee wants to go another round. I might be up for it, but mostly to say I could. It isn’t necessary. I could just as easily lie here and pass out.

When I wake up, Yunee’s gone. My head hurts from the Someck. I shouldn’t drink that stuff so fast. I hate this poisonous feeling in my gut. Soju’s got to have all sorts of impurities and minerals and metals to make me feel like this. I’m sure I’ve slept well into the afternoon. Half my Saturday’s gone. Unless I make a good, strong cup of coffee, the rest of my day will be spent—

Yunee cut my hair!

There’s a chunk of my hair missing, right in front! Why would she? That’s why she’s gone. She cut my hair then took off. I don’t see any hair on my pillow or on the floor, so she must have taken it with her. Just like Canny. If I had a phone... No, there are payphones in front of the E-mart, but I don’t have her phone number. I don’t know where she lives. I don’t know where she could be or why she would want to crop my hair like this. I’m not 100 percent sure it was her, but who else could it be? Mr. Kim? I changed the pin on my door. That didn’t seem to slow Yunee down, though. I can’t imagine Mr. Kim creeping into my place and sneaking off

with a lump of hair. It looks so ridiculous sticking out right in front like this. What a little bitch.

By the time I find a real salon, I've calmed down, but something else has pissed me off on the way. I thought there were two barber shops between my apartment and work, but I couldn't find them. I found double barber poles on the side the building with the video shop, but there was no barber shop. I went to the next building with another set of barber poles. This time it had the poles had a floor marker, 2B. Two basement floors down, there was a long hallway with dark light fluorescents illuminating a velvety hallway. I'd seen a bar done up like that, once. I thought I might be able to find someone to cut my hair at the end of that hall. I'm two steps in when a little old lady sitting behind a black desk in a dark corner, scares the crap out of me. She screams something fierce, and I spasm around to see her lunging at me in a waddle. She screams something to me in Korean that sounds like, 'I'm gonna murder you shitbag, if you step into that hall,' but I couldn't be sure. The only word I could catch was, '*Wayguk.*' In the end, she was shouting, "No *wayguk!* No *wayguk!*"

The real salon is on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of another building. The barber pole spins a picture of a girl with pink hair holding scissors. There is one guy cutting hair on the fourth floor and four women. A woman greets me, and asks me something in Korean which she repeats in English, "appointment?"

"No. No appointment."

"Okay. Sign," she says, handing me a clipboard.

There are several people on the list before me, but I'm cut in as soon as the guy stylist is finished. He looks at my hair and asks, "You do?"

"Some crazy bitch cut my hair."

He steps back and says, "Crazy bitch?"



I grab at the missing chunk of hair and motion it getting cut, “Yeah, crazy bitch?”

“*Jinja?*” he asks.

“Really.” I say.

“How...” Guy Stylist begins, but then rattles off the rest of his question in Korean.

He might be asking how it happened or how I want it cut. I answer with, “Fix it. Make it handsome.” Not many choices left with this chunk of hair gone in front. Yune left only a couple of inches to work with.

Guy says, “Okay. Look handsome,” and starts cutting.

I get less mad as Guy continues cutting my hair. A hair cut isn’t the worst thing. It’s time for another change. New name, new country, new job, new look. It’s difficult to tell how things are going for me. I won’t be sure until I get paid. When I get paid, everything should be okay. If I don’t get paid, my food will run out and I would only be able to eat what they serve at the academy for lunch. And I would probably still continue to work, because otherwise I might end up on these streets and I’m not up for that yet. I would continue to work to keep the apartment and five meals a week. It’d be like slavery for a while. I don’t think that’ll happen, but if it did, I’d have to figure out how to get a side job to scrape enough money together and buy a ticket out of here. I might stay a while if I can make enough to be able to cook something good every—

“What does *Wayguk* mean?” I suddenly think to ask.

“*Wayguk?*” The way he repeated sounds like he knows what I’m saying. He mumbles, “*Wayguk,*” again to himself as he types it into his phone. “Foreigner.”

“Foreigner?” What the hell? That little old lady was yelling, ‘No foreigners! No foreigners!’

I try as best I can to describe the underground barber shop I found and what the old hag

was shouting at me. New guy starts laughing, giggling really. He says, “No cut,” motioning with his hands then looking around, he tells me, “Massage.”

I don’t think we’re having the same conversation anymore. Something must have gotten lost in the translation. He calls one of the girl stylists and she starts clipping around the ear while he finishes with the top. They switch sides, she does around the other ear and he fades out my sideburns with his hair clippers. They both brush off the strays.

At the register he tells me how much it will be then writes it down.

35,000 Won. I haven’t exchanged enough of my dollars to pay for the hair cut. I offer him 40\$ and show him that I only have a 20,000 note. He takes the dollars and looks up today’s exchange rate. He rights down the converted rate and gives me my change in Won. Thirty bucks is more than I wanted to pay for a haircut.

I get back home, and Yune is on my desk drinking soju. She gets excited about my haircut and says, “You hair,” and then maybe noticing my bitter face, “you cut short.”

“Why did you cut my hair?” I ask.

“I didn’t,” she says.

“I had to fix my hair at a salon because you cut my hair.”

“I didn’t.”

“Who cut my hair, then?” I say.

“You drink a lot of soju and—”

“Are you saying I cut my hair?” We both drank a lot yesterday, but I didn’t blackout. I remember everything, Spanish whispers, Zorro, humping my leg, then sleep.

Wanting to cry, she says, “I don’t know. I didn’t,” she sputters.

“Yeah, I got it. I didn’t, I didn’t.” *Wham!* She slaps me hard. “What’s your problem?” I

ask, rubbing my face.

Yunee spits out something in Korean. Yelling and pointing, accusing me of something. She mixes in, “I don’t like hair,” and then a bunch more Korean. *Wham! Wham!*

“Stop hitting me!” I shout, trying to grab her hands. *Whap!* “Stop.”

Her angry denials and physical attacks don’t do anything to convince me one way or the other as to whether she cut my hair or not. I still blame her because I have no other reasonable explanation as to how it happened.

My little cousin became a firm believer in Canny’s love prayer when my cousin’s middle school crush told her that her highlights looked cool. Canny never ended up getting fired from her maid job. She left on her own when surveillance cameras caught her slicing the tires of someone who worked at a computer store. I don’t know the extent of Canny’s and the computer store guy’s relationship, but when he showed up with police at my uncle’s house he looked more sad than anything. Canny didn’t get arrested that day. The police, the computer store guy, and Canny talked it out on the porch of my uncle’s house.

The guy showed up a week later, wearing his blue polo uniform, asking for Canny. Canny moved back to Mexico City to stay with some family. No, we didn’t have her contact information. Sure, we can give her the message if we hear from her. He still looked sad.

Yunee’s not screaming anymore. She’s not trying to slap or scratch me. She’s just looking at me. Her eyes were clear throughout her denials and attacks, but now, standing there, looking at me, mouthing those shallow breaths, her eyes are reddening. Her eyes water. I’ve calmed down. I don’t understand why Yunee is getting so upset. I get up to pour two glasses of beer. She doesn’t take her eyes off me until I try to hand her one. She refuses it, so I set it down

on the desk. I try to take a pull but Yuneé snatches away my glass and drinks my beer. Her eyes clear up again after her first beer. I don't understand a lot of Yuneé's behavior, but I'm not angry with her anymore. Whatever she's done, it's worked.

## CHAPTER IX

### THREE MONTHS LOST

You make less memories as you familiarize yourself with your surroundings. You get to a new place, and your brain records everything. When you come upon something new, like neon signs scripted in Hangul or an ancient looking street vendor selling roasted chestnuts, fried cuttlefish, and soju, you record everything in detail. This old lady on my walk home from work, I don't understand her ability to be alive. She is so old. The more you look at her, the more startling her droopy, sagging flesh becomes. After the first few months though, your brain gets more selective about what it registers. You'll start to save only the important bits.

She never talked to me until I bought a bottle of soju from her. Then I found out she's a North Korean refugee. The three fingers on her left hand and two fingers on her right are missing because of late payments made to money lending *gangpe*, gangsters who lent her money to buy her food cart, banks and family wouldn't, but the *gangpe* charged double the original loan in interest. She's eighty-nine years old and perpetually drunk. Maybe I'm wrong about being more selective about your memories, maybe nothing is registering because the most significant factors are no longer set on the surface of the experience. So now, I don't see an old street vendor anymore, what you'd see on the surface. She's a North Korean drunk who meddles with gangsters. When I see her, I'm glad she's working, because I know she's drunk and that her cart is paid off.

Same applies to cities. The first three months here have been lost. It takes three months

before novel sights lose their novelty. The appreciation of the tall beautiful city, and the lack of suburban sprawl gives way to frustration at the inability to use landmarks. Mountains cannot be used for guidance, because there are always mountains north, south, east and west of you. Trying to use any one building as a point of reference is like trying to ask a friend to meet you in a forest by a specific tree. There are cities within cities and each city has its specialty. There are motorcycle districts, cell phone districts, technology, kitchen appliance, sex, and seafood districts. Once you learn the name of each district and how to ask for prices, you go from taking it in to navigating through, and each new district becomes networked to one previously seen.

New people meld into archetypes. My boss, Mr. Kim, is a handsome fifty-year-old business man who looks thirty and can speak five languages, but not English. I learn in my first three months that Mr. Kim failed in his first business endeavor at building a real-estate agency and had to declare bankruptcy. He took out a second loan in his father-in-law's name and bankrupted that name too in a failed acquisition of properties to be rented out as office space. Now, he is prone to cold-sores, especially with the dropping numbers of registered students in this, his third business, an English academy purchased on credit under his wife's name. Mr. Kim's archetype is pitiful.

Some people can't be categorized. I can hardly remember Johnny Kim at all. But I remember our last conversation, when I told him about a concern I had been having lately.

"A couple of the teachers have quit, and another one is telling me she might be taking off soon too," I told him.

"Yes, Kim JonSu," Johnny said, no longer using the deferential *Wonjangnym*, "does not paid contract fee to me. I can not help you if there is a problem."

I asked, "Couldn't you find me a contract at another school? Wouldn't they pay you your

finder's fee even if I'm already in the country?"

"No. You cannot transfer VISA to another school with no release letter. Kim JonSu," he said, "need to give release letter. New school pay to him for release letter, not pay to me." The tiredness in his voice is what I remember clearest. That and that I was stuck.

Maybe you're not making less memories. Maybe you just categorize them, like you do to people. Categories like, every time Yunee and I fought. No, not just fought. That's too broad, every time we fought naked, or every time we fought in a public place, I might be able to remember every scene we caused if I tried. She interrupted a farewell lunch I was having alone with Judy. She spit on our table and started kicking at me. Normally, I'd let her get a few hits in to blow off some steam, but I didn't like the idea that she might be following me, so I caught her foot and dropped her. Then, there was the time I told her off outside the movie theater after she smashed my glasses. She thought I would look better with contacts. I did. Then there was the time at work when I told her to lay off Sarah. She called me a hypocrite, told me that I made fun of her all the time, calling her Stammering Sarah, or SuSuSuSarah, so we went at it, right in the office, and poor Sarah started crying. There was another time we fought in the lobby of our building, at the door to the fish restaurant, because I called her a crazy bitch after she threw her shoe at me and called me a dirty foreigner. I can't remember what I did to make her throw her shoe though.

Three months ago, the all female staff of teachers at my academy seemed guarded and mysterious in the cryptic way they spoke and used body language. Now I know their real names and the English names they use, or used, at work; Kim UnYoung, Lee SongHee, Chwe MiYong, Bak MiSun, and Seong Yunee are Sarah, Sandy, Judy, Chloe, and Brandy.

Chloe speaks the best English, but scored an eighty on two IQ tests. I know Sarah's parents are both Korean, but raised her in Hong Kong which is where she learned her broken English. Sarah attended a dance academy, singing academy, and etiquette training, but was never formally educated, so she's unable to properly write in either English or Korean, and also makes frequent speaking errors in both. Judy is the oldest teacher being in her late forties and was almost fired from the company when she was arrested for having an extramarital affair. She paid compensations to the offended family, and was deferred any sort of judicial proceedings. I know Sandy dislikes Brandy because she thinks Brandy sabotaged her desk with fish oil to make it stink. Her desk does stink, and it sounds like something Yunee'd do.

All of the other girls admired Brandy, Yunee, and were jealous when she quit. She set a precedent, and now everyone's jumping ship. In these three months, I know I don't know anything about Yunee. I have many thoughts on her, but I've failed to validate most of my suspicions. I think she stole my passport. I think she's homeless, or does not have an actual apartment of her own. She might be sleeping at bathhouses when I don't let her sleep over. I think she was sexually abused as an adult. And has at least one undiagnosed schizoaffective disorder. I do know though, that every time I see her I have trouble predicting what will happen next. In other words, I am still seeing Yunee like it is the first time.



## CHAPTER X

### CURSING IN SPANISH

Yunee tells me about an uncle, “He was live in Mexico City as missionary for ten years. He does not talk English, but he can Spanish.”

“Are we going out, or are we going to stay here?” I ask.

She answers with, “He is forty. I have not seen him, when I was twenty. I lent him... *guchon-man-won* when I was twenty-four,” and then waits for me to say something.

It takes me a moment to ask, “You lent him money when you were twenty-four, but you haven’t seen him since you were twenty?”

She sees where I’m going with this and says, “I sent him money to his bank, but I never see him. He was in Mexico,” and again waits.

Again, I have to take a moment to think about what she’s saying, “Where did you get that much money?” I think \$90,000 is a lot to have when you’re twenty-four.

“I made it, when I worked near Homeplus.”

Near Homeplus? Homeplus is the Korean equivalent of Wal-Mart. How could you save \$90,000 working at Wal-Mart’s equivalent?

I begin asking, “What were—”

“I worked front of the Homeplus above top the Wawa Bar.”

“What were you doing on top of the—”

“He never paid me money,” she says. I can see her getting agitated at my long pauses. I

hope she doesn't think I'm not following the conversation. I simply don't understand what the right response is to a lot of these declarations should be. What should I say about the money, or—

“What do you want me to do?” I ask.

“I want you to have dinner with him,” she says.

“And?”

“That is it. I want to have dinner with us,” I don't have time to ask before she adds, “tomorrow.”

Before dinner she tells me that he also borrowed money from her sisters. He never paid any of them back, but Yuneel lent him the most money.

“Are you going to ask him about the *gu... chonmanwon*?” I ask. Why would Yuneel lend this uncle \$90,000?

“I'm not sure, if what I can—”

“Do you want me to?” I ask.

“His name is HongSu.”

She's being evasive.

We three meet in Apujung at his request. He would like us to buy him a seafood soup dinner to celebrate his return back to Korea.

It pisses me off that he wants to eat in Apujung, because Apujung is expensive.

When we meet, I greet him in Korean first then in Spanish. He replies only in Korean. He orders for us in Korean. In fact, only Korean is spoken for the first part of our meal together. I don't join in, but I pick up a few words, and I hear him question her about dating a foreigner.

“*Que le dijiste de salir con un extranjero?*” I ask him.

He replies, “*No, esto es algo entre familia.*”

The fuck you think this is just between family.

“*Que, qual familia. Ni tu te la creas, buey,*” and then for the benefit of Yunee, “*Mirame culerito. No te le acerques ha Yunee con tus pendejadas de andar pediendole dinero.*” Sitting on the floor like this makes the intimidation more intimate.

He replies in Spanish that he has no plans of borrowing any more money. That if he could, he would pay back what he owes.

The sea food soup arrives.

They place a low pot with glass lid in the middle of our table on top of the gas burner. The pot is full of clams, cuttlefish, bluefish, a couple of live shrimp, and a live octopus. Our server clamps the lid shut and lets opens the steam slide. She sets the gas on high before she walks away. It’s a few minutes before anyone says anything, and in that time, the water gets hot. The shrimp have stopped kicking, but the octopus is still slithering around inside.

Hongsu gets up and starts putting on his coat. He bids Yunee farewell, bows and turns to me, but I say, “*Sientate putito, o te siento,*” asking him to sit. “*Ni siquiera me gusta el marisco, puto. Yo ‘stoy pagando por esto. Estoy aqui para tu pinche fiesta de regreso.*”

He starts, “*No, gracias, pero lo creo mas—*”

But I say, “*Me vale verga lo que creas. Sientate, o paga tu comida,*” as politely as can be permitted, “*No vas a dejarme solo con esta pinche sopa cagalera. A quien se le ocurre a hervir un pulpo,*” and point again for him to sit.

He pats his pockets in a supplemental gesture, and then takes his seat again on the floor.

Yunee asks him why, and they exchange a few words before it is silent again.

The pot of soup is done.

Because of the tiny bowls we are allotted, the pot of seafood would have allowed us to fill them five or six times each. Yunee serves us our first bowl.

I pull out the shrimp from my bowl and offer it to Yunee. The shrimp's flavor here is too fishy for my tastes, but more than that, I like the way Yunee eats shrimp. She doesn't peel them. She'll eat their heads and tails making a satisfying crunch.

After our first bowlful, Yunee cuts into the octopus wrong and spills its ink into the soup. I look at Hongso to gauge his reaction. He keeps a straight face. I am relieved, because I don't care for this soup.

A waitress comes by and looks upset at the ink-filled pot before taking it away. Hongso takes this as another opportunity to excuse himself and escapes briskly. I let him go this time.

"Do they have meat here?" I ask Yunee.

"They have duck," she says.

The waitress appears again with a check, and I say, "*Oh beak mikju, juseyoe,*" ordering a beer.

"*Ne,*" she affirms.

"How do you say, duck? You say duck, *ori*, right?" I ask to Yunee.

"Yes," she says.

And I say, "*Ori juseyoe,*" to the waitress.

Yunee says something to our waitress to correct my order and orders herself a bottle of Soju.

They bring us half a kilo of de-boned and portioned duck meat. Half has been marinated in something red, and the other half has been smoked. We cook that on top of a large slanted griddle that drains into a steel dish.

The duck is better than the seafood.

We order rice when most of the duck is gone. I ask for the waitress to leave the sesame leaves out, and they fry this up with the left over duck, vegetables, rice cake, and mushrooms. She uses a little of the duck drippings to re-grease our griddle.

I'm too full to order any more beer. I didn't even finish my first glass. I didn't check what Yunee was drinking, but there are at least three empty bottles of Soju on our table. They give us complimentary sweet plum juice in the end, but I order a sugary coffee for the way out.

Our bill is thirty. Not bad.

Yunee tells me out on the street in her drunken slur that they discounted the seafood fifty percent because of the ink.

I feel pretty good, so we walk a while down the road looking at the shops before going home. It's cold again, tonight. I wish I had a scarf. Yunee calls scarves *mufflers*, which is an English word, but I've never used it before.

We stop by a video rental shop. I would guess the video shop is the front of someone's apartment. He rents out a personal collection of VHS, DVD's and digital movies. There are fewer than 500 videos and DVD's, but he had over ten thousand digital movies. I don't want to go through his digital collection, so I rent a DVD of *A Bittersweet Life*, a gangster movie I've seen.

I'm still very full from our meal, so I don't think to pick up beer before going home. Yunee finds a bottle of soju in my fridge. We aren't far into the movie when she finishes that bottle.

We've reached a scene in the movie where Sunwoo has dug himself out from being buried alive and is escaping from the gang who is in charge of killing him. It's one of the best

scenes in the movie. Yunee begins making advances, because she gets bored with action movies.

“What did he say to you at dinner?” I ask.

She says, “Oh, he said he was sorry and he has to leave,” and then asks, “What did you tell him?”

“I asked him what he said about you dating a foreigner. I told him to take a seat, and that the seafood was my treat for his welcome-back party,” I tell her, but Yunee seems to be waiting for more, “and I asked him about the octopus.”

“He not say anything about me dating a foreigner,” she tells me, “I didn’t tell him we were dating. Was his Spanish, good?”

“Yeah, it was alright,”

“It was alright,” she repeats, “but not great?”

“Yes, it was not great,” I say.

She starts snuggle-groping again as I watch Sunwoo driving and using a wall to slam a man off his car door. I really want to see this part. She doesn’t let me.

“I want to do rough sex,” she says.

I don’t actually know how to do rough sex. I try to distract her and do something else, but she doesn’t let me go down on her being a day after her period.

I think she just wants me to spank her again. I spank her a few times, then try slapping her a little, and something else, but she says to me, “No, I want rough sex.”

I don’t know how to do rough sex. I thought spanking was rough. I choke her a little and slap one of her breasts lightly.

Again she tells me, “I want to do it rough.” I have no idea where any of this is coming from. She’s never demanded something like this before.

I have to ask, “How do I do it rough?”

“Hit me.”

I don't know what to do. Hit her where? How hard?

“Hit me,” she says again. I flip her around and continue choking her with one hand. I slap her thigh and then her face. I feel her tense up when I smack her hard on her butt cheek. Then, I back hand her again but harder.

“Ouch, not hard.”

“Shut-up,” I say trying to keep it in the mood. I slide my hand up off her neck and put two fingers in her mouth. I think I've figured out this whole rough sex thing. It's not my favorite, but I can tell Yune is getting a lot out of this sort of play. She's getting ready to finish. I almost do, but I slow myself down by focusing on the T.V. again.

Sunwoo is trying to buy a gun. In reality, guns are illegal in Korea. Koreans have probably one murder per year.

So Sunwoo is trying to buy a gun from an illegal arms dealer. He sits across from his dealer with his hand wrapped because it was recently broken by another gangster with a wrench. The dealer tells him that he will sell him a gun after his boss vouches for him. Now, Sunwoo is nervous because he knows his boss won't vouch for him. His boss was the one that sent the rest of the gang after him. The gang that buried him alive and broke his hand but couldn't stop him from escaping. Sunwoo is relieved when someone takes a message.

The dealer tells Sunwoo his boss will call him back in one minute. In the meantime, he will show Sunwoo how to take apart and load the gun. A gun seller in Korea would normally have to explain such things, even to a gangster.

The dealer brings out the two large caliber hand guns. He gives one to Sunwoo and the

dealer begins by putting in his magazine and chambering a round. Sunwoo follows but has trouble because of his injured hand. He manages though, and follows as the dealer shows him how to take it apart. Both their guns are in pieces in front of them when the dealer gets the call back. Even the slides and springs are completely off their frames.

Now, the dealer is being told that Sunwoo has gone rogue and is not to be sold any firearms. Sunwoo knows that the dealer is being told this, so he takes the initiative and quickly begins reassembling his gun. The dealer slams the phone down and starts reassembling his own gun. He's just a step behind Sunwoo, but remember, Sunwoo is injured.

Sunwoo ends up chambering and firing his round first. The sound of the gun brings in the dealer's two lackeys, and Sunwoo fires on them too.

Yunee comes.

That's awesome.

Yunee is exhausted from her first orgasm. I start moving very slowly. I know she's drunk, and it's been over an hour since she's taken her anti-depressants and sleeping pills. If I go softly enough, she will fall asleep while I'm having sex with her.

I wonder what it would be like to screw a sleeping girl.

I thrust slowly, and she falls asleep.

After she wakes up, I tell her that I had sex with her after she'd fallen asleep, and she says, "That's awesome."

This is the first time I've heard her say 'awesome', and she sounds really good saying it. I can't remember saying it in front of her, but I know I think it a lot.



## CHAPTER XI

### SICKNESS

The doctor tells me, “You have a bacterial infection on your penis,” and I’m incredibly relieved when he tells me this.

Typically, a bacterial infection on your penis will manifest itself in one of two ways. A skin infection that creates suspicious looking red bumps on the shaft of the penis, or a tract infection resulting in a burning sensation when urinating. Naturally, you’re first reaction is to suspect you have one of several STDs, viruses being the only incurable ones, the deadly ones. But bacteria is okay, because you can get rid of bacteria.

I saw the red bumps last night and went to see the doctor this morning. I don’t understand why someone would delay seeing a doctor after anything suspicious happens to their genitals. It was only about thirteen hours between detection and examination, and that night I could think of nothing else. It’s an intense fear that only permits pleas to God and promises of abstinence. Then you’re filled with feelings of hatred and plots for revenge.

Only the angry revenge scenarios are any fun. You picture yourself with a wrath driven motivation that will get you up in the morning and into a hardware store. And you know if you’re going to purchase some rope, a shovel, and a ten kilogram bag of lye, you’re going to have to buy them in another town.

The doctor explains to me, “These red bumps are located only on the hair follicles. I did not find any... little bugs. That means this is not a sexually transmitted disease. You have a

bacterial infection.”

I'm all smiles when I go to pay my bill at the receptionist. She asks me the name of the specialist I saw. I point to his door and she retrieves my paperwork. She tells me he has prescribed some medication that I can purchase on the first floor of this building. She charges me 19,500 Won, about \$18. I've never been made this happy at so little a cost. The anti-inflammatory pills, anti-biotics, and topical cream come out to another 30,000 Won. I put them all in my briefcase and walk to work.

Several of my students ask me why I am so cheerful.

I lie to Yune when I get off work so I can follow the pharmacist's regimen of applying a layer of topical cream every four hours and keeping the area clean. Tomorrow, I will try another lie, something like I'm staying in another city. I'm not too sure, but I also want to spend less time with her for my last remaining weeks in this city.

She's been having trouble maintaining control, physical and mental. It's a little embarrassing talking to her. I can't even ask her to let me sleep alone anymore without bringing her to tears or murderous threats.

I need to report my missing passport to the police station, then take the report up to the U.S. embassy in Seoul to apply for a new one.

I finally feel like I'm having some problems in life. I was getting a little too comfortable and I was getting bored. I didn't expect that to happen this fast, not in this country. Too bad they're the kind that are too easily fixed. Still, maybe I shouldn't sleep in tomorrow.

## CHAPTER XII

### HANDLING MY OWN AFFAIRS

I end up sleeping in. After work I hail a cab, but he doesn't know what I'm saying when I ask him to take me to the police station. I step out angry. Most taxi drivers speak at least some English. I could've hailed another. I could've looked up the Korean word for police station. I could've found a map online and taken the subway, but I call Yunee instead.

She asks me why I want to go, so I tell her I need to file a report on my missing passport to take to the embassy the next morning. She asks me why I didn't do that sooner, why I didn't ask her for help before. She tells me that it's not good to be a foreigner and not have a passport. She tells me I'm stupid for going so long without my passport, that I'm lucky to have her, and I wouldn't be able to do anything without her.

I tune her out and think about C.E.E. I hope it fails or burns to the ground so I can get out of Suwon and start looking for work elsewhere. It's a terrible thing for a company's sole employee to want it to fail. It isn't anything personal, but unless I'm released from this company's contract, my visa won't be able to transfer to another company soon enough to give me enough time to earn a year end bonus or, at the very least, a flight ticket home.

Damn! My work visa was stamped inside my passport. I wonder how big of a deal it's going to be to replace that.

Yunee keeps talking all the way to the station. I get out of the car as soon as she pulls up to the curb, but she follows me inside. I tell the first cop I see that I need to report my passport

missing.

The female officer begins, “Oh, you lost passport—” when Yunee creeps in behind me and begins chatting away with her in Korean. I try to cut in a few times but the two fill out all the paperwork on their own. Yunee tells me to sign something and I oblige begrudgingly. After the officer hands me the report, I leave the station and jump into the first cab I see. I turn off my phone and ask the taxi driver to stop when I see another city square. It looks similar to the square where C.E.E. sits. I pay the cab and roam around this configuration of buildings for a while, haggling with vendors, stepping into the occasional shop. No one seems to be making eye contact with me. My being pissed off must be pretty obvious.

I find a restaurant with a hibiscus flower seal. The Korean government will mark up restaurants with their national flower for outstanding performance and high food quality. It’s a Bossam restaurant, one where you sit on the floor. I typically avoid these types but there is an empty table up at the edge of the restaurant, so at least I’ll be able to lean against the wall. My back should be okay, but I should stretch my legs out under the table. No one else sits like this. Even the other customers along the wall sit cross-legged, their backs erect. But I’m too annoyed to care.

The side dishes are good; nuts, chillies, mushrooms, dried squid, salad, boiled egg soup, and coconut rice cake. Bossam’s a really fatty pork that’s either steamed or boiled. I can’t tell why it’s anything special other than it’s cut well. Fat and meat carefully proportioned in each piece. I guess it is pretty nice.

But the Kimchi is awesome. It’s sweet and the yeast is effervescent, an effect that is very difficult to produce and control, I’m told. It must be the kimchi that put this restaurant over the top. I order two more portions of the stuff. My tab is around seven bucks at this point since sides

and kimchi are refilled for free. I like the waitress, too. She is Judy's age, maybe a little closer to forty, and better looking. She has a mousey looking face, but her breasts are nice. They naturally spread apart and stretch under their own weight. She catches me staring down her shirt every time she drops something off, but she always smiles. I wish I could tip. Ordering a beer or a bottle of soju might be the equivalent to tipping, you know, build up the tab a little bit. I'm gonna give the equivalent of a big tip.

When she brings me my first bottle of soju, she asks me something in Korean that I don't understand, but I say yes to nonetheless. She takes a seat next to me and I get a little nervous. What did she ask me? I pull off of the wall and sit up straight. I pull at my shirt, straightening it out. She gracefully takes a shot glass and pours me my first cup of soju, using both hands careful not to spill a drop nor to under or overfill my glass.

"Gonbae," I say, offering a toast. I drink it down and she stands to attend to her other tables. That was great. This restaurant is really something special.

I end up drinking four beers before I finish that first bottle of soju, but it was one of the better bottles of soju I've had, and I'm feeling pretty good when I get up to pay. My waitress meets me at the register and charges me around twelve bucks for my entire meal. I think I would ask this woman to marry me if I could. She doesn't break eye contact as she takes the money from me with both hands. There's a small caress of her finger that couldn't have been unintentional.

In the taxi, my mind is still a little hazy when I ask the driver to take me home. I pull my phone to check the time. I must have sat on it and turned in off accidentally. I see several missed calls from Yune and several missed text messages, 'Can I come over', 'I'm on my way', and 'I'll get some beer and soju.' I remember turning off my phone now. And I remember a little too

late that I don't know how to get back to the Bossam restaurant. I don't know the name, the cross streets, or even a nearby subway station, nothing. I will never be able to look down that waitress's shirt again. The last text message came in a half hour ago, so I'm not that surprised to find Yuneë already waiting inside.

I try. I really try to just sit in bed and think about the waitress while drinking my beer, but Yuneë won't leave me alone. She claims that I promised her sex. That she's done me so many favors, and the least I can do is give her the sex I promised.

“No.”

Still, she fondles me. I close my eyes and sip my beer. I conjure up the image of the waitress again. She rubs my legs and groin with her feet. She's pulling up my shirt rubbing her bare breasts on my stomach. I remember the fleshy part of her breasts as she dropped off my beers. Her smile. She licks my chest.

And then Yuneë ruins it by talking, “You said you would do it. You said. You said you will give me sex if I give you a ride.”

She takes off her underwear, stands up on the bed grabbing the headboard, and shoves her groin in my face.

“Suck my pussy.”

“Stop talking,” I tell her.

I stare straight ahead at her little tuft of hair and think of the waitress's smile. I imagine it's the waitress looking down at me and I take her into my mouth. I keep my eyes closed as I lie her down on the bed. I keep trying to hush her, but this girl's never been very good and keeping her voice down. Her moans are too recognizable, and she keeps throwing off my illusion. I jump up off of her and start playing some music. It's not very romantic. She makes a face, but I don't

care. I like this CD. It's loud.

I go back to the waitress and eat her like a dog nursing a wound to *Crime as Forgiven* by Against Me. The music isn't even close to dampening her moans, but the music does let me maintain focus. I keep my eyes closed and hold on to the image of the waitress' smile and her heavy breasts. I don't know when the CD finishes, but she continues moaning like there's music capable of muffling her.

She throws up a knee between us and finishes removing my boxers with her foot. The memory of her finger caressing my hand fills my mind just as she succeeds in putting me inside her and I quickly explode.

She doesn't slow down but it's easy now to hold on to her image. I'm sitting up against the headboard much like I was sitting up against the wall at the restaurant. The waitress drops off another beer showing me her breasts again and then quickly takes a seat on my erect prick. I bury my face in her chest, I imagine the waitress popping out one of her breasts from the top of her low collared blouse and offering it to me in her hand. I can tell she's about to come because of the motion of her hips. The waitress is pressing hard up against me, saying *Jinja* over and over again. It doesn't make much sense, her saying that, but it sounds really good in my head.

*Jinja! Jinja! Jinja!* She lets go of her breast and comes to a grinding halt. I'm happy to make her finish like that. She kisses me. I smile and open my eyes. I'm looking at Yunee now, but my smile doesn't fade.

"Thanks, Yunee."

Breathing heavy, she asks, "Do you like it?"

"Yeah. That was really good. I—," I get choked up, "I wish I could do that again." She misunderstands me and falls over into doggie position. "No, that's not what I meant," I say

tugging at her hips. I sit her next to me and put my arm over her shoulder, “Let’s just sit here for a minute.”

I close my eyes. I want to sit in the restaurant again, but she can’t seem to help herself. Maybe because I’m still hard, Yunee might be thinking I’m not yet satisfied so she grabs hold of my dick again. Using my own cum as lubricant, she slides her small hand up and down. The waitress does this as she pours me another shot of soju with the hand and then holds the shot glass up to my lips. I can’t help but let out my own unreserved moan.

I stand up to turn out the lights and then I return to my seat at the edge of the restaurant.



## CHAPTER XIII

### FATHER SOJU

When I get to work, I'm finishing a liter bottle of Mt. Dew, and I'm walking slowly because of the pain. My boss calls me into his office. Waiting there is a man who calls himself a preacher or pastor. When I don't respond he adds, like a priest or minister. He truly uses all of those titles.

The preacher-pastor-priest-minister is to serve as a translator, because my boss wants to clarify a few things between us. This is the first time we've spoken since my last attempt at getting a release letter from him.

It's only 2:00 P.M., and this preacher is already drunk, but his English is good and he handles himself like an experienced alcoholic, a functioning alcoholic.

His first question is about my religious affiliation. I say I don't have one and that I've never attended any church. He smiles and tells me he's pleased by this, and he's eager to talk about God, but my boss cuts him off and tells him to translate a few things. Father Soju turns to me and says, "Mr. Kim wants you understand everything he say to you before and..." he rubs his chin looking for the words. He opens a small cut he probably got from shaving. Unsteady hands. "Wants to know, you have doubts about C.E.E?"

I don't have much choice about quitting anymore. Mr. Kim flat out refused to give me the release letter. Legally, I can't even apply for a job anywhere else. Johnny Kim won't answer my calls. The only leverage I have is the threat of leaving. I wouldn't quit this job unless I had some

sort of prospects lined up, or even just one. No, I'd ride this gig out to the end, put up with all sorts of trouble, because the truth is, I've saved close to eight grand in the short time I've been here, and I want that number to continue to go up. I don't want to work to the very end. But Kimmy doesn't know that.

I enunciate every word, "It is a very big risk to stay at C.E.E.," I tell Father Soju placing one hand on his shoulder, "but I will stay if he can write me a new contract. I want my new contract to say that in the case of C.E.E. closing, I still get a full year end's bonus," I see Father Soju taken aback by this, and he continues to rub his reddening chin wound, "but I will be willing to forfeit the return ticket home."

Father Soju agrees and says this is reasonable. He follows this with some spiritual guidance regarding a man's worth being equitable to his efforts at his vocation.

I have to cut him off and ask him to translate what I've said to Mr. Kim. Mr. Kim agrees too quickly. I think about it and realize that in the event of C.E.E.'s closing, it would be due to lack of funds. In which case, the attempts of a foreigner soliciting back-pay would be in vain, and the seeking of severance, equally fruitless.

Still, it'd be nice to have it in print. Mrs. Lee, Mr. Kim's business partner, might cough up the money. She's been paying both our salaries, as of late.

Soon, the Father Soju goes back to the subject of religion, and I humor him only because it forces Mr. Kim to sit awkwardly in the room and listen to our inane conversation.

After a few minutes, Mr. Kim leaves the room without excusing himself. I try to end things with Father Soju by asking him if he's ever read any other scripture other than the King James Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls or Doctrine and Covenants, for instance. I ask him if he's ever read any of the Bible in the original language, which he thinks was Greek. He ends the

conversation with an invitation to dinner and drinks, but fails to set a time and date. Mr. Kim avoids eye contact for the rest of the afternoon and leaves work early.

I learn later from Amy that Mr. Kim is looking for a buyer of the academy and that Father Soju was one of the people Mr. Kim has been pitching to.

Father Soju would make for an interesting new boss.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A NICE BATHHOUSE

Yunee has left town, so I watch a bunch of movies on Friday after work. I want to go to the theatre because, of the three movies I've rented, only *Rough Cut* was memorable. Koreans really know how to make gangster movies.

I've also been reading some of Roald Dahl's adult literature. I found *My Uncle Oswald* at the Kyobo bookstore. Then, I bought a copy of *Someone Like You* online. Now, I'm leaving town, because I heard of a coffee bakery in Hongdae on the north side of Seoul that will be showing *Fantastic Mr. Fox* later tonight.

I get to the coffee bar and it's a foreign hipster dive. They are giving away fruit and French fries. The coffee they are selling is African, Brazilian, and Saudi and cost eight, twelve, and fourteen-fifty a cup. I am drinking my eight dollar cup of Brazilian coffee and eating two fifty-cent apple fritters when I start receiving the first of Yunee's calls.

It's still about an hour until the movie starts, but I text her 'in a movie call u later.' The coffee shop owners begin setting up a low end projector and making announcements. They will not be charging a fee for watching the movie, but they will be grateful if anyone wants to make a donation. A couple of people walk around with baskets lined with cloth. I give what I believe to be a fare price for a movie ticket.

They dim the lights about thirty minutes prior to the movie's intended start time and begin playing music videos and movie trailers upon request. I like the music video for Pearl

Jam's *Do the Evolution*. The trailers for the upcoming movies, *Let Me In* and *Monsters*, receive applause. I thought they looked okay. I was more impressed with the trailer for a movie called *The Proposition*, which had apparently been released several years ago. I get another call from Yune about five minutes to the start of the movie. I answer because they are showing a music video for Lady Gaga, and I want to step outside.

Yune asks if I am at home. I say no, that I am in Seoul. She gets excited because she is, as well, and wants directions to wherever I'm at. I tell her the movie is still going, but I give her the name of the coffee shop and tell her it's located in Hongdae. I'll call her after the movie.

*Fantastic Mr. Fox* is great, and I'm happy that I don't get any interruptions during the movie. I call Yune after and tell her I'm going to go drinking in Hongdae. She meets me in a bar called ToMaTo which in Hanguk roughly translates to Drink-Puke-Drink.

She asks if I want to go back home or to a hotel. I tell her I want to go to a *jimjill bong*, a bathhouse, because I haven't showered since yesterday, and the stink of my crotch has been bothering me all day. I also don't want to have sex with her and the lack of privacy in *jimjill bongs* usually keep her at bay, but I don't tell her this.

We're both drunk when we get into a taxi. She's sleepy, so I give the taxi directions. I say slowly and clearly, "*Jimjill bong, ju sey yo.*"

He quickly retorts, "*O tong jimjill bong?*" meaning which jimjill bong?

"A nice one."

"Okay, one nice *jimjill bong*," and he gives me a thumbs up.

We drive for about fifteen minutes, which is a long time when you have to take a piss. When we get to the building, I know it's going to be a few minutes before I get to the appropriate floor, pay, then find a toilet, so I decide to go around the side and try a trick a Korean friend

showed me. If you find a semi-secluded wall, turn away and pretend to be talking on your cell phone while taking a piss.

I find a dark corner in the parking garage and handle my business using the old cell phone technique, but I feel silly having a fake conversation so I simply hold the phone up to my ear. I hear one or two people walking behind me, but I'm invisible to them.

When I get back to Yunee, she giggles. "You looked funny," she says.

"Why?"

"I was looking for you in the garage. I see you in the dark, peeing with a very bright light on your face."

"I was just talking on my cell phone," I say laughing.

I pay the equivalent of sixteen dollars for the overnight fees of both our stays in the *jimjill bong*. I tell her I'll find her in the mutual sleeping area in about an hour or an hour and a half.

The taxi driver did not disappoint. There are several charcoal saunas, two warm naturally scented wood chambers called cave rooms, an ice room, a salt room, a wave pool, four hot tubs of various temperatures, full barber service, and a massage room. Only the massage rooms are extra, and the 180,000 won fee worth about 150 bucks, tells me that you get more than just a massage. Usually it's just a hand job, but foreigners aren't permitted inside. I wouldn't try regardless, I'm pressing my luck in this bathhouse as it is with my tattoos.

I wash up first, then jump into the hottest of the hot tubs. I sit there and soak for a good long while before going to the service clerk to buy a toothbrush and razor. I change into my sleep attire and leave the rest of my belongings in my storage locker. I go up one floor to the sleeping area and find Yunee sitting at a soup bar. Soup sounds awesome.

I want to look around this floor, but I order a spicy Ramyeon first. I don't have money on

me, but Yunee pays the 1000 won, or dollar fee. I want to order another soup but Yunee gets me a kimbop instead, then I take a look around.

There is an internet café. The computers are coin operated and work at 500 won an hour. There is a coin operated beer tap, 900 won a glass, coffee and espresso machines, complimentary, a child's play area, and various sleeping areas. There is a grand sleeping hall where most people stay, sleeping rooms for families, and sleeping tunnels for individuals. Yunee wants to find an empty family room. We do, but we are quickly joined by two other couples. Yunee and I put our bamboo mats together and fall into a nice drunken sleep.

At about 6 A.M., someone's phone starts going off in five minute intervals. Several people wake up, but no one does anything. I get up and find the phone ringing next to a man's head. He must have come in through the night. He is probably still drunk and can't wake up. I pick up his phone and silence his alarm then go back to my mat. Five minutes later, his phone rings again. I get up again and shake the man awake. He gets up, and I hand him his ringing phone. He thanks me, rubs his face, and leaves the room. I go back to my mat.

Yunee wakes me later in the morning to tell me she's going to take a mud bath and tells me not to get a massage. I smile and tell her okay before I go back to sleep. I wake up sweaty around noon, so I go up into the ice room. I get washed up again, and go for a shave even though I already paid 200 won for a razor the night before. The barber offers me several aftershaves and lotions, but I decline and use some of the hair products instead.

I get changed. I text Yunee once I'm outside telling her I'll be across the street having a sandwich. I cut through the parking garage and the many dark stains on the wall tell me that several people had the same idea I had last night.

## CHAPTER XV

### SHE LEAVES ME AND I MEET AN AMERICAN

By the time we finish out brunch, it's two, and Yunee and I decide to go shopping. We walk around some of the open air markets but don't buy anything there. Then we go to APM, a fifteen story shopping plaza in Dongdaemun, where I buy myself two one-hundred-dollar suits and find a three-hundred-dollar briefcase I like. I know the briefcase is overpriced. Yunee tells me not to buy it then tries to pull me away. I don't like the casual way she tells me not to buy it. So I buy it.

Yunee is quiet on the way home. She suddenly tells me that she's rescheduled one of her classes and that she will have to come back to Seoul tomorrow. She'll probably have to stay late, too.

I think she's upset about me not listening to her, so she's chosen this moment to lie to me about why she is going to Seoul.

I know she's not going to teach a class late on a Sunday. I smile and tell her I feel like drinking again, but I'm too tired. She gets excited and tells me she wants to drink, too.

Because we stop at a crab restaurant on the way home, we don't get into Suwon until a little after 10 P.M. She stops by a convenience store on the way home, and I pick up some beer. We're both drunk again about an hour later, and I tell her I want to take a shower. She says I don't have to, but I take one anyway to wash the grease and smog off my hair, she joins me as I'm getting finished up and I help wash her hair and scrub her back before I step out.



She comes out a little after and I pretend to be taking a nap. She doesn't buy it, and crawls in next to me pressing her wet ass against my groin and her wet hair on my neck and chest. I haven't had sex in almost three days and now I'm lying next to a drunken, nude girl trying to put the moves on me. I laugh it off and tell her I'm a little tired. I'm proud of myself, because she leaves me alone. My tone must have conveyed that I really didn't want to have sex tonight.

In the morning, I wake to obscene gropings. She is not going to let another opportunity go by, and I am at a loss at what I could do to fend off her attacks. She asks me to suck her, but I don't move. I keep thinking about a way out. She says she wants me to do her pussy. I like her phrasing, but I stay still.

She begins giving me oral sex without my consent, but it feels wonderful. Three days accumulates a lot of sexual oomph. Despite my lack of effort, I'm reaching that orgasmic precipice. I'm thinking that if she makes me come, I'm going to *have* to make love to her to the best of my ability. Unbeknownst to her, she stops two seconds short of that line. She climbs up and puts one of her breasts in my mouth. The dry, morning-after-beer taste in my mouth makes this an easy refusal. I get out of bed and take a few big swigs from a water bottle in the fridge and think. I reluctantly get back into bed and sit on the edge. She comes and sits next to me. I put an arm around her and try my best to think hard about what I can do to avoid what's already happening.

Then, it happens. She lets out a gruffly growl and pushes me away, presumably because of my lack of interest.

I did it. She turns away crossing her arms, and I have to turn away too, because I have a big stupid grin on my face.

She stays upset for about a minute, before she turns back at me and tries at it again. But now, I'm in complete control. I just get up out of bed and begin my regular morning routine.

She says nothing. She gets up out of bed, all smiles, and starts getting veggies out of my fridge. She makes spring rolls with cucumber, red bell peppers, spicy green peppers, lettuce, egg, cheese, spicy chicken, and a honey peanut butter sauce.

I put on Amon Tobin's *Bricolage* while we eat. Yunee still hasn't put on a single article of clothing. She brings up sex and laughs at me when I tell her I don't want to have sex with her anymore. She tells me I'm just mad because she got grumpy yesterday after shopping.

I put on Flogging Molly's *Within a Mile from Home* and begin the break-up talk again. I can see none of it is sinking in. By about time the CD gets to Tobacco Island, Yunee has stopped talking and just agrees with anything I tell her.

"This isn't going to go anywhere."

"Okay."

"You know your parents wouldn't be happy if they found out you were dating a foreigner," I add.

"Mm," she affirms.

"I'm going to finish my contract here, then I'm going back to the States."

"Okay. I am going to go swimming in the pool in Seoul. I will see you later," she smiles at me and we walk out of the apartment together.

When she gets to her car, I tell her I want to walk to a movie. She nods and puckers her lips, waiting. I give her a kiss.

"Bye," she says waving at me and blowing kisses as she drives away.

I see lots of spiders everywhere on my walk to the theatre. More signs that spring is here.

It's Tuesday now, and I'm getting bored. I didn't go out yesterday. I only went to have coffee and toast at Etre and then walked home. I bought a movie off a street vendor but it did not have subtitles, so I finished reading a play about Caligula by Camus. I think it's called *Caligula*. It's excellent, but I don't like the start of his next play, so I do my laundry and go to sleep.

I don't get any calls or text messages from Yune today. I almost invite her to dinner via text but decide against it. She's probably concentrating on some other guy, and I don't want to mess with our break-up by trying to be nice.

I can't sleep and feel like masturbating. I'm trying to keep my masturbation to a minimum so as to keep my mind and body flowing with the appropriate hormones to motivate me to go out and do things.

Thinking about work, I know it's going to be harder to go out now that it's just Amy and me working together. I think Amy has been trying harder lately to get my attention. She'll buy me coffee, or she will mention not having any plans from time to time. Maybe I'll ask her to dinner tomorrow.

An American comes to my door after work looking for the apartment's previous occupant. He is a small, ginger male of about my age, maybe a little older. I say I am the new resident, but invite him in. We talk of our jobs.

"How much do you make, if you don't mind my asking?" he asks.

"Two point six."

"Are you getting a pension?"

"No."

"You should get one. The academy won't tell you about it, because they have to match whatever you put into it. So in five years, if you've got forty grand in there, they'll have to put in

the other forty.”

“I won’t be here for five years.” I’m not going to die here.

“That’s what they all say.”

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“Just finishing up my sixth year.”

I wince and invite him out for a bottle of soju.

He starts talking about his sex life after his fifth bottle of soju. He can’t handle his drink, and I am really starting to hate this guy.

“She’s gotten these insey teensy little titties. Like a TV screen. She’s gotten these’ m... Those darken nipples that every one’ m these chink chicks got. You know what I mean?” he says slurping up more soju.

“No, man,” I say.

“M’ serious. They’re all the same. Evy las’ one of ‘um,” he says. Then he slur wispers, “Sometimes, I wanna tie her up an’ take a shit on ‘er chess.” He makes a motion with his hand like an airplane taking off.

I slap him hard across the face and pour myself a shot of soju.

“Hey?” he says.

“Where do you live?” I ask.

“Why’ d d’ you slap me?”

“You live in this plaza?” I ask pointing and trying not to look angry.

“Why’ d d’ you slap me?” he asks louder.

“Where do you live? Here, write it down for me,” I say handing him a paper from my wallet.

“Why?”

“I want to be able to knock on your door and kick your ass anytime I want.”

“Fuck you, asshole. I know where’n...” he hiccups, “you live, asshole.” He stands up, drops money on the table and walks away. “I fuckin’ know where you live, asshole.”

I collect his money off the table and put it in my pocket. I continue getting angry as I finish my bottle of soju. I start to think about me and Yune. I start getting angry at myself and wonder if I’ve been a piece-of-shit to her. I want to call her, but I know it would be a piece-of-shit thing to do if I...

Forget it. I should let her be.

The next day I check my phone. No missed calls. Suddenly, the idea pops into my head that she might have tried to kill herself again. I will call her tonight if I don’t hear from her throughout the day.

I almost call her at midnight, but I hold off. It’s been almost a week since we’ve last spoken. I try to masturbate, thinking that my hormones might be contributing to this wanting to call her.

She calls me at 1 A.M.

I pace around the room during our conversation. We say that we miss each other. I am glad that she is still being active, still working out at the pool. I tell her about the shitty American I met. She tells me to be careful, that all Americans are shitty and dangerous. I laugh.

The conversation is going great until she says that she never wanted to hurt me. I don’t know why, but that triggers something.

“Have you seen anyone these last couple of days?” I ask.

“What?” she says. I repeat the question to which she replies, “No-no,” very quickly. Then

she's quiet.

I rephrase, "Really? You didn't go out with your sister or friends this whole week?"

"No." she says again quickly, like she doesn't want the bad taste of a lie to linger in her mouth. "I don't do anything. I stay at home and work. That's all. I am free all the time."

I don't ask her out, like I thought I was if she called me, but I do ask, "What have you been doing for your meals? Are you eating well?"

"Yes. Fine."

"I eat at home, everyday." She says. I know she can't make herself ask me out because she feels guilty about going out with someone else. She wouldn't have any qualms about *letting me* go out with her if I ask, though. "I'm going to buy a book near your work today," she adds.

"Cool," I add nothing else.

"Do you want to go to dinner at seven?" She asks proving me wrong.

"I can't," I say. I don't actually have any plans. I had asked Amy to dinner today, but she declined offering up a long list of reasons why; too tired, work to do at home, her father is waiting at home, and she has to wake up early. That was fine. I've been turned down before, and in fact, I've been turned down on every occasion by every person here in Korea except Yune. I figured Amy was one of those pretty girls who likes having a lot of men interested in her, which is fine. I think flirting is fun, but I won't be asking her out again. Amy asked me later if I wanted a girlfriend, a very tricky question, but I handled it well. I didn't ask her if she wanted a boyfriend or any such nonsense, which is what she was looking for just to be able to apologize for my misunderstanding her innocent question. I ask instead if they've found a replacement for her yet.

I don't have any plans for tomorrow, but I think it better to tough it out at home alone.

“So we will not have dinner,” and she hangs up.

Now what? Maybe I’ll wander the streets looking for that shitty American guy.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE LAST FAREWELL

On Friday, Amy isn't at work. Mr. Kim later tells me that they have hired a new girl.

"Really? Well, where is Amy?" I ask.

"She... sick grandmother. She soon," he says with several gesticulations, and walks away. Mr. Kim does not talk with me very much anymore. I get a call later from Chloe. Amy told them of her leaving and all the former C.E.E. employees want to have a farewell dinner. Sounds fine.

I avoid eating throughout the day because Sarah sometimes has this bad habit of keeping everyone sober and boring, and I want to be able to get drunk easily. I plan on not eating at the restaurant, and focus more on drinking.

At the restaurant, the side dishes come out first. Three kinds of mushrooms, almonds, rice cake, rice sheets with coconut, some dried salted fish, green peppers, lettuce with a red pepper dipping sauce, steamed egg, and a simple beef soup. All this crowds the charcoal grill and gas burner situated at the center of our stainless steel table. Of all the appetizer dishes set before us, I dislike only the rice cake with coconut.

I ask the waiter for a beer when he drops off the food. He asks the girls if they'd like something to drink, but they decline. First, I start eating the peppers with the pepper sauce, because it goes well with beer. I normally love the salted fish, but then it makes my beer taste fishy. I finish my first beer in three gulps and push the waiter call button on our table. He returns,



and I ask for another beer. I finish this beer again, and he refreshes our steamed egg, and brings more peppers and pepper sauce. The third time I push the call button, I figure he must have spotted me from across the restaurant because he comes already holding a fresh beer.

I drink and eat quietly, as I don't feel much like talking about work. As the focus lying on Amy's quitting, the conversation was in Hangukeo for most of the night. I don't mind. I go to the can, and on my return, I see a new beer next to my other glass, still a third full. I try to empty both glasses before the waiter returns. I do, and he comes carrying a tray of very thinly sliced sheets of beef, several thick strips of marinated pork, a larger basket of string mushrooms, leafy greens, tofu, dried noodles, rice cake, bean sprouts, dried seaweed, sesame leaves for our shabu-shabu soup, and my beer.

Sandy and Sarah boil the vegetables, rice cake, and mushrooms first in the shabu-shabu broth boiling on the gas range. I ask if they wouldn't mind leaving out the sesame leaves, as I find them unbearably bitter. Judy grills the strips of raw pork.

The pork is turned when they begin adding the seaweed and noodles to the soup. The temperature is lowered to simmer and the ladies ladle soup into small bowls. We pick up the thin slices of raw beef with our chopsticks and cook them in our own personal bowls of shabu-shabu. I watch the red meat change color as the blood cooks. The pork is cut by Judy with cooking shears and left out by the edges of the grill to stay hot until we pick them off. The shabu-shabu comes with unending refills of broth and unlimited vegetables.

I fail at my plan to not eat and get embarrassingly drunk. I eat everything, and get moderately drunk, though through no fault of our waiter who made sure never to leave me with an empty glass.

The waiter assists in frying the remnants of our shabu-shabu with rice, dried seaweed,

sesame leaves, and an egg at the end of our meal. The ladies apologize for adding the sesame leaves. I don't mind because I am properly stuffed. Our waiter yells at another server as he cooks our rice, because I finish my beer. I am given my last beer of the evening which I'm unable to finish.

I would have generously tipped this waiter, had he been willing to accept it. Since I rarely went out my first month in this country—primarily for financial reasons—it was well into my second month here when I learned that it is not customary to tip. They will accept a tip if you insist, but the situation is usually uncomfortable for both when you do.

The forty-five dollar tab is split evenly by everyone except Amy whose money is refused, this being her celebratory dinner. I buy a 500-won-cup of sweetened coffee with cream from a machine at the door and step in into the busy sidewalk.

It is 10:45 P.M. when we leave the restaurant. I tell the ladies that I will be going to the movies. They ask what I'm going to watch. I don't know. I tell them I'll find out when I get to the theatre. I don't invite any of them, nor do any of them invite themselves.

There is only one English movie I haven't seen at the theatre. It's not something I would normally watch, but they sell beer at the theatre concession. I buy two beers and a ticket to *The Proposal*. I fall asleep after I finish my second beer.

I wake up when the lights come back on and check my phone. It is 1:35 in the A.M., and I have no missed calls. I take a cab home and fall asleep with my clothes on. I have a wet dream that night. I don't remember any of the dream other than the moment of ejaculation. There was a young girl with long black hair bouncing on my lap. We were both bouncing, actually, and we're both dressed. I remember it didn't take much to make me come. The weight of her body on my lap was so intense that we only bounced a few times, and then I was done.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE NEW GIRL

There is a new, new girl. I did not give this interview as I did with Amy. She either knows Mr. Bak or Mrs. Lee, or she agreed to a pay rate that made an English proficiency interview unnecessary.

I see her finishing up some paperwork in one of the unoccupied classrooms. I waste time pretending to read for about twenty-five minutes after the end of my shift, before I see her leaving. I pack up my briefcase and bump into her in front of the elevator. Our first meeting happens at a particularly convenient time and place, but I have to be careful in how I handle this. I don't want to botch this up and form some sort of lasting friendship with her.

I watch her take off her slippers. I put on my loafers and say, "Hello."

"Hello," she smiles back.

"I'm Sid Serrano," She doesn't try to repeat my name, nor do I try hers, "Are you the new grammar teacher?" I ask.

She nods.

"What time do you come in tomorrow?"

She holds up three fingers and says, "Thirty-two," though I may be mistaken.

"I have to be back at 2:30, myself. I'm going for a drink right now, and I know it's only Tuesday, but the desire to drink rarely strikes my fancy. And since I don't ever have to rise early, I tend to indulge in these impulsations of mine."

Looking down, she responds, “You speak... Very fast.”

I’m glad she didn’t ask me what impulsations meant. “Do you want to drink with me?” I ask.

She smiles at me, then frowns, saying, “I come back C.E.E. one hour.”

A couple of things go through my head at once. Her voice is pretty, she has to be related to Bak or Kim, because you can’t be dropping articles like that if you’re gonna be working here. But most importantly, she seemed pleased at my asking her out and sincerely disillusioned at not being able to go out with me.

“Can I wait for you?” I ask.

She smiles again and nods her head. I like her smile because she has one of those canines that sits askew.

“What time will you finish?” I ask.

Now, I’m sure I hear correctly this time when she says “*two-twenty-ten*”. I didn’t know how to ask her delicately what she meant. The fact that I lack the gumption to ask her to clarify something as simple as the time told me I would not be successful on our date unless I loosened up a bit.

Because I run, I get home a little after 8:00. I get changed, but into nothing too extravagant, because I know she won’t be. Just a better looking casual shirt. I drink a bottle of soju as I kick around my apartment. I take a book with me because I don’t know how long I’ll be waiting.

I arrive back at the Sang Hong tower a quarter after nine. I wait in the lobby, but I don’t check if she is still upstairs. Even though I don’t know what two-twenty-ten means, the entire building locks up at eleven. At most, I’ll be reading in our building’s lobby for a few hours. I

brought a Jonathon Ames book. My brother had a bunch of these, and they really drive the adventurous spirit.

I find out two-twenty-ten means 10:00 P.M. When I see her exit the elevator, I put up my book and smile as I walk towards her. I come close and kiss her on both cheeks. That's not something I normally do, but as a foreigner out of my element, I am allotted a bit of uncharacteristic behavior. She's likely trying to figure out whether those kisses on the cheeks mean something, or if it's just some weird foreigner thing. Then, I hold her hand and ask her where she'd like to go.

She says, "I'm fine," so I decide to take her for spicy pork soup at a Korean restaurant. I smile amiably and let go of her hand when we get to our subway stop, before it has a chance to get sweaty.

At the restaurant, I order a bottle of soju and a beer for us to share with our meal. I don't know how old she is, but she pours us our drinks. I don't think she had eaten anything prior to our meeting, but she did not eat more than a few chopsticks full.

"I'm not sure if you're not hungry, or if you feel as nervous as I am. You're beautiful. I don't think I can eat another bite," I say stringing all of my words together only slowing down on the 'you're beautiful.' I'm sure this is all she catches. I do this a few more times throwing in a 'very pretty' and a 'lovely smile'. She says a few things to me in Hangukoe, but I only understand the words 'yoja' and 'mekju' which mean, 'girl' and 'beer'.

She's put away most of the soju, and I'm finishing up my beer when she orders another bottle of each. We quickly finish these as *somok*. Comfortably numb, we pay our bill and step out of the restaurant. She's now talking and talking lengthy monologues about something she finds very humorous.

She stops laughing when I take her hand again. We walk back towards the bus stop closest to my apartment. I'm not sure if she brought a car to work, or if she'll be taking a taxi home, so I say, "I had a nice night. I want to go out with you again, but I can wait here with you and wait for a taxi. I only live about two minutes that way."

She nods smiling and pulls me in the direction I had pointed to. I get that excited, nervous feeling you get when you're hoping nothing messes things up. I ogle her on the walk to my apartment, but then try to focus on the buildings and surrounding trees so as not to get too excited.

I am wondering if the big black and white birds I'm seeing in the trees are magpies when she takes my arm and nestles it between her breasts and presses the back of my hand against her mound. The friction of her pubic hair against my hand gives me an instant and awkwardly positioned erection.

I casually shift it north, but the head of my penis slips out above my beltline after a few dozen steps. By the time I reach my door, I can feel a few drops of pre-cum on the inside of my shirt.

She still hasn't let go of my arm, and I don't want her to, so I use my left arm to push the buttons on the right side of the door.

We step inside quietly, but I'm not sure how to begin. I know what I'm supposed to do, but for some reason that first kiss seems difficult despite the alcohol and my erection. I look at her again, and I think I've figured why it's difficult. She's looking away shyly and slyly assessing my apartment from the entryway when it comes to me. She hasn't made eye contact yet. I don't remember... No, I'm sure we made eye contact during dinner. We must have.

Still looking away, she begins running her hand down my chest. I'm wide eyed thinking

about the cum constellation forming around my belt line. Her hand rests directly on my belt buckle with the head of my prick now snuggled between her ring and pinky fingers.

She has to know what I've got there behind my shirt. No she doesn't. I see the realization come to her a single moment later when she tries to run her hand along my belt line.

She gets this wide-eyed revulsed look that quickly turns to anger. My confusion turns to fear.

I'm guessing that my alarmed expression—or maybe the turtle head—triggered some sort of traumatic flashback, because the most vulgar obscenities begin pouring out of her mouth. I don't understand any of it, but the anger is clearly communicated.

She continues to scream at me when she starts pointing at the bed. I can guess she's yelling one of three things. I freeze.

I find it strange that she is considerate enough to remove her shoes first before entering my studio apartment, all the while, opening drawers, still shouting and still pointing at the bed.

I step in when she looks through my bathroom. Walking out, she passes me giving me a sinister look. She enters my kitchen where I hear her rummaging through my utensil drawer.

To my horrified amazement, she comes back from the kitchen with my fruit carving knife. With its lime green handle, it's not the most intimidating looking knife, but it certainly is the sharpest.

I throw my hands up in the air and immediately sit on the bed. She smiles and says, "Good." I smile back, which must have triggered another flashback, because she jumps on top of me and holds the knife about an inch from my eye. Then, she begins to do the scariest thing that could have been done. She begins to undo my belt.

I don't want my dick cut off, so I do something I've never done before. I hit a woman.

Close-fisted, I give her a hard right to the face. She falls to my left, and I quickly get hold of her wrists knowing it's safer than trying to pull the knife out of her hand. She is squirming and moaning under me. Her arms go limp, she begins thrusting her hips and rubbing her legs together.

Her moans are part sensual, part anger. More sensuous anger than angry sensuousness. Because of her gyrations and proximity, I smell the scent she seems to exude. It's arousing, but I am not aroused. I release the hand not holding the knife to see what she is going to do. She reaches up to my face and I slap her. She moans, in a sensual way. She reaches up to my face again. I hold my hand up to let her know another slap is coming if she tries anything. She caresses my cheek then puts her index finger in my mouth. I let her finger rest on my tongue and she lets out another series of squirms and moans.

I take the knife out of her hand. She takes the finger out of my mouth and with her other newly freed hand, she begins to undo my belt. There is a feeling of anxiety sitting heavy in my stomach. Luckily, it's far away enough from my groin to allow me to get hard.

The appreciation of being drunk while holding a knife on top of a newly hired co-worker who may or may not be related to one of my bosses prevents me from moving. Her eye is quickly getting puffy and red.

Now my penis is exposed. She guides my hand and cuts through the buttons of her blouse. She screams again and there is a pounding at the door. I hear a man, a neighbor probably, shouting from the other side of the door. I want to say something but can't. This insane girl shouts something terrifying. Her screams end with a powerful sounding '*shibpal*' calling my neighbor an asshole.

The man answers in the affirmative with a calm sounding '*ne*', then all is quiet aside



from her heavy breathing and the panicked beating of my heart.

I've gone soft again. I look down again and she tears open the rest of her blouse. She wears a transparent, flesh colored bra that undoes from the front. I take no action but she is unhesitant in revealing her breasts to me. She is an A cup or a small B. Her nipples are perfectly smooth and almost the exact same color of her pale breasts. The shine and the fingernail shaped indentation at its center are all that differentiate areola from breast. I want to touch them, but I have to think about it.

I'm still confused about what is happening. The most recent and predominating factor in this situation is that *she* is the one who tore open her shirt. She is also the one who exposed her breasts to me.

I reach down and touch her breasts. I want to touch her lightly, but she takes hold of my hand and forces a tight grip. She moans. I'm sure there are neighbors still standing at my door, so I'm grateful she doesn't scream again.

She tears my collar when she pulls me down for a kiss. The kiss is rough and terrible. Our teeth collide a few times and she sucks hard on my tongue and lower lip. I pull away and wipe what I think to be spittle but turns out to be blood from my lip. It could be my blood but I'm not sure. I don't taste blood.

She begins to squirm underneath me again, trying to position herself on the bed. Again, she tries to take me into her mouth. I let her, but she goes at it with her teeth, so I quickly retract.

I drop the knife on the floor near the foot of the bed, and attempt to try to give her oral sex. I'm hoping giving her a good tongue job will settle her down a bit. Being good at oral is having a varied technique that you can adjust accordingly. The size of the labia, furniture available, and level of sensitivity should all be taken into account when performing oral sex.

Reading your partners reactions is particularly important if you're to self-assess and accommodate.

From her anger moans, I would have guessed that she was taking offense, but her quivering hips and her gasping for breath between the death threats she seemed to be growling at me said otherwise.

She is burying my nose deep in her canal, but I am able to breathe through my mouth. Then she starts her violent grinding. Had I been a regular smoker, or had I not trained my lungs with regular swimming, I would have surely perished. Nevertheless, I am fearing a black-out. No doubt, she has no qualms about grinding a corpse.

She finally lifts off my face. She slides down, and for the first time tonight, our privates touch. Unfortunately, and I don't know how it's happened, she has that green knife in her hand again.

I try not to show fear. Maybe she'll drop it when she sees it has no effect on me. I sit up and casually use my shirt to wipe my face.

I ignore the knife and put my face directly in front of hers. I wait for her to open her eyes, and when we've made proper eye contact, I thrust inside of her. I keep the knife in my peripheral.

It's about the time I would normally change positions when she puts the knife into my hand then forces it onto her own throat.

I can't help but shake my head at this girl. I try imagining this situation from an outsider's perspective, but I'm interrupted by her orgasm. She tightens her muscles so forcefully that it fully ejects my prick. I let her take a moment and a few breaths hoping she'll ready herself for a second go, but she resists.

I'm not impressed with my performance, and I had yet to ejaculate.

She was now a completely different person. I fall into bed alongside of her. She is snuggling calmly in my arm. We fit nicely in each other's embrace. I feel silly still holding on to the knife, so I let it fall to the ground.

Even though I was tempted to continue the sex, I thought it best to let her rest. I give her a few soft kisses on the forehead before she looks up to give me one long splendid kiss on the lips. This kiss was made more memorable by her swollen eye, red cheek, and slightly cut neck.

She is quiet and still for a long time, but her breathing sounds conscious. It was about one o'clock when she started to snore.

I can't sleep.

When you're lying next to a beat-up, cut-up girl you've just banged cuddling your left side, etiquette dictates you keep a straight face, but I can't help myself. I smile, and the idea of smiling at a time like this makes me giddy. I can feel the stupid grin pulling my cheeks way back. She stops snoring when I start to giggle. I think I've woken her, so I pretend to sleep. Later, I wake myself by laughing in my sleep.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### HER NAME WAS BAK SUNJIN

Getting out of work, I take a bus to Inggedon Station because I want to buy some bootleg DVD's from the underground subway market.

The floor, walls, and the ceiling are all made of a kind of granite stone. It's a dark stone. Each of the shops equip their own lighting. The shops in the middle where the two lines meet are most expensive. Like-designer clothing, authentic jewelers, and tech shops all have expensive fluorescent lights or track lighting set on dimmers. As you move further out, you find everything else: leather, coffee, shoes, kids' stuff, fast food chains, photo studios, hanboks, and linens. Its on the fringes that you'll find the bootleg DVD's, designer knock-offs, piercing shops, and dollar fried foods. These little shops will have one or two lamps plugged into the wall or a battery light clamped to their carts.

I buy extra spicy tokkpokki, three horror movies, and a knock off Louis Vuitton muffler, because the nights are still cold.

I get home around 11:30 to find it covered in blood. It's dried and brown in most parts except for the center of the deepest pool located directly in front of my bed. I've seen a pool of blood like this one other time, and I know this is a lot. There are also dried footprints of blood leading out through the entryway. I walk into the apartment avoiding the blood not bothering to take off my shoes.

There are no blood stains in the other two rooms of my apartment. It seems nothing is

missing or broken in the kitchen or the bathroom. I find the green fruit knife inside the bathroom sink. It appears clean. I put it back in the kitchen drawer.

The apartment looks frightening coming in, but the blood is isolated to the front of the apartment. Something must have happened when, whoever's blood this is, answered the door.

I walk out of the apartment leaving the door open. I knock on my neighbor's door. I hear someone approach, but there is no answer.

"Hello?" I shout, "Can you help me?" but there is no response.

I don't blame them. Someone knocks on your door at this hour calling out in a foreign language, you might not want to answer.

I walk across the hall, but I know the next room is residence to two college-age girls, so I continue on down. Almost to the end of the corridor, I hear what sounds like T.V. and male conversation.

I knock, but there is no answer. I pound on the door again, and three young guys wearing boxer shorts answer the door, each of them smoking a cigarette and holding a glass of beer.

They seem excited to see me and invite me in like they were expecting me. I pull out my cell phone and ask them to call the police.

"Police? No-no-no-no-no. Wait," one of them answers. The others' gleeful expressions turn grave. One of them walks back into the apartment and lowers the gameshow or sitcom they were watching.

"Sorry. No noise. Sorry. No police, okay?" he pleads and all three offer apologetic bows.

I shake my head and dial 119 telling him, "No, not you. You're okay. My apartment has a problem." I point down the hall towards my room.

"You have problem? What problem?" he asks looking down the corridor. The emergency

operator answers, and I hand him the phone. He speaks as I guide him, then, to my door. He gives the address and directions to the operator when he sees the blood. They speak a few moments longer, then hands the phone back to me.

“He speak to you. English.”

“Thank you,” I say then into the phone, “Hello?”

“Yes, hello. Can you tell me what is the problem?”

“Sure. I came home from work, and there was blood all over my apartment.”

“Oh, you came home and there was blood in your apartment? Oh,” then a pause. “What time did you came home?” he asks.

“Five minutes ago,” I say.

“Five minutes ago?” I think he asks, so I answer.

“Yes,” another pause, and now I figure he is translating to someone.

“Do you know what blood came from?”

“No, I’m not sure,” I say, but I can guess.

A police van and cruiser arrive ten minutes later carrying a dozen policemen, all of them young guys. Some of them look twelve in their baggy uniforms and drooping belts. They all crowd into the corridor and peer into the apartment. I’m left standing in the entrance of the building.

There are a couple of oh’s and ah’s. The police also take several pictures with their camera phones. They talk amongst themselves, then with my neighbors who have put on jeans and shirts.

One of the twelve-year-old cops smoking a cigarette approaches me and asks, “American?”

“Yes,” I say.

He nods, exhaling, “Army?”

“No. English teacher.”

“Oh, English teacher.” He takes another pull from his cigarette and walks back to the other police officers.

A few minutes later, the cops begin busying themselves, when two distinguished looking officers arrive, distinguished more by the ribbons and tassels hanging from their shoulders than by their age.

One of the senior officers addresses the crowd of police in a deep commanding voice. Two of them quickly begin knocking on doors and declaring themselves. The rest of them pile into the police van and leave. The two officers talk for a moment and take a few pictures with their cell phones. One of them finally approaches me and shakes my hand.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“What is your name?”

“Sid Serrano.”

“Sid. Can you tell me what happen?”

“I got home from work around 11:30. When I went into the apartment, I saw the blood, so I asked them,” I point to my neighbors, “to call you.”

My neighbors approach, but the officer stops them with a gesture. He begins writing when he asks, “Can I see your ID and passport?”

“Here’s my ID, but my passport is missing. I reported it lost a week ago.”

“Stolen?” he asks.

“Lost,” I say.

“Please excuse my English,” he says, “but who made the blood?”

“I don’t know?”

“Do you live with another...”

“No, I live alone.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“An ex-girlfriend. I have not seen her for over a week.”

“Korean?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Do you have a phone number of her?”

“Yes.” I give him her phone number. “Her name is Seong Yunee.”

“Did you called her?” he asks still writing.

“No, I haven’t,” I answer, wondering why I hadn’t.

“Is this her blood?”

“I hope not.”

“Mm,” he nods.

“Does Seong Yunee live in Suwon?”

“No, Seoul.”

“Was anything missing in the apartment?”

“No, nothing looked like it was missing” I say.

He dials Yunee’s number on his cell phone but she does not answer. He groans and says something to himself I don’t catch. He takes my arm and asks, “Can you come with me to the police station?”



“Yes, I will,” I say not giving any footing, “but I want to tell you something first.”

“What do you want to tell me?” he asks still holding my arm.

“Last night, a girl stayed in my apartment.”

“What is her name?”

“I don’t remember. She told it to me yesterday, but I forgot.”

“What is her phone number?” he asks.

“I did not ask for it.”

“Did you have sex?”

I don’t understand this line of questioning, but I answer anyways. “Yes, why?”

“I want to understand better,” he says, then adds, “Was she American?”

“No, I don’t know any American women here.”

“Okay, we can talk more in the station.”

At the station, a young officer with poor English questions me. He asks the same questions, along with gathering a more detailed timetable of my day including my time in the underground shops.

I offer what I believe to be pertinent information by telling him, “A girl slept in my apartment last night.”

He offers a casual, “Mm,” and continues with his notes. I’m not sure if he’s noted this detail or not.

He begins asking the same series of questions again when another officer arrives and cuts him off. The two exchange a few words, and the newly arrived officer leaves again. The young officer questioning me gathers up all of the files he’s filled and his notes and says to me, “We have reached your girlfriend, Seong Yunee. She come now. You may go.”

## CHAPTER XIX

### LEAVING KOREA

I grab my three suits, all my shirts, and my best pants. I pack my toiletries and a box of granola bars. Then I take a look at my shelf. There're about twenty books I haven't read yet. I unpack the granola bars. In the kitchen, I find the green fruit knife. I consider boiling it and taking it with me but I feel pressed for time, so I use soap and water instead.

I wasn't exactly told not to leave town. The police's parting remarks included, 'You must be available.' I try to rationalize what I plan on doing, but no matter how I look at it, turning off my phone, taking a boat to Japan, and flying back to the States without telling anybody does not constitute making myself available.

My bag is heavy. I'm not thinking clearly. I'm sure there's lots of things I'm forgetting, but I'm already in a taxi on the way to the subway. I step out only to find the subway's closed. It's been closed for several hours now. I hail another taxi planning on taking that all the way to the train station, but that's going to be closed too. I tell my driver to take me back to my apartment.

I clean up all the blood. I thought someone else was going to do it at some point, but it never happened. I use the toilet brush to get the dried blood off the linoleum floor and walls. I take all the bloodied sheets, toss them in the machine and flip the mattress. I feel a little better. It was the blood in the apartment that was giving me a feeling like death was lurking about, making me scramble like whatever killed in my apartment was coming for me next.

It's 4 A.M. when I finally sit down and think. Everything's mixed up. Who did this? Where's the body? Am I being set up? I need to get my money out of my account. The account might be frozen. If it is, I only have enough cash to get to Japan, and then what? No, I won't go to Japan unless I have access to my money. At least I'm not locked up. I feel tired.

I wake up at 8:30. A lot later than I had hoped, but I'm not frantic anymore. I walk to the ATM in front of the grocer's. My money's there, and I withdraw my limit. I have another 8,000,000 Won in my account—about \$7300—so I take a taxi to my bank and I try to close the account. The teller asks for assistance from her manager, but the manager doesn't speak that great of English, so they get one of the younger security guards who comes in and asks me, "What can I help you with?" with his hands held together as if in prayer. I see that closing a bank account is a much bigger ordeal than expected, so I shake my head and say, "Withdrawal." I leave the equivalent of \$6.14 in my account.

I call in to work and tell Mr. Kim that I can't come in today. Mr. Kim says, "No. You must. No new teacher come. You must."

"The new teacher is not working today either?" I ask.

"What?" he asks, "Slowly, please."

"Where is the new teacher?" I ask again.

"She no phone. No house," he tells me.

"I can't come in, I have to go to the embassy," and like a lie that suddenly becomes true, I realize I don't have a passport, and I will have to request a new one at the embassy in Seoul.

"If you no come, I close C.E.E," are Mr. Kim's last words to me.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kim," are mine.

The Mugunhwa train is cheapest, but it will take an hour to get to Seoul. The KTX, going

at about 260 miles an hour, costs \$10 more but will get me there in 15 minutes.

The KTX starts gliding out the Suwon terminal just as the second hand on the station's digital clock hits the 9:45:00 mark, and comes to a halt in Seoul at 10:01 and some seconds. I get off and follow the crowd. A line forms behind the escalators, but I take the stairs. A few men in business suits rush up along side next to me. It seems like only people with places to be use the stairs. I hear air the train's brakes release their pressure and I look at the clock, 10:05 on the dot.

I finish my trip to the northern part of Seoul by subway, and I carry my luggage the 100 yards it takes to get from the subway station to the embassy. Security holds my luggage at the security outpost. It takes about an hour to fill out the passport replacement forms and costs \$5 to get my photos from the passport picture booth located in the lobby. If I wasn't so scared about being persecuted about a potential homicide I didn't commit, I might be impressed at this country's efficiency and convenience. I turn all of the paperwork in, including the police report about my missing passport and \$150 in passport processing fees. I'm being told that my passport will take two weeks for processing and that there is no fee to pay to expedite this process when our conversation is interrupted by a clerk.

"Excuse me, Mr. Serrano. Your passport was turned in last month," the clerk tells me. She dumps the contents of a large clear envelope onto the stainless steel drawer connecting us between the bulletproof partition. "All correspondence was sent back to us, so we looked up your residency with the Korean Department of Education and found that your employer listed the school campus as your residence. We decided to hold your documents until an absolute residency was established."

Now I'm impressed. I don't even know my own address, "I recently had to move into a temporary residence," I tell her, not knowing why I lied. I'm returned my passport, photos, fees,

and paperwork. I ask, “Do you know where my passport was found?”

“Lee Hyung Swa, bank manager at Shinham Bank, enclosed a letter saying it was left in one of the copy machines. They reviewed security footage and they determined that your passport—”

Now I remember. The last time I exchanged money at Shinham Bank, they asked me for an ID and I let them make a photo copy of my passport. I was wrong about Yunee. Either way, I’ve done it. I’ve fixed my passport problem, and it’s not even noon yet. It is strange how the small immediate victories can change your outlook on everything. I could even make it back to Suwon in time to go to work.

‘*She no phone. No house,*’ Mr. Kim had said. I don’t think about it anymore. Back at the train station, I buy a ticket to Busan, the port I hope to leave from to get to Japan.

The momentary satisfaction achieved from regaining my passport dissipates on the train. I might have to spend a day or two in Busan if I can’t book a ferry today. If I’m going to be detained anywhere, it’s going to be while trying to leave the country. I’m not hungry, but I buy a milk coffee and a kimbop on the train. I should eat something to keep me going.

I consider leaving my luggage in one of the storage lockers in Busan Station, but I decide against it and look for a cyber café. There is one in the shopping plaza across the street from the station. Online, I find the port I need to get to for the Jr. Beetle, with ferries leaving everyday twice a day.

I think up all of the worst stuff on the train to Jungangdong station. I imagined getting stopped at a security check point by armed guards where I’m fingerprinted and my newly retrieved passport is taken away again. My limp body is hauled off to prison. I don’t know why my body would be limp like that. I laugh at my own exaggerated fears. I poke fun at myself by

thinking up even more ridiculous scenarios. A Korean judge yelling at me from a pulpit, waving his mallet at me, spittle flying from his screaming mouth. I can't understand anything he's saying. I'm undressed and forced into a dog kennel. The train stops at Jungangdong, my stop, just as everyone in the courtroom was getting ready to piss on my cage. I'll have to get a bus for the last part of my trip.

The port is nothing like I imagined, though I should have expected this. It's a salty bus station with friendlier people. The ticket attendant helps me buy my ticket. He hardly glances at my passport, and a good looking girl wearing a vest and long earrings takes my luggage and points me towards the docking halls outside. There are a half dozen good size boats sitting outside. One or two look like fishing boats, a couple more look to be taking on passengers, the others seem to be resting in the water. I ask an old lady to point me to my ship. The old *ajumma* looks at my ticket, takes my arm and walks me to the pier. It's a pleasant enough farewell. No hard feelings. I go up top once, but stay inside the hull of the boat most of the time. The water's choppy, and I'm already feeling nervous. I don't look out the window much, and three hours later I'm in Japan. The people and buildings look the same on this side of the sea except everything is written in Japanese. There is some Korean and Chinese, but not a whole lot in English. I take a train and then a bus to get to the airport. It took just a few deciphered symbols and a couple conversations with kind strangers to figure it all out.

I've cut across two whole countries today. What was it that taught me to do things like this? I thrived in Korea. I'm healthy. I had a place of my own, a salaried job, a girl, and now I'm leaving with \$8000. Most of the sexual angst that was so debilitating is gone now. Two years ago, I couldn't even hold down a minimum wage job and now I... This doesn't exactly constitute holding down a job, but I think I am doing a pretty decent job of getting out of this sticky

situation, and I'm doing it on my own.

I figure out why I did so well in Korean after I buy my plane ticket at the airport. It's precisely because of how I'm able to buy my ticket that shows me why I made out so well. I walk up to the ticket counter of the first airline I see and ask for the cheapest ticket to anywhere in Texas leaving at the earliest possible date. She smiles and nods. She doesn't say anything at all to me and begins working at her computer for a good long while. I'm beginning to doubt whether she understood what I'd ask for. I tell her, "I'll take whatever is cheapest but whatever is closest to—" and I'm about to say Austin when she starts up in perfect English.

"One ticket from Fukuoka to Dallas today at 6:15 PM, 447,100 Yen. One ticket from Fukuoka to Dallas today at 9:50 PM, 492,880 Yen."

I stop her and ask how much that is in dollars. She looks at her screen and works out the transfer rate by hand. She tells me, "\$4392.62." She works out the second ticket price and tells me, "\$4771.35." Then maybe because of the face I might have been making she gestures towards a room marked Business Office and says, "It is cheaper if you buy online."

I ask if I can use the computers in the business office. She smiles and continues to gesture towards the office. Inside the business office, they have several computers, a Xerox machine, a fax machine, phone booths with digital screens, and an attendant. I tell the attendant I want to use a computer and he sits me at one of the terminals, unlocking the screen. It takes me 15 minutes to find the exact same flight to Dallas at 6:15, but it's only \$1,100 online. I end up paying a little more, but I make my final destination Austin.

I'm thankful I'm able to charge the ticket to my account holding a little over \$6.00, and that's when it hits me. I wouldn't have been able to do any of this in the States. Banks won't credit you a thousand dollars on a checking account. They don't have public computers at American

airports. Airlines won't help you get a better deal. People aren't friendly and helpful like at the Busan port. Trains don't go 260 miles an hour, nothing in Texas does. Public transportation wouldn't have got me to the airport and off to another country in one day. Nobody pays your rent in America. I made it out of here so easily because Korea is easy.

I get through airport security without a problem, and I take my seat in the plane with a light heart. I hope I can get the car I left at dad's house running again. I'm not going to waste any time at dad's house though. That place is for dead people. I'm going back to Austin. I didn't do so well in Austin the last time, but I think I can make it this time. Korea was easy on me, but it made me stronger. I was thirteen the last time I was in Austin. That was the last time I got to see Pabs.



## CHAPTER XX

### REMEMBERING PABS

My elder brother, Pablo, was the complete opposite of the original Sid. Pabs couldn't have cared less about anything, not his family, his friends, his health, but he did have an opinion on Sid's wanting to leave home to go to college. Everyone in our family knew Speedy's story, of our family's history. Pabs dreaded what it meant, and he resented my brother Sid for leaving. Angry and bitter, everyone said that Pablo, more than anyone else, chased death, but that's not how I remember Pabs. I remember when Pabs asked me to go to Austin.

"Now?" I asked him. I was a little scared of him because he was always cussing me out or throwing me across a room. It was cold that day and it was supposed to be even colder that night. His car had heat, and our apartment didn't. Normally, you don't need any extra heat in South Texas, but for about two weeks a year, it can get nippy. "Yeah. I'll give you some money. We'll go out to eat. We'll see a fucking show," he said. That sounded even better than staying warm.

At thirteen, I was small for my age, and Pabs was driving me upstate to help him get some drugs across Falfurrias. He thought with me in the passenger seat, border patrol wouldn't hassle him at the checkpoint. We stop at the T&A truck stop 'to get some shit,' as he put it. I remember driving in thinking it looked like they had turned an entire strip mall into a gas station. The parking lot was full, and every pump was lined with three or four cars. My brother drove around back and parked where truck drivers parked their rigs. He was backing up between two

trailers when a tatted up truck driver came out of the dark and approached our car.

Pabs gave me five bucks and told me to find something to eat while he talked with this guy. It was a little scary walking across the big rig parking lot, but it was nice inside. There were three restaurants, not including the hot dogs, burritos, and turkey legs by the register. The truck stop had slot machines in the back, showers in the bathroom, a toy store, a DVD and books on tape library. I get a pizza and go back outside.

I remember it smelled like peanut butter when I got back to the car. "I got some pizza," I told Pabs. I was looking at his face checking to see if I made the right decision, but he's not listening to me. He's looking at two fat guys approaching our car. In one motion, my brother pulled the keys out of the ignition, swung open the door, and stepped out to meet our visitors. I stayed in my seat. I see Pabs stop six inches in front of the fatter guy. The big fat guy picked up an arm and looked as if he was going to grab at Pabs' shoulder, but he didn't get a chance because Pabs swung a knife and stuck it sideways into the fat guy's forearm. Even through the windshield, I heard the sound Pabs' fist made when it slapped against Big Fatty's arm. The flesh gave no resistance to the blade as it slipped in between Big Fatty's radius and ulna. Big Fatty didn't scream until Pabs spun around to put his back up against Big Fatty's belly and leverage the entire weight over his shoulder. But Pabs wasn't pulling the man by the arm or wrist like you normally would when slinging a 300 lb. man over your shoulder, Pabs guided him by pushing the blade up through his forearm. Big Fatty was on the floor squeeling when Pabs withdrew his knife. The blade had sliced through the forearm from the elbow up to the wrist. Little Fatty was gone by then. I hadn't even seen him leave. Pabs let Fatty stand and run off somewhere in the dark, probably to bleed out under a trailer. Pabs kicked some gravel over the wet spot in front of our car. It blended in to all the oil stains on the floor. It grossed me out when Pabs grabbed a slice of

pizza with his hand covered in someone else's blood, but that wasn't why I was throwing up.

Pabs had to stop once more a little ways down from the truck stop to get cleaned up, but we got all the way to the checkpoint in Falfurrias without incident. We listened to Danzig and Motorhead tapes all the way up until we got close to the checkpoint. There, he turned down the stereo, tucked his chains under his shirt and took off his orange tinted glasses. He rested the hand holding his glasses on the steering wheel making sure the agent noticed the gesture. He also lowered the front and rear driver's side windows to let the agent have a good look in. He said, "Hello." Neither the border patrol agent nor his German Sheppard suspected there was anything inside the three large jars of peanut butter in the backseat other than peanut butter, so he waved us past with a nod.

The first cool thing about Austin is that everyone looks different. You see a lot of people with hats, vests, longboards, tattoos, belt buckles, fishnets, accents, piercings, motorcycles, mohawks, stilettos, buttons, band logos, and the music is everywhere. You can't walk a single street without hearing live music coming out of a dozen buildings. My brother parked in front of a place called The Thai Tree, grabbed a PB jar, and we hoofed it down a road covered in graffiti, hookah bars, and hole-in-the-wall joints to eat and drink. A gothic junkie with a cross branded onto his neck asked my brother to share some of his peanut butter. "Fuck off drag-rat!"

"What's a drag rat?" I asked Pabs.

Pointing up and down the road, Pabs said to me, "This is the drag. These trashy looking mother-fuckers living on the streets here," he said pointing at the goth punk, "are drag rats."

Farther down the drag, we reached a store called Cream Vintage. Inside they had all the cool getups everyone was wearing on the street. There was a guy and girl inside wearing the same outfit. Two blue, tightly fitted western shirts with tight jeans cut off at the knee. The guy

had long dreads and the girl a slick Coney Island do. They both spotted us going in, but Dreadlocks walked straight to my brother. They embraced and made their way towards the back of the building. “Look around. Go through this crap and find something you like,” Pabs told me from the door. By the time they get back, I’ve got a blue western shirt that looked like the one the two clerks were wearing. It was alright, but it would have looked bigger on me. “No, check this out little dude,” Dreadlocks tells me, grabbing another shirt I hadn’t seen because it was at the window. It was a cream colored western with pearl snap buttons and red stitching above the breast pockets. There were embroidered squirrels sitting up on top of large mushrooms with smaller mushrooms in their hands. We didn’t have to pay for anything, so I also got some shoes that I never ended up wearing again, but I still have that shirt.

Back in the car, I was just about to grab a slice from the box I hadn’t touched since leaving the truck stop when my brother said, “You wanna eat a hamburger better than Whataburger?” I told him I didn’t believe there was a burger better than Whataburger. He said, “It’s called Dan’s. It’s the meat. The meat is what makes it fucking better here, and you can get it however you want.” We get to Dan’s but it’s closed. “There’s Fran’s Hamburgers also. These places used to be called Fran’s and Dan’s but the owners split up and they each got one of the restaurants.” Pabs explains. Nope, Fran’s is also closed. I tell him I had seen a Whataburger on the way, “Fuck that!” he tells me. We get to a drive-in called Tom and Jerry’s. He tells me that this place delivers to your house too. I thought it was cool that a burger place could deliver, but I still didn’t think it was better than Whataburger. We ate parked in the car then we head west. We go west until we couldn’t see any more buildings. Then we were inside the hills. The real hills, the big hills. I was upset when it kept getting darker because I couldn’t see the big ones anymore. I asked where we were going. Pabs told me we were going to a Polish party on Lake Travis.

It was almost pitch on that side of the Austin hills. The city lights grew dimmer as my brother made a series of calls asking for directions. We made it to a lake and my brother tried to make another call but there was no signal. We circled the lake with our windows down until we get to the Pole Party. My brother hardly stepped out of the car when someone jumps in the back seat.

Pabs greeted our visitor, “The fuck’s up, Sammy?”

“Yo, Pabs. Glad you found us, I couldn’t get you on the phone.”

“Yeah. Hey, that there’s your shit,” my brother tells Sammy pointing at the jars of Skippy.

“Hells yes,” says Sammy opening up one of the jars. He dug his fingers inside and tried to pull something out of the peanut butter.

“Here, I had to bust open the last one too,” Pabs told him pulling out his knife. He hardly slid the blade against the plastic container, but it came apart and Sammy was able to pull out a peanut butter covered, double sacked bag of weed. Pabs helped him take the first bag off, and licking his fingers, Sam sniffed and carefully examined the buds. “Is this four ounces?”

“That’s it. That’s a QP,” Pabs answered.

Sammy picked up the other peanut butter can and asked, “What’s this?”

Pabs cut open and removed another double sack. He licked his fingers, and showed Sammy a bag full of mushrooms. Pabs didn’t want me to take any of the mushrooms, but he said I could walk around the party and drink any beer or smoke any weed that I wanted. The hazy light coming from Austin was completely blocked out by the trees. The only way to get around was by looking directly at the floor being careful for rock and hole shadows. I was constantly falling down either way. I was drinking a whiskey coke. Some of the bigger Polish girls saw me drinking and asked me how old I was. I told them I was fourteen, but that I was small for my age.

One of them asked if she could pick me up. She did, she picked me up with one arm and we toasted. We took a drink together and then she put me down. I was glad I wasn't shivering anymore. I heard and followed some voices away from the trees. There were guys and girls hanging at the water's edge getting undressed. A girl, taller than most of the guys there, said that it was a Polish tradition, to go swimming on the coldest night of the year. Sounded like it might be fun to watch, but I heard my brother's voice in the distance. I found him standing in a circle with some six other people. He'd just started explaining something to them.

“...a power-hour with beer and a shot glass and a watch. You take a shot of beer every minute for an hour and you take turns toasting to something. Toast to anything. Toast to hookers, or rainbows, or some shit. I say most of ya'll will bow out before the hour's up. I bet more than half in thirty minutes, but before you gets started, do any of ya'll want to buy some mushrooms?”

As it turns out every one of the six guys standing in a circle wanted to buy mushrooms. Most of them bought an eighth or a quarter. Some of them ate their entire batch, others split it with a friend or two.

“Everybody grab yourselves a couple of beers and a shot glass. If you can't find one, just take a big pull.” It was a little unusual watching all these huge Polish guys jumping at Pabs' commands, but it wasn't unusual watching my brother barking orders. Pabs continued to address the new and larger circle, “Alright,” Pabs raised his shot glass, “to mushrooms,” and then after giving everyone a split second of eye contact, “and to the great, goddamned adventures they bring,” and then everyone in sync, “To Mushrooms!” followed by a shot of beer.

A minute later, the guy to the right of Pabs made his toast, “To the woods. May her darkness protect us from wildlings and police.”

“To the woods!”

A minute later, “To my dick, may it find a warm cave tonight and may it never fail me in times of need,” and then a mixed response of, “To your dick,” and “To my dick.”

Quickly, by the sixth and seventh minute there were people scrambling out of the power-hour circle to get more beers and sometimes more people before the start of the next toast. Pabs was right about one thing. Contestants for the power-hour began dropping off around minute 26 when they started to burp up beer foam.

Pabs again addressed the circle, “If you’re starting to feel sick you can step out now so you don’t throw up all your mushrooms. No one will think less of you. No one is going to call you a chicken-shit bitch who can’t handle his drink like a real man.” Then to the two girls in the circle, “or woman.”

One of the girls pours herself a shot of beer and raises it to the air, “To chicken-shit bitches who can’t handle their drinks like a real man!” Everyone cheers and no one steps out of the power-hour, for five minutes. With the half hour mark past and several people off getting fresh beers, several others took that as their cue to sneak out of the circle. With time, the toasts started to lose their flavor.

“To donkey shows!”

“To Sharia law.”

“To,” something in Polish.

“To Spiderman, the foiler of evil and doer of good.”

And people began retching at minute 38. They tried walking off and being discreet, but you can hear everything in pitch darkness. The power-hour was disbanded. I skipped the occasional toast, but I had the better part of five beers in those 38 minutes. I kept drinking until I

came across something at the water's edge. It crunched when I stepped on it, but I couldn't see what it was. Slowly at first and then all at once, it turned from black to white and I started to make out its shape. It was the skeleton of a big fish. I didn't understand how it could suddenly change color like that and that's when I realized it was covered in ants and it turning white was a result of them scattering. I jumped up, screamed, and ran kicking towards my brother's car. I made such a fuss that I startled a few people. They jumped up and followed me for a few steps asking me what was the matter, what was out there?

In the car with the interior light, I saw that there were no ants on me, that there probably weren't any ants to begin with, and that the entire pizza was still there. The pizza was cold and hard but I was drunk hungry and it tasted good. I fell asleep in the car and in the morning Pabs took me to Dan's Hamburgers. They were difficult to eat. I wasn't hungover so bad, but all that beer was still sloshing around in my stomach. Either way, Dan's wasn't as great as a Whataburger either.

Pabs died there in Austin. That was when I learned how to forget things, to not record them even. Pabs' death was the reason I learned to not think about things so much. I started handling tough situations one thing at a time and wouldn't worry about the rest. I remember Pabs' money didn't last long. I slept outside a couple of nights, and I was grateful when I finally got picked up by the cops. I got sent back home fevered and hated for bearing the news of Pab's death. I had to block less and less as I got older and better at handling myself.



## CHAPTER XXI

### COSTA'S PLACE

I say, "Hey, I'm calling about the room you've got advertised... for—"

"Yeah-yeah-yeah, that's me, but, uh, where did you see the ad?" I guy named Costa who posted a roommate-wanted-ad asks.

"Online," I tell him.

He shoots back, "Yeah, that one's kinda old. It's not really a room. It's a couch that folds out into the bed. I don't know if that's cool with you."

For a moment I forget the reason I left Korea, and I consider dropping the two grand and flying back. I wouldn't mind spending another year sleeping and fighting with Yunee. I bet Mr. Kim hasn't found a replacement for me yet. I would at least have my own place.

Red.

"No, that's fine. Is it still available?"

"Yeah, but for-sure-for-sure, only about a week and then maybe a little bit longer if my roommates think you're alright."

Roommates? "Alright. Where can I meet you?"

Sounds like I'm falling back to communal living standards. Staying for a week might be alright until I find something better. At least the apartment is right in central Austin, better than I expected, a couple of miles from the university and right on the rim of downtown, the first two

places I'd look for work. Hopefully they'll let me stay longer than a week.

Outside the door advertised, there are two guys smoking. I ask for Costa, the guy who posted the ad. Both tell me Costa's inside. There're fourteen people inside the apartment. There are four guys on an X-Box, four more playing dominoes on the dining table, two heating up noodles and drinking beer in the kitchen, and the last three guys leaning on the bar are watching a fourth guy describe some acid and listening to the suggested amounts to be taken. Two of the guys leaning on the bar had money in their hands when someone else comes in behind me.

“What the fuck, Costa!”

This guy is yelling only partly because Cypress Hill is playing so loud. Mostly, it's because he's pissed.

Because I hadn't a chance to leave the doorway, I am sort of taking it in for the moment from the Pissed-Off Guy's point of view, him being next to me, and I can't tell who Costa is, because everyone turns and looks in our direction.

“Who the fuck are all these people!”

Finally someone responds, whom I'm assuming is Costa, but I don't catch everything he says over the Cypress Hill.

I do hear when the guy next to me yells, “What are you doing!”

Costa replies louder this time, “No man, it's cool. I—”

“Get everyone the fuck out!” Pissed-Off Guy yells.

Everyone gets up to leave except for one guy sitting at the dominoes table. He was in the middle of rolling some ground-up Adderall into a joint, so it took him a while to gather his things. I linger long enough to see Pissed-Off Guy shut off the stereo. Outside the crowd scatters. A few stay long enough to shake hands or pay money to Costa. Then it's just Costa and me left

in the parking lot.

“This dickhead, gets all butt-hurt just cause I have a few people over. We weren’t even touching his things,” Costa tells me. “What a bitch.”

“Yeah, what’s up with that guy?” I ask wondering if the guy, who I figure might be one of Costa’s roommates got pissed because there were so many people over or because of the apparent drug deal taking place.

“He tells me it’s cool if I crash at his place and then he gets all bitchy about me inviting some friends. What a hypocrite.”

“So this isn’t your apartment? Is he the guy renting out the couch?” I say pointing up to the second floor.

“No, that was me. I was going to tell him that you were a friend of mine. I thought he’d let me have you stay over at least a few days that way.” I’m thinking about the balls it takes to charge someone rent for an apartment you’re just crashing in when he tells me, “I don’t think he’s gonna be cool with it anymore.”

I should be pissed at this hustler but I’m not. I’m strangely sympathetic. “That sucks man.” I say pointing up to the apartment we were just in, “So, what’s your plan, man?” I don’t realize in at first, but for some reason I felt drawn to Costa.

Costa starts, “I’ll just get something to eat, maybe watch a fucking show,” he says giving the finger to the apartment, “until he chills out or something.”

*Pabs?*

Pissed-Off Guy looks out onto the parking lot from the second floor and yells, “Hey Costa, come get your shit!”

Costa sucks his teeth before walking back up the stairs. My chest gets tight and my heart

starts racing watching Costa's big-man strut even though a walk of shame might be more fitting. I know this type of guy. Nothing but watery-shit-trouble for anyone he manages to stick to. Probably unemployed, I doubt he's got a car. Costa survives on wit and charm alone, and it looks to have not gotten him very far. That's Pabs reincarnate, without a care. I wait for Costa.

"Hey man," I ask, "you know of another place to crash? If I don't find a cheap place, a ratty ass hotel is gonna eat up my money real quick." I add, "I need to have an address and phone number if I'm going to get a job."

He tells me he's thinking of taking a bus to a friend's house to see if he can crash there. I tell him I can give him a ride. He calls her and asks her if he and I can come over for a bit. He tells me after he hangs up that he'll ask her about us crashing for a while in person. I was thinking along the lines of renting a place or a room, but I don't say anything.

The friend's house turns out to belong to this huge girl. She's smoking a cigarette on the balcony waiting for us. We go inside. The apartment stinks. Forget this place. I've seen this place before. I've smelled it. It's death. I'm back at my brother's place where I had to peel him off the bed before burying him. Even the thick stench of cigarette smoke and burnt pot can't cover this dead filth scent. Big Filth Girl lives in this one bedroom with three small dogs, a Chihuahua, a Dachshund, and a terrier mix. The terrier mix is shaking, coughing up something nasty.

Big Filth tells Costa that she's going out to smoke another cigarette.

"I'll join you," Costa tells her.

"Yeah," I follow even though I don't smoke. I've got to get out of this apartment. Even if it was the actual Pabs resurrected from the dead, I wouldn't crash here with him. I'm going to have to ditch Costa here because there's no way I'm going to let myself get ringworm, or fleas, or Hepatitis A, B, and C over nostalgia.

“I’ne gettin a-victed,” Big Filth says, smoke and stench billowing out her mouth.

“When?” Costa asks.

“They’ne said be out’n ‘fore last Thursday. Tol’em to wait’n. But they’n want to wait’n no more.” I can’t possibly imagine what this girl could be doing for a living. She’s got to have some sort of brain damage from drugs or birth defects or something. The smell she’s emanating couldn’t possibly allow her to work around other people.

Costa gives Big Filth girl a hug before she turns and gives me one too. She presses her head against my chest and holds me with both arms, and now I feel sorry for her getting evicted. And just like that, Costa flicks his cigarette and walks away.

Costa follows me to my car and gets in without saying a word. I start the car. I want to ask him what that poor girl does for a living, and if she really *does* have brain damage. How long has she lived in that apartment? Does she live alone, or does someone come by and assist her with things? How does she pay for rent or find food?

Costa doesn’t let me figure out a way to ask these questions because he says, “That bitch deserves to be out on her ass. Damn, her place looks bad, though, right?”

“How do you know her?” I ask.

“How do regular people find an apartment?” Costa asks, ignoring my question. Costa is telling me something with his question, though. He means he’s never had to get his own apartment. Crashing at a friend’s house, even if you’re exceedingly pleasant, will only last so long. Surfing from couch to couch will only let you stay unemployed for as long as people can tolerate you. It will force you to dig into your friends’ fridges and pantries, and this in turn, shortens your welcome, but in answer to Costa’s question, “You just drive around and look for ‘For Rent’ signs.”

The first two are out of our price range, and we're having to go farther and farther outside of town. They're all too expensive. Costa picks up a phonebook from the front office of one of these.

"I didn't even know they still printed these," Costa tells me flipping through the book.

"What are you looking for?" I ask.

"Apartments," he says.

"I don't think—"

"Ha!" he says finding the section labeled apartments, "What's Apartment Finders? You think..."

"I," I begin.

"How do you lose a whole apartment?"

"Let me see," I say, taking the book away from him.

"Look. There's like five businesses that help you find your apartment. You think it's for kids who get lost... or foreigners?"

I tell Costa, "No, they don't do that. They help you find a new apartment," but Costa's not listening.

"How is a little kid gonna know to call an apartment finder? Kids don't know how to use a phone book."

"No, *man*. We can use it to find an apartment," I tell him.

"Oh yeah! We could go over there and tell them that we lost our apartment. They might take us to a couple places. You think they have, like, a lost and found or—"

"Dammit, Costa! They help people who need an apartment, like us, to find one," I say.

He smiles at my getting frustrated then says, "I know, dude. I'm just fucking with you."

Go to Apartment Locators on South Congress. It's the closest one."

Maybe towards the end he was messing with me, but I wonder, at what point he authentically stopped being an idiot and started trying to be funny.

The guys at the realty office peg us for college students or the unemployed. There are six of them, all sitting at a desk facing the door. After we walk in, they all look at each other drawing psychic straws to decide who's to help us.

A young guy, one of the two farthest from the door, gets up and begins with introductions. We tell him we want an apartment, affordable, and in what part of town we'd like it. He grabs a file from his desk and walks us outside. There, he asks if we'd like to take our car or ride in his, a newer looking Dodge Nitro.

Costa answers with, "Hells yeah, let's take your Nitro."

I think Costa's demeanor prompts the realtor to come back with, "You guys know I can only show you a couple of places. It's almost four, and I'll have to get back here before five to finish up the day."

In his Dodge, I take the front seat and tell him again that I'd like something on the edge of downtown. He tells us he's got something in mind.

He takes us to a gated apartment complex sitting across from Zilker Park. The buildings, about 20 of them, are all concrete, but done up in a modern cubic design. They're all three stories and look too new. I look at the cars parked in front of the office. Nothing looks more than five years old. There's a Mercedes SUV, an H2 and H3, an Escalade Hybrid, and a bunch of douchey looking two-seaters. I don't think—

"Hey, I've been here before," Costa says, "These places are two thousand bucks a month."

“Well, not necessarily,” counters the realtor trying to sound enthused, “you can get a pretty decent sized one-bedroom for around sixteen hundred.” He adds, “You guys work out, right? Well, there’s a gym inside, so you’ll be saving that much more on gym memberships.”

We’ve now got time to see only one other property, and it seems like this guy’s doing his best to blow us off. I’ve got to stress the affordability, because if we can’t get something in this next go, I’m likely to be staying in some death-hole hotel.

“Whatever, man. Let’s hot-box your Nitro,” Costa tells us leaning in between the front seats holding a joint.

I look at the clock and it’s 4:21. Now, I can’t tell if he’s purposefully being a dumbass or if he’s actually unaware.

“Hey, don’t mind if I do,” says the realtor.

When we finish the joint, Costa asks Serg, short for Sergio, “Hey man, you gonna have to go back to work, or what?”

“Oh yeah,” says Serg pulling out his phone, “I forgot.” He puts a finger to his lips then says into the phone, “Hey, I’m over here at Regent Estates. No, nope. They said they want something bigger with better neighbors. Yeah, I know, right? I’m gonna try to head over to Obsidian before the offices close... Yeah, I know... Okay, I’ll just see you tomorrow then. Okay... Bye.”

Costa’s ready with a freshly rolled joint, “Badass. Here, man. You can green this.”

After lighting the next joint, Serg tells us about a place that Apartment Locators doesn’t have listed, “I don’t get a commission off of this, but it’s real cheap, and it’s alright.”

At the new place, Serg parks on a strip of spaces that seems dangerously close to the frontage road. I like this complex better. The buildings look older. There are a few cars looking



decrepit, sitting on flats, covered in bird milk and bond-o. Some of the apartment windows are covered in tin-foil to block out the heat. There are five to six dogs yapping behind closed doors and off balconies.

All of the buildings from this lot are different types and look as if they were made at different times. There are duplexes, quadriplexes, side-by-side townhouses, and a few partitioned houses, all done up in yellow wood and brick. The owner leasing these places lives in one of the partitioned houses. We simply knocked on his door, and he answered.

I don't know if Serg knew this guy or not, but he did us the favor of introducing us and asking if there was a vacancy. The owner looks at us like we'd interrupted something. I'm getting nervous. It seems like no one here seems too enthused about finding a place. I don't know how to express to everyone how important it is to secure housing. Twice before have I had to live in a motel. I never went from a motel to a better place. Dad's house pops into my mind, but you only go to dad's house to die, and sleeping outside is something I don't want to waste any time doing again. The owner grunts and shows us two vacancies. A townhouse, and one of the partitioned houses. They are both the same price.

From the house, we'd get two bedrooms, a den, kitchen, and bathroom. The garage and RV in the back are rented to someone else. The townhouse, numbered 1509A, is much older and smaller, but still comes with two bedrooms. Even though the house is much bigger, it doesn't have appliances or ceiling fans. The owner tells us he can put in some fans if we leave a larger deposit.

I can already see Costa doesn't like it, and I know exactly what he's thinking. He knows he doesn't want to move into a place where he has to worry about getting a fridge, but now the townhouse looks that much smaller for the same price. Might as well not get either of them.

In truth, the price is great for either of these places. I'd take it on my own, so I ask the owner 'how much' even though I'd already asked Serg about it in the car.

"It's \$55 for the application fee and background check, \$400 for deposit, and \$680 a month for rent."

I ask, "If we give you \$3600 up front, would you let us have the place at \$600 a month?"

He seems intrigued, but he answers, "Not at \$600."

"How much then?"

"If you pay all your first six months up front?"

"Yeah."

"\$660."

I nod in agreement and extend a hand when I say, "3860 bucks."

He shakes my hands and smiles, but I don't tell him that \$3860 divided by six is about \$645 a month. Also, when I pay him cash in his office, I don't remind him about the deposit.

I've been in Austin for one day, and I've already used half of all my money, but I feel great. I don't have to worry about where I'm going to sleep for at least six months.

Serg seems excited on the drive back to my car, but Costa doesn't say much.

Costa can't put up his half of three month's rent, but he gives me \$800 and says he'll get the rest to me later. I believe he'll try to pay me, but even if he doesn't, it's still cheaper than trying to get a one bedroom on my own. I've also enjoyed his company so far. And more importantly, I feel comforted knowing I've secured housing at least for the next six months. Now, I just have to look for work again. I got used to having money and living a comfortable life.

## CHAPTER XXII

### INTERVIEWS AND TESTS

To lead into a lesson on articles, I would tell the kids in Korea that the most commonly spoken word in English is *the* and that they need to learn how to use it correctly. I never told the kids that the most commonly spoken word while smoking marijuana is *ear*.

Costa and I are smoking in front of the T.V. watching *May*, a horror flick, when my cell phone rings. It's an unknown number, so I pass the joint to Costa, and with a lungful of smoke, I answer the phone with, "'ello?" and hold my breath.

"Hello, is this Mr. Serrano?" asks the woman on the line.

Pulling the mouthpiece away from my coughing gasping breaths, I answer with, "Yes, this is Sid."

"Hi Sid, this is Mrs. Davis from Austin Rotary House. How are you this morning?"

Austin Rotary House is a Mental Health and Mental Retardation center for kids who have been abused or abandoned. Most of the jobs I've applied for were on the Drag and didn't require a degree. Mostly part-time work, it's minimum wage stuff that didn't look too stimulating, but I stumbled onto the Rotary House by accident when Costa and I were driving around looking for a secluded spot to smoke. It's a couple miles from our apartment, on the top of one of the bigger hills. We followed the winding road up the hill passing what looked like old school house buildings, but no one was around. At the top of the hill, we found another building with a huge "Now Hiring" sign. Rotary offered immediate full-time and part-time positions with benefits for

people with a degree, and a decent salary which, if I got, would let me blow some cash on a regular basis.

“Just dandy, thanks for asking.” *Dandy?* Why would I say dandy?

“Great to hear that Mr. Serrano,” she says, “The reason for this call is to inform you that we’ve processed your application, and we’d like to schedule an interview sometime soon.”

“That’s just,” I almost say dandy again, “great.”

“Great. Would you be able to make it in this Tuesday or Wednesday between 11:00 A.M. and 1:00 P.M.?”

“Tuesday, 11:00 A.M. sounds good,” I say.

“Alright, Tuesday 11:00 A.M. and please bring a copy of your resume and an updated transcript.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, but a transcript of what, exactly?” I ask her.

“An updated school transcript.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

“Okay, well then we’ll be seeing you Mr. Serrano on Tuesday at 11:00 A.M. Did you have any questions for me?”

“No ma’am. I’ll see you on Tuesday.”

I hang up and Costa, with his lungs and mouth full of smoke, offers me the joint, “‘Ear.”

Austin Rotary House is only four blocks west and five blocks north. That’d be nothing if I had a car, but I don’t. Pab’s car was a badass when he had it. I didn’t know the name for it when I was younger. Pab called it The Bird, but it was a ‘79 Trans Am. He called it The Bird because of the hood. But it quickly went to hell after my other brother got a hold of it. It didn’t help that I left it parked the whole time I was in Korea. It only took a few days of driving to get

everything gummed up. Now the hoses are cracking and leaking all over the engine, so it smokes all the time. The oil pan is leaking, the brakes are grinding, and the passenger door doesn't open from the inside anymore. After getting the apartment with Costa, I thought the only thing left was to get a job, but I need to maintain that car if the Rotary gig comes through. I'm going to have to keep looking farther and farther away from my place. Costa says I can use his bicycle if I prefer that over walking. It doesn't sound like a bad idea. By bike, I could get there in twenty minutes.

By 10:30 on the day of my interview, the temperature is over 90 with full humidity. Last night, I ironed my grey slacks, navy shirt, and grey and gold tie. Had I considered having to go biking in full sun this morning, I would have gone with white on khaki. Either way, I get across the ten blocks of hilly road to the Rotary gates in sixteen minutes without hardly breaking a sweat, but the steep incline to the top of the hill took a little bit out of me. Racking my bike in front of the administration building, I control my breathing. I don't want to be seen panting out in the parking lot, and I step inside ten minutes early for my interview. I thought I felt alright walking in, but when the air-conditioning hits me I start seeing stars. I spot the restroom to my right and head straight in.

I remember starting a thought about washing my face, but I end up sprawled out on the floor of the men's room. I must have passed out just as the door closed behind me. I am not sure how long I was out, but when I come to, a jolt of adrenaline gets me up off the floor. I check out the floor, and examine the back of my outfit. Nothing seems out of place, but I'm sure my face looks nervous when I check in with the girl at the front desk.

"No, you're fine Mr. Serrano. It will be a few more minutes before Mrs. Bourg sees you."

"Mrs. Bourg?" I ask making sure I remember the pronunciation.

“Yes, she’s head of HR. She’ll ask you a few routine questions and then if everything works out, James Krasinski will tell you about the facility.”

“So if I don’t get to talk to James, then that’s a pretty good sign that the interview isn’t going so well.”

She smiles and says, “Don’t worry Mr. Serrano, I’m sure you’ll do fine,” but I don’t feel that reassured.

As it turns out, my worries were misplaced. I had nothing to worry about in the interview process. My paperwork was in order, and the questions were standard. What motivates you to want to work at Austin Rotary House? What makes you a superior candidate over the other people applying? Tell me of a problem you’ve had in your life and what you did to overcome this problem.

There was one question that threw me a little bit. It started with, “As you know, we treat young adults here, some with severe trauma and particularly violent histories,” I did not know this, but that’s not the part that threw me. “When confronted with a violent individual who means to do you harm, what is the first thing you would try to do?”

I don’t answer right away. There two incidents from my life that stand out where people meant to do me harm. The first was in a friend’s basement. I’d come to the basement party with Chuy, and he started a fight with a girl. When I saw the girl smash a bottle and go at poor, drunken Chuy, I had to push her away. She landed badly and struck her head on a table. It was the Bottle Girl’s husband that wanted to do me harm. Chuy pulls a knife at that point and everyone is relieved when I pull Chuy and myself out of that basement. The second is Yune, and I bailed out on that situation too. I’m not my brother Pabs. I’m not going to find the nearest shank or blunt object and try to go toe to toe, but it doesn’t sound like I can simply walk away

from the situations that happen here. It sounds like Austin Rotary House is paying people to deal with these confrontations head on.

I say, "I would first try to find out what that person wants."

"Like I said Mr. Serrano, this person wants to hurt you," Mrs. Bourg says.

"I think if I'm doing my job right here at Austin Rotary House, that anger is going to be a symptom of something other than myself," I have no idea how to read Mrs. Bourg's inquisitive look. I start to feel something on the back of my head. Like something is crawling on my scalp. I feel the back of my head and my hand comes back with fingertips stained with blood, "So I guess what I am trying to say is I would try to talk to the individual and find out what is really bothering them, and if after that, they still have their heart set on hurting me," not sure if she's noticed, I keep my bloody hand balled up though I continue to feel the blood dripping down my scalp. I'm sure I still haven't answered her question and I don't think I will when I say, "I'll do whatever you've trained me to do." She gives one of those pleasantly surprised smiles accompanied with a slow nod.

"Very good, Mr. Serrano. It is refreshing to hear a candidate admit that they don't always know how to respond in these types of situations, but rest assured, it is our job to teach you how to appropriately deal with these types of situations. And you are right about the fact that most often it is misplaced anger that drives our children to want to hurt others."

I shake my head and offer a sympathetic smile, but inside all I'm thinking is that I've got this. Then I'm taken to James Krasinski, program director for Austin Rotary House. He gives me a tour of the grounds and tells me a little about how the facility is run. Of the therapists' work, the nurses, the unit directors, CSOs, or Children's Safety Officers, and of the work I will be doing as a Mental Health Technician. Legally, you will function as these kids legal guardians.

For a second I think whether some terrible disaster might come and take all of the residents before their 25<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Probably not, this curse seems to be in our blood, but I'd never find out either way. James K. continues showing me the swimming pool, a rock climbing wall and ropes course, rec-room, games room, and a building he says is the cafeteria. He won't show me the inside because there are residents inside now. I am thinking whether it was reasonable for James K. to give every applicant this much time and attention before they've even been hired when we reach the head nurse's station at the bottom of the hill. There, James tells me, "Now, Sid. We begin training for the new Mental Health Techs this Monday," opening the door to the nurse's station, "but before you begin you will need to take a TB test."

"Okay," I tell him.

"Because we always have a nurse on staff, we offer free TB tests to our applicants, but if you have a preferred clinic..." he trails off waiting for me to answer.

"No, that's fine. I can take it here." It sounds like I've got the job.

Not quite. It is fortunate that James K. is looking down at a piece of paper he is scribbling on, because he does not see the horror on my face when he tells me, "You will also have to take a drug test."

I almost want to shake his hand and tell him sorry for wasting his time, but I figure I might as well ride this thing through. They might only be checking for hard drugs, not things like weed, mushrooms, and salvia. James hands me the paper he was writing on. It is a map and a drug screening request form. James tells me, "You have three days to schedule an appointment at this address," he says pointing at the map. "Fill out the form and the lab will send us the results."

Three days did give me a fighting chance, but I must have had the remnants of dread on my face because James puts his hand on my shoulder and adds, "Don't worry, they'll send us the



bill, too.” I smile at both our idiocies.

Back at the apartment, I ask Costa if he knows how long weed and mushrooms stay in your system.

He answers, “If you smoke one joint, it takes about a week. If you smoke like us, then it’s about a month, unless your fat, then it takes two, but you’re not fat. Mushrooms are out of your system right away, and most labs won’t test for psilocybin. That’s the active ingredient in—”

“Yeah, I know what psilocybin is. I have to take a drug test.”

“Oof, you’re screwed. You taking it today?” he asks crushing me.

“No, I have three days.”

“Oh, then you’re okay. The three day test is just to filter out stupid people or junkies too fucked up to lay off their shit for a while,” he says. His confidence is reassuring, but I have my doubts.

I ask, “So how do I get the weed out of my system.”

He answers with, “You know you have a blood stain on the back of your collar?”

The lady at the health food store tells Costa and me that the full system cleanse will eliminate all of the impurities in our blood and organs in as little as two weeks. All we have to do is drink the tea, take the supplements, avoid caffeine and other toxins, and drink loads of water. There is an optional enema, but I should schedule this with them at the end of the cleanse.

“Sid is definitely interested in the enema, but he was looking for a cleanse that works a little faster. You use to have something called 300X. It was guaranteed to be 300% effective and should eliminate...” Costa struggles finding the right word but chooses, “narcotics,” the worst choice, “from his system.”

“You’re talking about a masking agent. We don’t sell the masking drinks anymore. They

don't do anything healthy for you. They just cover up the drugs in your—”

“Damn, you don't sell them anymore? But they work.” Costa argues.

The health lady gets defensive, “No, people were coming in saying that they didn't work. That they lost their jobs or kids or—”

“I've used them. They do work. They're 300% guaranteed to work or triple your money back!” Now Costa's getting defensive, “This is bullshit. I know where we can go.”

The health food lady made me nervous about the drink. She made it seem like even if I could find the masking drink, it'd be a waste of time, but Costa wasn't deterred. He told me of a time when he passed out at work. He said he was just a little sick, but because it happened at work where he handles food, he was told to go get cleared by a doctor and take a drug test, “So the 300X works unless my boss just didn't give a fuck that my piss was full of all sorts of dirties.” I wish he'd left that qualifier out. Costa takes me to a head shop on the drag called Pipes Plus, and I ask him if he couldn't find another head shop not so close to the place where I plan to work. He says that there is another head shop two doors down.

Inside Pipes Plus, they've got several different types of masking drinks. The cashier explains why the health food lady would say that these drinks don't work. There are instructions you have to follow to make sure it works.

“You taking the test today?” Pipes Guy asks me.

“No, I've got three days.”

“A'ight, then you're cool. The three day test is just to catch dumbasses that can't handle their shit.” Pipes tells me, and I feel a lot better.

“You see,” Costa tells me.

Then I ask, “So what do I do? What are the instructions?”

Pipes turns over the bottle and shows me the instructions but explains them all the same, “First, you can’t smoke nothing for 48 hours. You can do that, right?”

“Yeah, no problem,” I say urging him on.

“A’ight. Then you gots to drink this all. It taste a’ight, but it is a little hard to take it in,” he tells me and Costa nods in agreement, “it’s got a little bit of a mediciny taste, but it’s not bad.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding.

Pipes continues, “Then you’ve got to fill this bottle up with water three times and drink all that water. That’s tough too, but just take your time, but not all day, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I got you.”

“Alright now here’s the last part. This is where some people fuck up. You’re gonna have to take three pisses before you take the test. You’ve gots to get all that tainted piss out your system before it’s filled with this stuff. Don’t worry about being able to piss three times. This’ll make you go.”

“Okay, that sounds easy enough. Is that all?” I ask.

“Yeah, but this’s got a window of opportunity. Doesn’t start working until two hours after you take it,” he says pointing at the bottle’s label, “Most effective at four hours, and it starts losing its effect in twelve, you hear me?”

“Yeah, I think I got it. Don’t smoke for 48 hours, drink this and then three bottles of water, piss three times and then take the test as close to four hours after, right?” I ask him, but I know I’ve got this down. I couldn’t have been more attentive.

“You got it. That’ll be \$32.39.”

Costa was considerate enough to not smoke inside the apartment for two days. I

scheduled the appointment at Point Perfect Lab for 2:00 P.M. I drink my drink plus the water at 9:30 in the morning, and I go to my appointment a half hour early, but not before I've had my three pisses. I check in, turn in the drug screening request form, and I'm told to wait. It looks like a doctor's office. The doors leading from the waiting area are labeled A through G, except for the bathroom. I have to take a piss again, but I'm not sure it won't deplete the effectiveness taking more than the three recommended pisses. Shouldn't do any harm. The first piss I took after taking the drink came out almost crystal, but it has progressively gotten more yellow. But it's not a piss yellow, it's a bright, almost fluorescent yellow. I'm thinking that there's no way a lab tech is going to buy that this is real human piss.

The lab tech doesn't tell me I'm busted or laugh at me when I hand him my sample even though it's practically glowing. He simply checks and records the temperature indicated on the cup's color gauge.

"Your results will be sent," the girl at the front window tells me looking at the request form, "to Austin Rotary House within three business days. If your tests are found to be inconclusive, we will call the contact number you've left us and Austin Rotary House to schedule another appointment."

"Why would the test be inconclusive?" I can't help but ask.

"For a variety of reasons. If the sample has been contaminated or if it proves to be a false sample." I don't ask what she means by a false sample.

I'll have to postpone my celebratory smoke with Costa for another three days. No, four, which is the Monday that training starts. I figured if they were going to say anything about my testing dirty, they'd do it before then.

I was wrong. What management does is they wait for you to come in on Monday finish a

whole morning's worth of training. Then they let you go to lunch. You might even go to lunch with some of the other trainees where you'll talk about how worried you were you might have tested dirty. Then when you come back from lunch, James K. will interrupt the afternoon training and calls you out by name. Everyone in the room knows it's about the drug test because he's got a handful of papers in his hand with the Point Perfect Labs letterhead on the top of the page. It is embarrassing for everyone in the room except for James K., he seems to be enjoying the show.

"Arodd Visacam, can you come with me?" James says reading the name off the lab report, then he looks around the room as if he didn't know exactly who Arody was, and poor Arody, embarrassed and frightened about what this could mean doesn't even correct the atrocious mis-pronouncement of his name. Arody starts to get up when James K. adds, "No, Arodd. Go ahead and gather your things." James K. struggles to maintain his straight face. While Arody gathers his things, James K. walks over and stands next to me.

"How are you doing, Sid?" he asks not looking at me but setting his hand on my shoulder.

"Fine, thanks James," I say looking up at him, but James keeps his eyes on Arody. After Arody's put on his backpack and gathered up his training materials, James motions for him to go ahead and walk out the door.

"Good, good," adds James. He gives me a few pats on the shoulder then walks out of the room grazing my neck a little with his fingers.

For the rest of the day's training, I thought James K. was messing with me a little when he singled me out. I thought he had my results in that stack of paper, too, but I was never called out. When training was finished, I am asked by my trainer to stay after for a moment, then after everyone cleared the room he says, "You have a couple of extra forms you need to fill out, and I

need to talk to you about a couple of different options you have for vision and dental insurance,” he tells me.

“Why isn’t anyone else doing this paperwork?” I ask still suspecting some sort of ambush.

“You’re the only one from the training that is going to start full-time,” he says and then to clarify because I still don’t get him, “Part-timers don’t get benefits.”

“Oh,” is all I can manage.

“Your health insurance is fully covered at no charge to you unless you want to lower your deductible to—”

“Why am I the only one?” I ask.

“\$500,” he finishes saying then adds, “Because you were the only applicant with a degree, and you had enough graduate hours to get your pay bumped up to \$13.50.”

I don’t know what he means by graduate hours, but I know that I’m making more than \$100 a day. I feel I have to make more of an effort to look the part of a college graduate. I end up keeping the health insurance as it is, but I have \$80 deducted from my pay for full dental and vision. I don’t have cavities and I don’t want to get new glasses, but I’ve never had my teeth checked out before. I check my phone before getting back on Costa’s bike. I have a voicemail, which I suspect is from Point Perfect or from James K. telling me the results of my drug test, but it’s not. It’s from the garage telling me my car is ready.

When I finally get back home, I tell Costa I might want to hold off my celebrating for a bit. I tell him about Arody and my insurance plan. I don’t know if he’s getting it. He nods the whole time, but he’s carefully rolling a joint. It’s as long as my hand, coned, and it has a filter. Costa hands me the joint.

He says, "Congratulations on your gig, man. That's badass. You get greens." He grabs his glass and taps the end of the joint before lighting it, "To Sid," he says. I think about my brothers and what they've given me. I think about Sid, Arody, random drug tests, what to read, and my birthday. I take a deep drag off the joint. I turn 24 this month.

## CHAPTER XXIII

KIIA, BRITTANY, ALANE, ABBY, LAMECA, CHRISTINA, HANNA, RUTH, SARA, TONI

I feel excited but a little scared. I plan out my dialogues and the path I take just to get clocked in and into my unit. I concentrate on my movements, so as to remember what it's supposed to be like when my movements become difficult. I will need to do my best to avoid that swaying swagger while standing.

I don't look at my watch. I don't worry about the time. I smile if someone addresses me and answer in short declarative sentences if they ask me a question. Don't worry about my appearance; I know I'll feel much higher than I'll look.

I ate two firecrackers, marijuana fried in butter and mixed with peanut butter in between two crackers, at 9:45.

I swipe my ID in the nurse's station to clock in at 10 P.M. I am gathering the required paperwork to be filled out for tonight when Mr. Matt walks out of his unit, the Springhill Girls. "You gonna need three locator forms and three HRSA's."

"There's three boys on HRSA?" I ask. Being a High Risk Self-Abuser comes seldom on the boys unit.

"Nope," he says smiling, "they be on the girl's unit, and that's where you be."

"What?"

"Them girls be plotting some nasty business, so they decided to move me," he says.

"What are you talking about, Mr. Matt? What they been plotting. Who?"



“It seems, that a couple girls, over there,” he says with a flick of his head, “been planning on raping me.”

“What the fuck?”

“You fucking right, what the fuck.” he says nodding. “They even wrote out a plan and everything.”

“Who?” I ask again.

“No, I don’t know who wrote it. I just know it was Kiia who took it and turned it in.”

“Is there an incident report for it, or the journal? Is that anywhere?”

“No Mr. Z, that’d be up in Chippada’s office. Doc wrote up the incident and he recommend they should move me.”

“Ah snap, I bet that journal’d make for a pretty good read,” I say. “You don’t think it was Kiia who planned to rape you?”

“No, she just the one who turn it in, probably.”

“Damn...” I say pondering this for a second, “Well it sucks they had to move you, Mr. Matt.”

“No it don’t. Sucks for you, maybe. Not for me. Them bitches crazy. And you soon be finding that out. Ha, those bitches,” he says pointing at the girl’s unit door, “gonna be planning on raping your ass, next. You be sure of that.”

“Don’t you worry about me Mr. Matt. I be too quick for them.” I say picking up Matt’s speech pattern, “There ain’t gonna be no raping while I’m around.”

“Let’s just hope,” he says.

“Yes, let’s hope. Don’t want any of them girls catching anything, now do we?” I say and Mr. Matt lets out a laugh and offers his hand for a parting slap-shake.

“That preggy bug be the worst they can get,” he says in a tone one octave lower but still smiling. Walking away, he points his radio to me, “You be sure to radio me if you hear CSO. Ask if we got any laundry soap on the boy’s unit. I expect I’ll be catching a little shut eye over on this side.”

He disappears into the boys unit.

Firecrackers were a stupid idea.

The girl’s unit is an exact inversion of the boy’s. It’s the same mellow yellow paint, same low ceiling, and same vinyl floor. The only differences are the motivational posters plexi-glassed to the wall and the girls sleeping out in the hall, girls who are on HRSA.

I sit in the joint of an L-shaped hallway. To my left, a narrow hall to the door of the Springhill common area and nurse’s station. Ahead, a long hall with four bedroom doors on the left, three on the right, plus one bathroom door. Bathroom’s the same. It has a large communal shower, even though the residents are only allowed to take showers one at a time. Behind me is the laundry room. The laundry room is like on the boy’s unit, except for one difference. The original suspension ceiling tiles were replaced with stucco and plywood.

A staffer, some years back, was climbing up through the ceiling tiles of the laundry room. Then, climbing over to the bathroom area, he would pull up the sprinkler heads and peer down into the girls while they showered or used the rest room. On the last of these occasions, he accidentally broke the red liquid filled sensor and set off the sprinkler head. The spray of water blew out the transformers for the fluorescent lights and gave him a start. Unable to make his way back towards the laundry through darkness, he crashed through the ceiling. He was said to have hooked the fleshy part of his thigh on one of the suspension joints, and there he hung and nearly bled to death, until one of the girls called for help.

They found several pieces of the girls' clothing up in the ceiling. He spent fourteen months incarcerated. A relative of this ex-staff told Matt that he is still with his wife. That she stuck by him through everything, even when he came out of prison testing positive for HIV. No doubt, she loved him.

One of the washers is going when I start with the other loads. One of the girls comes in behind me and says, "That's mine, don't touch it," apparently referring to the clothes in the washer.

This girl can't be more than eighty pounds. Her face looks aged though, and she has got heavy bags under her eyes.

"I'm Mr. Serrano," I say.

"Where's Mr. Matt?"

"He got moved over to the boys unit after you all got caught planning to rape him."

"Whatever, don't touch my laundry," says this girl.

Turning away, I whisper, "What the hell?"

"What you say?" she asks.

"I said to go to hell," I say, but shouldn't have.

Alane is momentarily taken aback. I use that moment to gather up the sheets and walk out of the laundry room. That was a stupid thing to say. Stupid-fucking-firecrackers-pieces-o'shit.

I start to get angry with myself. I fold the sheets in the hall. Another girl comes out of her room barefoot, wearing a huge shirt that comes down almost to her knees.

"Where's Mr. Matt?"

"He got moved to the boy's unit," I say blinking hard trying to get some moisture into my drying eyes.

“Oh. What’s your name?”

“Mr. Serrano.”

“They call you Mr. Z?” she asks.

“They call me that. What do I call you?”

“I’m Abby,” she smiles and walks into the bathroom.

Abby is pretty and looks Asian, but she’s not. She has alcohol fetal syndrome.

I try to force a yawn, again, to try to get some tears to my eyes. I walk to the full length mirror next to the bathroom door to make sure my eyes aren’t red. They’re not, they’re fine. I’m pulling on my cheeks when Abby comes out of the bathroom.

“Did you wash your hands?” I ask.

“No. I didn’t touch my vagina.”

“Did you flush the toilet?”

“Yes,” she says looking saddened like I was chastising her.

I reply more tenderly, “Well, other girls touched their vaginas and then flushed the toilet, right?”

“I guess.”

“And the door handle, too, right? So you should wash your hands every time you use the restroom. Just to be safe.” I say.

“M’kay.” She goes back into the bathroom, but quickly sticks her head back out and asks, “How do I wash my hands after I touch the door?”

“Use a paper towel to open the door.”

“We don’t have paper towels. We have a hot air blower,” she says.

“Use toilet paper.”

“Okay,” she says with a large smile.

I hear her wash her hands. Then, I hear her wash her hands, again.

“I forgot to get the toilet paper first, so I had to wash my hands again,” she says grinning, offering me her interlocked hands to inspect.

“Good job, Abby.”

Walking back to her room, “Are you going to be our new overnight staff?”

“Maybe, I’m not sure.”

“I hope you are.”

That makes me smile and brings much needed moisture to my eyes.

I finish folding the sheets and blankets and go back into the laundry room. The other girl is still there.

“You’re Brittany, right?” I say not knowing who she is but knowing she is not Brittany.

Brittany is the big girl on the unit. She was originally sent to another treatment facility because she wasn’t coping in school. Sounds innocent enough. After being cast there, she began having real issues including violent outbursts, self-harm, major depression, and was diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder, which is the same as a sociopath, except a doctor’s criteria for a sociopath diagnosis requires an age of 18 or older. The chief symptom for oppositional defiant disorder are failure to conform to society and follow norms and laws. The next two are deceitfulness and irrational impulsivity. I don’t know yet if Brittany has the last two.

In the mornings, I’d hear Matt shouting stuff like, ‘You best not be going back into your room, Brittany.’ or ‘Brittany, you should let Lameca take a shower first.’ Brittany would surely then stomp back into her room and stay there, or quickly gather her things and get to taking her shower. Matt says these things because he wants Brittany in her room or he wants her to take a

shower. It's just easier to get her to do them this way, because Brittany has that tendency to do the opposite of what she is told to do.

Her psychologist doesn't like staff doing this, because they feel staff is only reinforcing her defiant tendencies. She is progressively becoming more defiant, more aggressive. She is already on a heavy regimen of anti-psychotics and a whole long list of other meds, mostly to counter the side-effects of said anti-psychotics.

"What the fu..." she stops herself from cursing and I think I now know who this is.

"You're Geegee."

"Don't call me Geegee. My name is Alane," she says and it clicks.

"You were named after G.G. Allin."

"Ugh," she says rolling her eyes.

Peralez startles me when he says, "Alane, residents should be in bed at this hour, and you're still on white level." She was already leaving when Peralez started that sentence.

Like a cop driving past, Peralez makes me do a quick one-two of my person. But instead of checking my speed, making sure my lights are on, and maybe smelling my breath and fingertips, I look at my clothes, and check my pockets for my unit key and my—

Peralez hands me my walkie-talkie, "You shouldn't leave this in the hall."

"Thanks," I say.

"Staff should always have their radios on them at all the time, Mr. Serrano."

"Yes sir, Mr. Peralez," I say resisting the urge to salute.

"You don't want a resident getting a hold of your radio," he adds.

"I got it, radio on me at all times," I say.

But he continues, "A resident gets a hold of that radio, and—"

Oh no! Mr. Matt.

“Mr. Matt, do you have laundry soap?” I ask into my radio, “I repeat, do you have laundry soap?” I hear my voice broadcast over Peralez’ radio, panicked and tense. There is no reply. “Mr. Matt, please come in. Do... You... Have... Laundry Soap?”

Mr. Peralez is looking at me like I’ve just whipped my prick out. I return his questioning look.

“You got laundry soap right behind you, Mr. Serrano,” he says pointing with the antenna of his radio.

I suck my teeth and try to swallow. My mouth is getting dry. I wipe the corners of my mouth and remove the white foam that has been accumulating through this awkward conversation. I’ve often wondered how to tell someone that they have that white stuff on their mouth. I know people appreciate it when you tell them they’ve got something on their teeth or in their hair, but that dry spit foam is has another type of—

“Mr. Serrano?” asks nurse Brakstock.

*When did nurse Brakstock get here?*

“Yes, Brakstock?”

“Mr. Matt is charging his walkie in the nurse’s station. I asked him if he was in need of laundry soap. He said he was well-stocked, and thank you.”

“Good, I just wanted to make sure. I was on the boy’s unit yesterday, and I thought we were running low,” I say to Peralez.

I think he is about to respond when the washer’s timer goes off, and Alane immediately walks into the laundry room like she’s been waiting outside the door.

“Alane, you are supposed to be in your bedroom, asleep,” says Peralez, again pointing

with his walkie. Alane walks past us in the now uncomfortably crowded laundry room and swats Peralez's antenna out of her face.

"Mrs. Alane," Brakstock adds, "Mr. Serrano here can put your clothes in the dryer."

"Yeah, don't worry about it, I got it," I feel compelled to say.

"No, how do I know he's not going to jack-off all over my underwear, like Mr. Paul?"

Alane answers while opening up the washer.

"Mrs. Alane!" Brakstock exclaims.

I start, "Is Mr. Paul the guy who was climbing up—"

"You can't talk like that, Alane," Mr. Peralez cuts in, "You be sure to write out an incident report about that, Mr. Serrano, and make sure she doesn't get a check for this hour or the last one either."

"What, why? I can say jacking-off," Alane says, "and how do you know he isn't going to jack-off with my clothes?"

"I'm not going to jack-off in her underwear, Peralez," I say defensively.

"If you keep screaming Mrs. Alane—"

"I'm not screaming!" Alane screams.

"You're going to spend the night in the CSO seclusion room, you understand me?" says Peralez, grabbing Alane's arm.

Alane pulls her arm out of Peralez's grip with a violent tug, "Ugh! Fine, I'll go to bed." Alane scowls, not looking at anyone as she walks out of the laundry room. Nurse Brakstock, arms crossed, lips pursed, shakes her head at me as she follows Alane out. Peralez looks at me and points his radio at my face.

"You be sure to right that up in a incident report," he says and walks out of the laundry



room.

I wipe more dry spit from the corners of my mouth and try to swallow before making my way into the girls' unit corridor.

Peralez and Brakstock leave just in time, right before I really start to fade. I'm staring at the empty pages of paperwork I've got sitting on my lap for endless minutes it seems.

I do, however, notice, but choose to ignore, when Alane walks back into the laundry room.

"Hey Serrano, you got two girls you gotta wake before they wet themselves." Matt's crackling voice tells me on my walkie.

"Yeah, who is it? It's Brittany and..." I begin.

Peralez cuts in, "Don't use resident names over the radio."

"Yup-yup, sorry about that, Peralez." I say getting up and walking to the boy's unit.

I unlock the door to the common area in front of the nurses' station that connects this unit to the boy's, but Matt is already making his way over.

He says, "It's Brittany and Lameca. Brittany is the girl—"

"Yeah, I know who Brittany is," I say, "but which is Lameca's bedroom?"

"Hers is the bedroom farthest on the right. She's the little black girl." Matt tells me.

The Springhill girl's unit currently houses ten girls. There is only one black girl in Springhill girls, and no black boys in Springhill boys. This unit and the Springhill boys are the two highest functioning groups here at the Austin Rotary house. There are five other units on the hill. Summer Dreams boys and girls are the two biggest units. In these units reside those who received deferred adjudication, for violent crimes. The race ratio for these units is typically an inversion of the Springhill girls, about twenty black residents with two or three whites, or maybe

a Hispanic. Gang violence, aggravated assault, attempted and first degree murder are some of the charges the girls and boys face here. They will either successfully complete their therapeutic stay here or face formal conviction and serve their original sentence.

Tiff, not short for Tiffany, just Tiff, murdered her own mother. Tiff, has an IQ below 70. Her mother was high on something or a bunch of somethings when she started beating on Tiff's younger brother. Tiff got a knife from the kitchen and stabbed her seven times in the neck and back. She told me this the only time I worked on Summer Dreams. I felt special then, until I found out she tells everyone she meets this story. It's true, nonetheless. Most residents age out at eighteen, but because of her IQ, Tiff will be here until she is twenty-one.

There are two private pay units on the grounds. These house the residents who seek treatment for issues not covered by insurance. I'll work these units from time to time, and other than being carpeted and having security cameras, the New Glory boys' and girls' units are no different from the rest. That, and the residents in these units pay \$200 a day for a minimum of three months to stay here.

One of the boys in New Glory, Bilgraham, told the other residents that he was in there because he stole his father's credit card and car and drove to Las Vegas and, together with a prostitute, racked up a \$29,000 bill.

It's a good story when Bilgraham tells it, complete with anal sex, drag races down the strip, and oodles of champagne. Unfortunately, it's not true. He did take his father's car and American Express, but he went to Indianapolis with a guy friend and spent \$4000 before the card was reported stolen. The two were picked up trying to check into a hotel.

Bilgraham has already been here for six months. In that time, he's learned to curse like a proper gentlemen, begun snorting his ADHD medication, and has developed a terrible penchant

for lying. \$4000 in credit card debt is nothing compared to the \$36,000 Austin Rotary House has dicked out of Bilgraham's father.

The last of the units is named Aspiring Greatness, but is more often called the Sex-Offender unit amongst staff. The Sex-Offender unit only house boys... and sadness. All of these kids are addicted to masturbation, and all but one was sexually abused for a majority of their life. The worst of the lot is a boy named Bryan who was held captive by a truck driver in his cab, under the mattress for an untold number of months.

The boy making the best effort to control his urges is also named Brian, but spelled with an I. He asked his parents for treatment the morning after he stopped himself from entering his six year old sister's room. While in treatment, he confessed to masturbating to photographs of his mother (neither nude nor illicit), and having sexual intercourse with the family dog.

The sex-offender unit is the easiest unit to work on because the staff to resident ratio has to be kept at 1 to 4, all others are 1 to 8, and residents are not allowed in each other's rooms, making altercations or incidents unlikely.

I prefer Springhill.

*I forgot! Lameca and Brittany.*

Dammit. Brittany is wet. I'll get her up in a second.

Lameca is okay. She is dry when I get to her. I rouse her, and she gets up without opening her eyes. They are completely shut and I get ahead of her when I see her bump into her door. I open her door for her and then the bathroom door. I see her fumble with the handle for a bit before I step in and open that for her, too. I wait a minute in the doorway for her to finish. I wait a few minutes more. Then, I go in to the stall to find her lying on the floor. She doesn't respond to my calls and starts crying when I shake her. I don't want to be in this situation longer than I

have to, so I pull up her briefs and shorts and carry her back to her bed. It's adorable when she resists letting go of my neck after being set down.

Now Brittany.

I put on latex gloves before even going into her room.

"Hey Brittany, get up," I say. "Brittany... Brittany... Hey—"

She suddenly sits up and squints at me.

"You gotta get up and get into the shower," I say.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Brittany, don't talk like that. It's unattractive to—"

"What the fuck... Who are you?"

"I'm Mr. Serrano. I'm your new overnight staff."

"Where's Mr. Matt?"

"He got moved to the boy's unit."

Brittany makes a face like she's smelled me fart, then falls back on her pillow. I wait a second, and then try again.

"Brittany, you've got to take a shower. You're wet, Brittany... Brittany, get up. Come on, Brittany, you have to take a shower. Brittany."

I'm really resisting the urge to tell her, 'Okay Brittany, I hope you don't take a shower,' but not because of what the therapists recommend, but because I'm afraid I might teach her to decipher between what people say and what people want. I think for now, I've got to stick with a different line of reasoning.

"Brittany, if you get up, I'll let you have a snack," I say. Nothing. This time I walk over and shake her a little, "Come on, Brittany."

“What the fuck!” she yells, “Can’t you fucking see I’m trying to fucking sleep. God damn it!”

“Brittany...” I’m at a loss, but I’m starting to understand what my brother meant when he told me I sounded too stupid to have gone to college.

“What!”

“Why don’t you want to take a shower? Don’t you want to take one?” I ask, sincerely curious.

“Brittany, get your ass into the shower, or I’ll be getting Peralez in here in two seconds to drag your pissy ass to CSO,” says Mr. Matt, startling me from behind.

“Ugh! Why won’t anybody leave me the fuck alone!” Brittany says getting up out of bed. “Why does everybody have to—”

“Brittany!” I hear Matt call in a tone I’ve never heard, and then in the harshest of whispers, “one more yell and I’ll personally drag you to CSO, you hear?”

“Ugh!” Brittany screams again, but this time, on her way to the shower.

“Thanks, Matt,” I say.

“Yo Mr. Z, Brakstock came in and asked me if I got any laundry soap. She caught me sleeping but she told me about you asking for laundry soap,” he says.

“Yeah, Peralez was here. Did he go over to your side?”

“No, he don’t mess with me, Z. Did she tell him about me sleeping?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“That’s fine,” he says laughing then walks out.

I grab up all the sheets and blankets and take them over to the laundry room. Inside I find Alane. I forgot about her, I remember her walking in, and I guess it never registered her not

walking out. Eyes closed, she sits on top of one of the machines, hers, the one containing her clothes. Her legs dangle on either side of one of the corners, and she is arching her back firmly pressing her groin against the tumbling dryer.

I don't say anything. I don't know what to say. I drop the wet linens and walk back out of the laundry room. I hear her let out several moans, and it is terribly exciting. I think about what to say for what feels like several minutes.

Finally going back in. I say, "Alane." It's not very clever, but it was all I could come up with. She doesn't respond or open her eyes. I approach her and say again, "Alane."

Alane grabs a hold of my shoulder and grimaces as if in pain. She pulls me towards her and I look towards the door. I feel like Peralez, Matt, Brakstock, even Brittany could walk in at any moment. Looking back towards Alane, she presses her face against mine, not really mouth to mouth. More like cheek to eye, and she grabs at my chest. I smile when she lets out a loud whimper, almost a sob. I pull away, and I don't wait for her to open her eyes to walk out of the laundry room.

I'm standing in the doorway looking out into the common area when I hear Alane walk out of the laundry room.

I go back for the laundry after she's gone back to her room.

I set Brittany's linens to wash. I grab a fresh set to replace the soiled ones after I've sanitized her vinyl mattress with an aromatic bleach spray.

I don't want to talk to Brittany when she comes out of the shower. I planned on ignoring her as much as possible for the rest of the night. Ignoring her is not always an option. She walks out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her waist, and the image of her burly arms and hairy nipples gets burned into my mind before I get to turn away.

That picture, with her wet drooping man breasts and her thick hands gripping her towel, is all I can think about while I try to fill out my paperwork. I can hardly relish the moment I had with Alane. I tried conjuring up the image of Alane sitting on top of the dryer again, but I stopped when Brittany appeared in my mind swallowing up the dryer into a hairy orifice.

It takes me the rest of the night to finish my paperwork, fold the laundry, sweep the unit, take out the trash, and check-up on the girls on HRSA.

Girls on HRSA always have similar stories. I don't even bother reading the incident reports anymore. They cut their arms when they lose their afternoon snack privileges, they'll bang their heads against the wall if they get scolded, or they'll scratch their faces when people don't listen to them.

Boys don't do that. Boys'll punch a wall or each other when they get upset.

The three forms I picked up from Matt tell me that Christina, Hannah, and Ruth are on watch for another forty-eight hours. And other than giving a bunch of extra paperwork to staff, being on HRSA means staff has to have you in their sights at all times and you must be physically escorted when leaving the unit.

The environment here can be restrictive. No cursing, regulated sleep, regimented meals, and micromanaged time schedules do not allow for a lot of spontaneity. For some people, this is great, just what they need. For those with a more worldly upbringing like sex and drugs, the change can be jarring and counterproductive.

Though, the only one I feel bad for is Ruth. Ruth is ten, the youngest. She is here because she has no family. She was a perfectly healthy little girl, relatively healthy, when she got here. Her only problem is that she keeps running away from foster homes; who knows why? Ruth's nice, but she's picking up some nasty habits living here, self-abuse being one of them.

I start waking up the girls at 6:00 A.M one at a time. Half the girls are supposed to take a shower in the morning. The other five should have taken one last night. I walk into Lameca and Hannah's room and tell them both to wake up and figure out who is going to take a shower first.

Samantha shows up at 7:10. She's a night staffer at Summer Dreams boys. Samantha looks a bit out of place here with the Springhill girls.

At two-hundred and twenty pounds of pure muscle, Samantha and I have spent the last couple of mornings together, smoking weed and eating breakfast.

I met Samantha at my neighbor's house party. We were the two strongest people at the party. I challenged her to an arm-wrestling competition. I told her that if I beat her, she'd have to kiss me.

I made that strange proposition because Costa had recently told me about making out with a black girl, and I'd been secretly jealous ever since.

I beat Samantha with the left and she took me with the right.

"Yo Sam, you off, already," I say, "I'll be off in a bit."

"No, I doing here for a double?"

The sixteen hours of a double shift are hardest when you start during an overnight. You end up having to spend the second shift moving from place to place. From the unit to the cafeteria at the top of the hill, from the caf to the classrooms at the bottom of the hill, from the class to the gym or ropes course during recess, from recess back to the caf for lunch and then back to class. Class finishes at 2:45 and you either finish your seven to three o'clock shift back in the unit or at the game room.

"Ugh, I guess that's better than doing a double at Summer Dreams."



“Fuck these catty bitches. I hate working at Springhill,” she says, “What you doing on this side? Why aren’t you with the boys?”

“Two girls wrote out a plan to rape Mr. Matt.”

“See what I’m saying? Who was it that planned it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you could get one of them to tell you.”

“Man, I can’t stand this unit.”

“I can get use to it. I don’t know. I can’t get use to Summer Dreams. Those chicks over there make me question all sorts of stuff.”

“Who’s in the bathroom, right now?”

“Maybe Kiia,” I say.

Samantha walks into the restroom, and after a moment, I hear her say, “Kiia, did you break this mirror?”

“No. I didn’t break shit,” Kiia says from inside.

“Don’t you talk like that in front of me. I’m staff. You best respect me and speak correctly.” Samantha lets the silence linger a little bit before she says, “Who broke this mirror?”

Abby sticks her head into the bathroom and says in a quiet voice, “It was broken when I took a shower.”

“Did it break this morning?”

Samantha walks out of the bathroom and asks me when the mirror was broken.

“I honestly don’t know Sam. Nobody told me anything about it when I got here.”

Abby says, “It was okay when I peed at night.”

Samantha looks at me, “Who’s used the bathroom since then?”

“Like half the girls. Brittany, Alane, Lameca and Hannah took a shower before Kiia,” I

say wondering.

Samantha ponders this and then says something that I found to be the grandest of gestures.

“Look, why don’t you head out. I’ll handle this. But when I get out of this I’m going over to your place and you’re going to hook it up, again.”

Of course I would have smoked her out after she got out of work. I’m glad she has appreciated our previous mornings enough to want to let me leave now.

Samantha asks, “Anything else happen during the overnight? You write any incident reports?”

“No, nothing really happened,” I say, “Other than the mirror, and I didn’t even know that happened.”

“Well, don’t worry about that. I’ll get it written up. I’ll see you later,” she says and then asks, “Did you charge the walkie?”

I unclip the radio from my belt and hit the page button. There is no charge left.

I get to clock out at 7:22 in the nurse’s station. Brakstock doesn’t speak to me, but she does offer me a, “You too,” when I say to her, “You have a good morning.”

I see Samantha one more time when she sticks her head out into the common area just as I’m heading to the door. She asks, “Where are Sara and Toni?”

## CHAPTER XXIV

### SMOKEY'S

Smoking at Smoky's Pizzeria is always a grand experience. Because Costa, as irresponsible, thieving, and untrustworthy as he is, managed to attain the managerial position at Smoky's, using the 30' by 15' hole-in-the-wall pizza shop as our personal kitchen and smoke room was never a problem.

The pizza shop had been there for decades, owned by the same person but always under new management. More often than not, the pizzeria had no management. It needed at most 2 people working at any given time to function and 3 full-time employees could easily fill every shift. The owner coming in every night to tally the register and count the money eliminated the need for a management figure. Unfortunately-fortunately, Bob, the owner, has succumbed to his biyearly-depression-backache-painkiller-addiction spell leaving him to choose between his cook, cleaner, and cashier guy for manager.

The manager title really only gives that person the extra duties of counting the money, depositing it into his account, and locking up after hours. Nonetheless, it was surprising when Bob gave the keys and code to the safe to Costa.

I think it was because of his humor. Even if he's not book smart or common sense smart, not even really street smart, he does have a quick wit and that gives him an edge over his co-workers.

It's about 10:30, Costa has just finished cleaning and is now waiting for Phillip to leave

so we can start smoking grass.

“Hey Phil, you almost done, you drunk-ass bitch? They’re about to end the whiskey specials over at Emo’s. They’ve got King Louie for 25 cents!”

Phil doesn’t smoke, and he’s in AA and Costa knows this.

“I don’t drink anymore, Costa.”

“Well that sucks for you. All the waitresses are naked right now, and they’re letting everyone take shots from their pussies.”

“Forget you, Costa!” Phil flicks the bird and punches out. Phil gave up cursing too, but I guess the bird doesn’t count.

Costa looks hurt and speaks in a soothing tone, “Calm down, Phil. I was just messing, man. I know you’re not into that,” then mocking again, “but I bet if you tip well enough you could probably get some hot beefy bartender to let you sop some whiskey off his nuts.”

Phil had taken off his apron and was out the door before Costa was done with his lewd remark. Costa finishes it anyways, but I can’t tell if it was for my sake or his own.

Nemo, his wife Lucinda, and a few bums hang around in the alley waiting and watching Phil get into his car and drive off before Nemo makes his way into Smoky’s.

“Yo Costa, got any hot slices, man?”

“Sure do Nemo, man.”

“Wanna get high, man?”

“Hells yeah, I wanna get high.”

“Mind if a few friends come in, too?”

“How many?”

“Besides Lucy and Behr, just two more.”

“Sure man, that’s cool. Your crew’s getting bigger, Nemo-man.”

“No man, Lucy and Behr are my crew. The other two, they’re just nice people.”

“Coo-cool.”

Nemo Lonewolf has lived on the streets for the last twelve years. The last six of which he has had the company of his wife, Lucinda Robles. Lucinda spoke no English, but it took Nemo less than six months to learn Spanish. Nemo has been traversing the streets of Austin for the last two years. Before that, he was in New Orleans, Atlanta, Wigby Island, the Rio Grande Valley, L.A., and dozens of tiny one-light towns. Through all of which he has had no steady work, I.D., residency, bank account, or criminal record.

I would never refer to Nemo as a begger. He won’t ask for money; he’ll go hungry before he asks for money, but he’ll rob someone before he gets hungry.

Behr is Nemo’s new muscle. Behr, pronounced Bear, looks like a grizzly but acts more like a Teddy. His heavy frame and meaty arms give him his place with Nemo. His size alone deters most riff-raff but it’s his scabbed-up, bulbous knuckles that scare me the most. Not that I’m really scared of him, but I’d prefer him on my side in a brawl. Behr has been sticking with Nemo for the last year or so and often refers to him as a mentor.

Nemo, Lucy, and Behr have been smoking us out pretty regularly for some time, and Costa always hooks them up with a couple boxes of pizza. And like always, Nemo passes Costa his bud, always wrapped in foil, never in a bag, for Costa to load into his pipe. Besides Lucy, and sometimes Behr, Nemo never brought extra company, so it was particularly unnerving when Costa and I saw that the two extra were a mother of indeterminate age and her five-year-old son.

“What the hell, Costa?” I whisper.

“Shit, are you gonna smoke?” he chokes back, loaded pipe in hand.

“Are you?”

“I don’t know man, we don’t have a whole lot of choice,” he says, passing the pipe over to Nemo to green.

I knew we, he, I had a choice. We had plenty of choices.

“Too late,” I say, happy that Nemo passes the pipe to me leaving Costa to decide whether or not he’s going to offer it to the street mother, her son watching.

I take a hit, hold it, pass it to Costa, and just watch him. I was too embarrassed to check if the kid was watching me take my hit, but I could guess by the way he stared at Costa that he was. His eyes followed the pipe as Costa meekly offers it to his mother.

“Do you smoke?” Costa asks making and breaking eye contact.

“Yeah, thank you.” She takes the pipe from Costa.

I start coughing, dripping drool all over myself. I held my hit in too long. I’m seeing stars and I bury my face in my hands for a moment trying to regain my composure. Nemo gently pats my back.

“You okay there, brother? That was one huge hit, there.”

It really wasn’t that big, but Nemo has good smoking etiquette.

“I’m okay. Whoa, a little rough, but tasty.” I say to Nemo, then look over to the street mom. She’s letting out her hit and her son is crawling up on her lap, his back up against her chest.

I close my mouth only after I see Costa’s stupid expression. I elbow him a little trying to get him to close his mouth too, but he doesn’t, and he doesn’t take his eyes off the kid.

She puts the pipe to his mouth, lights it, and works the carb for him while he pulls in a monstrous drag.

“Okay, now hold it in,” she says in a motherly tone.

I’m thinking he looks cute with his chest and cheeks puffed out. I’m also pretty sure he cashed the bowl because when his mother passes the pipe to Lucy, she ashes it on the table and begins loading another. It’s packed, Lucy’s let out her hit and is passing the pipe to Behr when the kid releases his intake. His cloud of smoke is thick and practically fills the room. He doesn’t cough. I elbow Costa, needlessly; he’s been eyeing the kid the whole time.

“Fuuuuuuuck,” is all Costa manages to say.

I don’t know how long the boy’s mother has been smoking him out but the bowl always cashed on him.

There are certain things you only have to do once and they change the kind of person you are. Drinking and drugs take lots of different occasions before they’ve made you into a drunk or an addict. But if you, even once, touch a child inappropriately, you’re a pedophile. It was Costa who once told me, “It takes many bridges before you can call yourself a bridge builder, but if you suck even one dick, you’re a cocksucker.” I don’t know where he got that from, but I know that wasn’t his.

I can see Costa is having trouble digesting what he may have become. I don’t believe what I’ve done has changed who I am. What am I now, a corrupter of children? Why should I care? I also tried to kill my brother.

I don’t care one way or the other what sort of epithets are attached to my name, but I do know that whenever I think about it, sometimes I smile.

Costa goes on a smoking hiatus after this. I don’t join in his abstinence, and he mopes around the apartment for several weeks.

One day after work, I find him getting high on the couch. He smiles at me.

“What’s the occasion?” I ask.

“You know that street mom and kid we smoked out a while back?” he asks. I nod, and he continues, “They came by the shop again last night, and I called child protective services.”

“Badass.” I take the joint and get high with Costa, again.

Costa smokes more than ever, now.



## CHAPTER XXV

### MORNING HASTE

When I wake, Alane is sitting on my chest, hugging her knees, looking disappointed at me. She has a bony butt, but she weighs hardly ninety pounds. I tilt my head to the left, so as to block the overhead light with her silhouette. I'm about to close my eyes again when she says, "It's 6:45, you know?"

It's not uncommon to fall asleep during the overnight shifts at the Austin Rotary House, but it is a terminative offence. Last night, an uneventful night, sitting in my chair, I was distracting myself from doing my paperwork by rocking back and forth on the two back legs of my chair. I was conscious of my lack of effort at not really trying to fight off sleep, but when I did fall asleep, I woke up. I woke up because I had fallen off my chair, but the floor was comfortable—more comfortable than being doubled over in my chair. So I'd just take a moment. Just a moment to stretch my back then get up to finish my paperwork, wake Brittany to use the restroom, and start the laundry.

Then there was that desperate struggle. Should I stand up or take another moment. Pure will against the desires of the body. Psychologists call that emotive intelligence; personal agency fighting to maintain discipline, delay gratification, and exert control over the self.

Still on the floor. Okay, get up. Get up, hurry up and finish your paperwork then you can take a nap. Okay, get up. Set your phone to vibrate for 5:00, or if you can finish all the paperwork by 2:30 and then, let's say it takes thirty minutes to do or skip the laundry, do or skip

the sweeping, and take out the trash. I wish I could take my nap on this floor, and there's that empty bed in Ruth's room.

Ha, that'd be pretty messed.

Dammit, I need to wake up Brittany and Lameca. Dammit, I bet Brittany already pissed herself. That means I have to get her showered and change her sheets and do another load of laundry. I hope she didn't piss herself already. I hope my kids don't piss themselves when they're fifteen.

Then I remember the dreams I had. I dreamt I was at work trying to teach the kids, but I was also trying to do my paperwork and running all over the place stopping arguments and breaking up fights.

I recognize the ceiling and the overhead lights now. I look over towards the nurse's station in the hall, but the door has been shut between us. Alane must have shut it without nurse Brakstock noticing.

What a useless nurse. She didn't stick her head out once to check on me. I was asleep for nearly five hours sprawled out on the floor like some goddamn corpse. I could have been bludgeoned to death, and she wouldn't even have noticed. How ridiculous, I almost felt angry.

I quickly stand up telling Alane to get into the bathroom and start her morning routine. Then I panic as I pat my chest and waist looking for the unit keys. Alane walks to the bathroom, unlocks it, then tosses me my keys with a grin.

I rush into all of the girls' rooms shouting that this is the last time I'm going to tell them to get up and get ready for school. I kick the mattresses of the girls on HRSA sleeping in the hall and tell them to get their mattresses back in their rooms and make their beds.

I get to Lameca. She's wet, so I tell her to change quickly or she won't make it for

breakfast. She is confused at first, but gets up quickly without arguing, because she hates showering, and doesn't want me changing my mind.

I get the last four girls up. They don't ask for a chance to brush their teeth.

6:57!

I unlock the door and walk to the nurse's station. Dusty, old nurse Brakstock is face down on an open, wet book. I creep back to the door, lock it up slowly, then loudly unlock it and slam the door. I take a moment before I casually stroll back in front of Brakstock's window. She is now in the middle of filling out some form and has put away her book.

"Are you ready for me to start sending the girls out for their meds Mrs. Brakstock?"

"No, not just yet. They've just dropped off some med change requests, so I've got a little adjusting to do. Give me five minutes, then start sending them out one at a time," she says removing sleep from her eye but playing it as if it was an eyelash that is bothering her.

"No problem."

I wonder who went to sleep first.

I put on latex gloves, then I walk to Brittany's room and pull the covers off her. She has soaked through her sheets, clothes and blankets. I ask her one time to get up and get changed or get in the shower.

"Fuck'n leave me the fuck alone. Fuck! Get out of my room. I'm not fucking going to fucking school! I feel shitty!"

I feel sorry for Brittany. Because of her personality, she doesn't have any friends and the rest of the staff treat her like she's nothing but a burden. I know I messed up not waking her up to use the bathroom, so I don't argue the way I normally would to get her up and ready for school. I just find a dry spot on the sheets and pull them out from under her. She rolls on her own

because, despite her attitude towards me, I know she likes me, and she doesn't really want to give me that hard of a time.

“Fucking nigger, get the fuck out of my room!” she says lying on her vinyl mattress facedown on her pillow. Piss has soaked into the pillow, too. I take her pillow. “God damn it! How much are you gonna fuck with me before you fucking get out of my room?”

“Bye Brittany. You have a nice day, okay?” I take all of her pissed bedding and drop it in the hall tossing away the gloves.

I walk to Alane and squeeze her face with one hand and lean in within a couple of inches of her face.

“Did you brush?” I ask.

“No, did you?” she retorts.

“Fine, go get your meds, then line up.” She swings the door open and is walking back before the door has even finished closing. She still has the powder from the gloves on her cheeks. Staring right at me, she walks back in, kicks the door closed, and spits her meds into the trash.

“Lameca, go take your meds, then line up.”

By 7:10 I've got everyone but Brittany lined up. The morning staff was supposed to be in at 7:00 to relieve me. I dial the CSO office extension from the unit phone, “CSO, Peralez,” Peralez answers already wound up as if expecting a problem.

“Hey Peralez, it's Sid. I've got the girls lined up and medicated, ready to go to breakfast. I've been trying to get Brittany up to shower for the last hour and a half, but that's not working out real well.” I say gesturing to Kiia to go out for her meds.

“Has... Has um, have Cindy take the girls up, and you stay back with Brittany so she

can—”

“Cindy’s not here, man. If you want to take the girls to the caf, I can go ahead and finish off with—”

“No uh, tell the nurse to sit in the hall until I get there. Just have to finish some Resident LOC forms, then I’ll head over. Okay, just tell Brakstock to hang, I’ll be there in ten.”

“Coo-cool, I’ll head down the hill and get the girls fed,” I say smacking Christina’s wandering hand out of my back pocket and sending her out for her meds.

“Oh, and have the kitchen send a plate back for Brittany.”

“Yup-yup.” I hang up and address the unit. “Everyone listen up, we’re already twenty minutes late for breakfast so we need—”

“You didn’t wake us up.” “Yeah,” shout Christina and Hannah.

I start again, “We need to walk quickly. Is everyone ready? And I’m not coming back if someone wants to throw a fit just cause they don’t like what the kitchen—”

“I didn’t get to change my clothes,” interrupts Christina followed by Sara, “I wanna do my hair.”

“I didn’t get to use the restroom.”

“You be quiet Sara, and go get your meds,” I say.

“I need to use the bathroom, too.”

“Ya’ll should have thought of that when I woke you up the first time,” I say pointing a finger.

“No, you woke us up late, you were probably asleep,” says Abby.

“That’s ridiculous.” I counter, “I couldn’t have been asleep because we’re not allowed to sleep. If I fell asleep, I would probably get fired.” I turn and open the hall door to let the girls

into the common area in front of the nurse's station.

"Mrs. Brakstock, that's all of the girls who need to take their med's, right? I'm going to go ahead and walk these girls to the cafeteria. I wasn't able to get Brittany out of bed. She's in one of her moods. You can try if you'd like, or you can wait and Peralez will be here in a few to deal with her. If and when Cindy gets here, just have her meet us in the caf'," I say to Brakstock as she stifles a yawn and gathers some paperwork.

"Okay, let me just grab a few things and..."

"Okay-cool, thanks," I say walking towards the front door.

By the time we've reached the cafeteria, I have less than fifteen minutes before classes start at the bottom of the hill. I begin filling out the locator sheets and monitor sheets for the two girls on HRSA instead of eating breakfast.

At 7:44 we're already fourteen minutes late for class when I hear little twelve-year-old Ruth, a few seats down, shouting.

"Mr. Z, Mr. Z!"

"Jesus Ruth, there's no need to shout. What do you want?" I ask.

"Can I get seconds on toast and cereal!"

"No, we don't have time for seconds. Everyone is going to put up in about two minutes,"

I say going back to my paperwork.

"That's not fair! If you hadn't been aslee—"

The slap is so loud all the Springhill girls suddenly take up a moment of silence.

"Are you retarded?" Alane whispers. "Don't say that Mr. Z was asleep, he'll get fired you stupid bitch."

"So-sorry," Ruth stammers rubbing her cheek.

“Alane,” I call.

“Huh?”

“Watch your body space,” I say trying to keep a straight face. Alane sits back down and finishes her juice, but gives her cereal to Ruth.

Because my paperwork took a little longer than expected, and because there weren’t any CSOs in the cafeteria to hustle us out, it’s 8:25 when the girls are finally putting up their trays.

Cindy finally arrives. I tell Cindy that because of the two girls on HRSA, I’ll help her walk the girls down the hill for school. Kiia and Toni both smile when I take hold of their arms because they know I’ve been breaking HRSA protocol all morning.

“Now, don’t try any funny business you two, or I’ll be forced to kill you,” I say with scornful eyes, but they just giggle.

We make it to the portable buildings that serve as the classrooms at the bottom of the hill by 8:37, but I don’t actually enter Mrs. Dickens’ class. I don’t find Mrs. Dickens’ name appropriate because she is an androgynous lesbian with a large build. I just stand and listen for a moment from the open doorway.

“Excuse me Ms. Cindy, but you cannot be bringing the girls to class this late. They should have been here by 7:30! That’s over an hour. Now, if you don’t think you can get the girls to school just use your walkie—”

I just realized that I haven’t had my radio on me all day and I have no idea where it might be.

“If there is nothing I can do for you Mrs. Dickens...” I interrupt.

“No, that’s fine Mr. Serrano,” she says politely before returning her hateful glare towards Cindy, but still speaking to me, “I know you were here for the overnight and you must be

exhausted. You should have been at home by now. Thank you for staying and trying to help Mrs. Cindy.”

“I just got here,” whines Cindy.

Looking past both of them I say to the girls unit, “See you girls next week,” while Cindy continues to get chewed out, “That’s exactly what I mean Ms. Cindy, and it’s 8:40 already—” continues Mrs. Dickens.

“Goodbye Mr. Z!” exclaim most of the girls.

I walk away from Dickens’ fading voice, “I don’t wish to discuss this with you any further. I haven’t much time left.”

I walk back up the hill to file away my, now completed, paperwork.

When I open the front door, a pungent odor hits me, Brittany feces. Brittany feces is not like any other feces I’ve smelt. I asked about it once and found out it was because of her high fiber intake ingested to counter the constipation side effects of her antipsychotic medication. That combined with a number of allergies to a variety of fruits and vegetables, and her insistence of maintaining a vegan diet.

In the nurse’s station, where my filed paperwork belongs, I find two fresh incident reports.

Resident(s) involved: Brittany Nichols

Staff involved-

I skip down to the incident summary section.

*Res was awoken and she immediatly started screamin and eventually attacked staff. I initiaeted a follow-to-ground restraint. Was in restraint approximatly 22 mins. Escorted said Res to seclusion Room.*



Peralez' incident reports are known for their brevity and spelling errors. I usually take my time and add more color to my incident reports.

Old Mr. Matt, the overnight for the Summerhill Boys' unit, walks in before I read the other incidence report.

“Yo, Mr. Z, what you still doing here?”

“Just finished dropping the kids off at school. You?”

“Getting back from a transport. Oh man, you just miss Brittany going crazy.”

“I know. I just started reading the reports.”

“Yeah man, Peralez comes in spitting fire and shit. Calls me over like he already prepping for a restraint. She's covered in piss, shit stank like a hamster cage, man, but she still in bed. Peralez goes over there and YANKS her outta bed with one arm and is talking all sorts a hellfire. ‘You're a disgusting little girl, you don't have any decency’.” Matt does a pretty good Peralez impression.

“Brittany doesn't... say... shit... She just tries to climb back into bed. Peralez runs over and flips her pissy mattress. She starts screaming that she wants her breakfast, screaming she ain't doing nothing until she get some breakfast. Pig-headed Peralez, just like Brittany, starts shouting he ain't gonna get no one no breakfast unless they get showered. Then he just puts her in a restraint.”

“Can he do that?”

“Sure. He CSO. He just say she clench her fists an teeth. Marks the box, *showed signs of aggression*, on the SIR form. Pretty sure it's kosher. So he's in a restraint and Brittany still screaming she wants some breakfast, over and over.”

“Wow, that sucks,” I say waiting for him to get to the Brittany feces part.

“Yeah man, and Peralez is still talking trash cause he wants to get last word in and because he’s pissed, you know... covered in piss,” I hear the unit phone ring, but I ignore it and Matt continues, “and he like ‘I can’t let you go until you stop screaming. Screaming is a sign of aggression, Brittany,’ but she don’t shut-up. Poor bitch keep screaming that same shit, over and over again, but then...” he smiles and pauses for effect. “But then Brittany take a ripe old dump and start thrashing, like something’ crazy! And you know Peralez, he be like 160, 170 pounds at the most, but Brittany she be clearing 200, easy.” Brittany’s weight gain is also a side-effect of her medication. “And I mean, she fifteen but she fifteen and crazy and covered in shit, now. So if they’d kept at it, I bet Peralez would of tapped out first.”

“She shat on Peralez?” My cell phone starts to ring but I don’t answer it because we’re not supposed to have our phones on campus, and I suspect it’s from the CSO office.

“No man, worse. Peralez made the mistake when he smell that stank...he let her go. She dig in to those big ass cheeks and starts slinging shit everywhere. You can check it out if you like,” he says pointing to the Summerhill Girls unit door.

My cell beeps now telling me I’ve got a voicemail. I start playing the message but gesture to Matt to continue his story.

“She gets shit on Peralez’ hair and shirt. She got that shit on the floor, on the walls and she got that on the ceiling. And you know you can’t get no shit outta no ceiling tile. That shit be absorbing—”

The voice message is from a pissed-off sounding Peralez. “Sid, this is Peralez from the Austin Rotary House. I’m not sure if you’re still here on campus. I couldn’t reach you on your walkie—” I wonder if anything is going to come of my losing that walkie?

I catch Matt mid-sentence, “I wasn’t gonna help out in no shit restraint. That restraint was

bullshit to start with, anyhow.”

Peralez’s tone has now changed as if making a real effort to sound composed, “If you’re still on campus, even if you’re close by, we need you to come back over to the CSO office. If you can’t reach me just call switchboard and have them—”

Matt again, “and lucky for me, Brakstock start running her mouth so Brittany starts chasing—”

Despite wanting to hear the end of the story, I know I’ve got very little time before Peralez or one of the nurses comes into the unit, so I cut Matt off, “You have the time, Matt?”

“Nine oh nine,” he answers.

“Ah hell Matt, I gotta clock out before someone tries to get me snagged in for another shift.”

“That right man. You should hoof it, real soon.”

I file away my paperwork, and end up clocking out at 9:13 A.M. Outside on the way to the parking lot, over across the ropes course, I catch a glimpse of Brakstock smoking. She is wearing a different shirt.

I’m at the top of the hill and comfortably sitting in my car when I spot Peralez stepping out of the CSO office wearing latex gloves and also lighting up. The view of the classrooms past the trees down at the bottom of the hill looks peaceful in the morning sun even through tinted glass. I turn the ignition and a tape of Peter Bjorn and John singing starts up. It’s past the chorus, so I rewind the tape some.

“And the question is was I more alive then than I am now. I happily have to disagree. I laugh more often now. I cry more often now. I am more me,” he sings as I shift my car into reverse.

It seems like days since I had heard the beginning of that song.

I want to go swimming. I have four days off. Four days starting with a good night's rest and a pleasant morning. I'll have breakfast first then go swimming.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### A BOAT PARTY

I set my alarm for 2:30 and 2:40 P.M., and had set it to charge on my bedside table. I see the phone charger cable leading under the bed.

Charge Complete. I disconnect the charger. 1 New Voicemail, I click END. Listen to Voicemail. END. 1 Missed Call. END. Why is it so hard to get to the—

4:40 P.M.

Dammit.

I brush my teeth, put on my clothes, and am sitting in my car by 4:47 P.M.

About a mile from the Austin Rotary House, I call the CSO for my unit, but get the machine, “Hey, it’s Sid. Sorry about being late, I had my phone set on vibrate to wake me up and it must have vibrated off my bedside table before I had a chance to...”

A loud beep tells me I have an incoming call.

“Ah, you dumb-shit!” I say to myself, but not doing a too good a job of not cursing into the phone.

“Hey, it’s Sid.”

“What, yeah, I know Sid, I’m calling you. What’s up?” answers Peralez.

“Sorry about being late, man. I set my phone as my alarm and it must’ve—”

“Hold on - hold on a sec.” he says, “Let me see...”

“I’m already pulling into the parking lot.” I say trying to dispel any incoming grief.

“Sid, yeah, you’re not on the schedule for today.”

“I’m not?”

“No, Sid.”

“Badass. Well then... later, I guess.”

“Sure buddy, talk to you—”

“Oh, and if you heard me call you something, I didn’t mean it.”

“What?”

I hang up and check my missed call and voicemail. It’s from Blockbuster regarding my late movie rentals.

Awesome. I feel like breakfast.

Since I’m only one and a half minutes away, I make my way to and park at the administration building, because on Fridays they bring in doughnuts and kolaches for the office staff.

Stepping inside the smallest but newest building of our campus, I see dumb, beautiful Jenny sitting in as switchboard. I say hey, and begin loading up on carbs and protein as she directs calls through campus. My lightened mood makes me want to flirt with her. I’ve eaten about a half-dozen assorted pastries before the phone stops ringing.

“Wow. that was a satisfying breakfast.” I say stretching.

Jenny giggles, “Breakfast? It’s 5:00 P.M.”

“I know, but I just woke up.”

She giggles again, “You just woke up? It’s 5 in the af...ter...noon.”

“Yes, but you see, I’m a vampire.” I say holding up my hands like claws.

Another dumb giggle, “Vampire? It’s 5 in the—”

James K. cutting her off, “Jenny, it’s 5 o’clock already. Why don’t you go ahead and clock out for today?” The clinic director, James, standing just inside his office, leans on the doorframe, arms crossed, with his head turned in an expertly posed fashion. He holds this pose just a little too long.

“Go ahead Jenny, have a good weekend.”

The phone rings as Jenny is removing her headset.

“Wait. Jenny, go ahead and answer that call then switch it to the answering machine.”

“Austin Rotary House, this is Jenny. How can I help you?” Jenny answers without even a hint of resentment or annoyance.

“How are you doing, Sid?” James asks, but I don’t respond because he’s still in his silly statuesque pose facing the doorframe and I’m eating another doughnut. He clears his throat and finally looks over in my direction.

“How are you doing, Sid?” he repeats not any louder.

“Oh, fug me. Sovee James. I’m goo, anks.” I say choking down my doughnut and grabbing another. I get up and start fixing myself a cup of coffee. The coffee is strong, burnt, and hot so I mix in about ten creamers. I like that they have four different kinds of creamers, but now they’re out of vanilla, and since I’m—

“Sid!” James says, not actually shouting, but loud enough for me to know he’d been trying to get my attention.

“What?” I ask, thinking he is commenting on the amount of cream I’m adding.

“I asked if you’ve checked in with your unit. You’ve been taking a long break and you don’t have a radio on you.” He pauses, and I take another bite from my doughnut, chew. He continues, “I don’t like the kids to be out of ratio with staff for too long.” Another pause. “What

unit are you on, I can go ahead and call just to make sure every—”

I swallow, “I’m not on the clock, I came in thinking I was supposed to work, but I’m off today.”

“You’ve been here, on campus, off the clock, since three?”

“No, I got here late, about twenty minutes ago.”

“Well now, isn’t that something?” he says changing poses.

I toss my coffee and look at Jenny who’s finished her phone conversation.

“Hey Jenny,” I say, “you ever been up to Five Mile Dam?”

I’m surprised at how blatantly James cock-blocks with, “Jenny, some of the therapists are going to be calling the units to get some of the kid’s med monitors. Would you mind staying until 6:00, 6:30?” He doesn’t wait for her to answer nor does she offer one. “Hey Sid, can you step in my office for a minute?” he asks with a flick of the head. James K. closes the door after I step in.

I sit on one of the chairs against the wall rather than in front of his desk. All of the chairs in his office are black, modern, pieces-of-crap that lack any comfort. I have to take everything—keys, rolling papers, wallet—out of my back pockets, and set them on the chair to my left. I see the cactus bulbs bulging in my front pockets, and now I’m wishing I had taken more than seven minutes getting ready for work.

Even if I did take them out, chances are he wouldn’t know what they were, or their legality, not being very familiar with the latter myself. I think it’s legal for them to grow and to eat them but not to pick them, but I’m not certain and—

“I mean, it’s ironic how the institutionalized cowardice of some people like the Koch brothers would resort to being so flippant with something as brave as the ‘Occupy’ movement,



am I right?" He adds finger quotes to his own words like I don't know he's saying it.

I think he's waiting for me to say something, but I didn't catch the beginning of whatever it was he was talking about.

I smile and say, "Huh. Kind of reminds me of a time when I sat in on a peace rally protesting police brutality. One of the protesters, high off his rocker might I add, thought it wise to start a fight with one of the officers at the scene. The cop was actually attempting to quell the angry bystanders who were forced to abandon their seasonal shopping due to our peaceful sit-in." I hate the way my speech patterns change when talking to people like James K.

"That, that sounds... Well, d-do you think you'd like to see Henry Rollins' speech?" He asks.

"I've never heard of him." I say, knowing I don't want to go.

"I just told you about... I thought I heard you mention that you saw The Henry Rollins Band and X at Stubb's the other day."

How does he know that?

"No, I don't think that sounds like something I would make any effort to see. I was really only there to see X."

"I see. You know, I had my own doubts about it anyway."

I feel bad because he looks sad, but then he asks, "Have you seen the new Robert, Mapplethorpe exhibit, downtown?"

I want this conversation to end, and I don't want to talk about not knowing who Mapplethorpe is, so I say, "No, I was thinking about celebrating my day off with lots of alcohol." *Peyote buttons actually.*

"Well, if you'd like to try something really nice, my very good friend, Ron Johnson, is

having a fiesta on his new boat. Plenty of wine and champagne to get any—”

“I think I’ll stick to my beer and whiskey.”

“I’ll bring plenty of whiskey. Do you think you can get a suit by tonight? I might have one in your size. What size suit are you?”

Peyote buttons and a boat party would be interesting, “42 slim. I’ve got plenty of formal wear.”

“Great! If you don’t want to drive home after, I could pick you up?”

I don’t want to try driving on peyote, “That’d be good.”

We chit-chat a little longer but I excuse myself when James begins talking about work. Walking towards the front desk, I was already thinking about blowing off James to go swimming with Jenny, but she’s already gone. I grab a box of doughnuts, put in a few kolaches, and go home.

Reaching the door to my apartment, it takes, what seems like, just enough time for my paranoid roommate to put away the weed, pipe, and stashbox before he opens the deadbolt.

“You get fired? I heard you wake up and take off all pissed.” Costa asks smiling.

“No, I didn’t even have to work today. D’you want some breakfast?” I hand him the box of doughnuts and kolaches.

“Hell yeah. Wanna smoke?”

By six o’clock, I had smoked enough to get me excited about the boat party, by seven, I was too high to order a pizza, and when eight o’clock came, I was trying to calm and convince Costa that it’s impossible for a hamster or a human to overdose on THC.

“Costa, don’t be such a dumbass, it was probably all the chocolate in the brownie that killed Chuchee. I don’t think hamsters are supposed to eat chocolate, man.” I say getting

frustrated.

“I dunno, man. I feel really weird. I-I’ve been eating mushrooms every day for, like a week.” he confesses.

“What? You’ve been tripping on mushrooms all week! You—”

“I don’t know, man. My chest feels heavy, like there’s, I do-don’t know,” he starts faux-hyperventilating.

“Costa. Costa, don’t cry. Just calm down. You can’t die from smoking, Costa,” I say saddened, “You’re already dead.” Costa isn’t crying, and I’m no longer trying to calm him down.

“Don’t say that shit, man. That’s not even a little bit funny!”

I look down and cover my eyes, “Man Costa, you were the best friend I ever had.” I look up shedding real tears. It’s amusing how gullible the drugs have made him, but the tears I induced were actually accomplished by imagining his death. It was an unexpected revelation, and more emotional than I had planned, but it was quickly becoming a chore not to laugh. “I miss you so much... I just wish I could talk to you one more... Just one more time.” Now I have to bury my smiling face in my hands.

“I’m right here. You’re not being cool. You’re not funny,” he says trying to convince himself.

“Costa.” I call through my wet red eyes, now adding fear to my voice, “Is that you, man?”

“I’m right here, man.” now he’s crying.

“Costa, why did you have to get in that car? I told you, you were too high.” I put face back into my hands. “You were too fucked up... You were too fucked up...”

“Sid! Sid! Look at me, look at me, man!”

I hear my phone vibrating, muffled-like.

“I’m right here man, just look at—” he pleads.

“Shut-the-fuck-up, Costa. Where’s my phone? I can hear my phone vibrating.”

His anger instantly diffuses his fear.

“That’s fucked up!” Costa leaves the apartment but I’m unwilling, and most likely unable, to stop him, because I still can’t find my phone. Standing and looking around, my eyes track the vibrations already approaching their thirty second limit.

Ha!

The front door slams.

I reach in between the couch cushions and answer the incoming call simultaneously.

“Haha! Yes! Hello,” I answer.

Before the caller responds, before I even finish my greeting, and without looking at the caller ID, I’ve already figured the caller and I am regretting the tone I’ve used.

“Hello right back, fella.” James replies gaily. I don’t like the way he says ‘fella’. He continues, “I’ve just come into your complex and I’m looking for apartment 1606. 1606, what building is that?”

*Dammit.*

“Can you step outside? There are a lot of buildings here. Can you see me driving around?”

“James.”

“Yes?”

“James, I’m not at home, nor is my roommate and—”

“You’re not canceling our—”

“No, I’m already ready but I’m not here, I had to leave to take someone home. Why don’t you meet me at Twin Liquors, the one you passed on the highway over on—”

“Yes-yes, I know the one.”

“Then I’ll see you there in about twenty. Fifteen, if I get all green lights.” I say running upstairs as quickly as possible.

I can feel the rush of adrenaline, and my purposeful single train of thought begins to excite me about this whole boat party endeavor. Flawlessly, I ready myself and make my way to the liquor store.

I’m at Twin Liquors in nine minutes completely sober looking and immaculately dressed in a pressed suit. I decided against the peyote but brought three joints, just in case.

I find James perusing in the whiskey selection. “Hey James, did I give you enough time to pick something decent?” I say to his back.

He turns, smiles, “You look great.”

Dammit. His speaking to me completely destroys any illusions I have about my sobriety and self-control.

“What’s wrong, you don’t like my choice I’ve—”

I realize I’m staring at him wide-eyed and he thinks it’s something to do with the whiskey in his hand.

“No, sorry, I just realized that I did something that might have been a mistake.” I’m saying the wrong stuff.

“What, what is it? Are you... you’re not leaving are you?” He asks walking towards the registers.

“No, I just remembered that I locked the door after I left my apartment and my roommate

stepped out for something, so I may have locked him out.” My own words impress me for being both true and sequitur, and fast.

I feel sober again. I let myself relax. I tend to get paranoid in situations like this, but it’s usually times like this where I get to prove how well I can handle myself under pressure. The fear in his voice also helps reassure me. It’s obvious he really wants to hang out. It’s always been a—

“Sid?” James looks at me suspiciously.

Dammit again. He’s asked me something again and I missed it. I’ve got to start paying better attention to this guy.

The cashier has handed him a second bottle from behind the counter. He’s got a Macallen 12 and something called Pappy Van Winkle, “That sounds good.” I point to the latter with my chin.

I offer to pay for the bottle even though the card I pull from my wallet would get rejected. He refuses my card with a slight gesture and I put my wallet away.

Moments later, we are in his car—a new, cream colored sedan. It’s clean, but smells like he works out in it.

“I’ve always hated those things anyways.” he says.

I don’t know what he’s talking about. He continues, “I’m sure your car will be fine either way, even if you want to leave it ‘till morning.” He flashes one of those smiles, the ones ads use to sell toothpaste or eyeglasses. I wonder if he practices his smiles in front of the mirror.

“Yeah, I’m sure no one would want to take it, but I’m nervous about all the drugs I’ve left in the trunk.” I say, and James lets out a reassuring hearty laugh.

On the drive, we make a lot of other lame jokes. He laughs at all of them, even his own.

He makes a lot of eye contact and grabs my shoulder from time to time. I start to feel like I've been really wrong about James, he's being a really cool guy.

The time and drive pass the way they do when you're high and eventually we arrive at a house, looks like two floors, three bedrooms, and he kills the engine.

"Here we are," he says. I don't know where here is or what we're doing. I know we're nowhere near a boat. I know I missed something.

"Where are we?" This is the fourth or fifth time I've—

He puts his hand on my leg, knee really, guys don't touch each other's legs, and says proudly, "My house."

I smile, because I remember a time I went to the movies with my cousin Greg and Costa. Costa likes making my cousin feel uncomfortable, so while watching the movie, a particularly touching part of the movie, Costa places his hand high on Greg's thigh. Greg, wanting to prove he can take it as well as dish it out, goes right ahead and places his hand on Costa's thigh. Not very creative but a good effort on Greg's part. Costa giggles, and they continue right on with the movie. During the next touching scene Costa fucks with Greg again. This time, cupping Greg's groin. In most instances, that'd be too much for any man, but Greg was determined not to be one upped, so without even blushing, Greg reaches over and places his hand on Costa's mess. Of course, Costa expected this and had his genitalia hanging out his pants. Because I was not sitting next to Costa, I only heard Greg scream followed by Costa's guffaws. It wasn't until after the movie that I heard the whole story. It was pretty funny.

I can't remember why this story suddenly came to mind.

"Come on in."

I don't care for the inside of his house. There's too much white; white leather couches,

white painted walls, off-white carpet, even white cabinets—doesn't feel masculine. James walks into his kitchen and I walk to his book shelves and start fingering through his books and movies. Everything is lame and pretentious, but I see the box for *My Own Private Idaho* on top of his DVD player. I pick up the box and stare at the cover art.

James' voice comes from the big white couch behind me, "See anything interesting?" He's holding a glass of whiskey on the rocks and there's another on a coaster sitting on the coffee table.

"Can I get a whiskey coke?" I ask after spotting the other whiskey rocks.

"Yeah." He gets up quickly and takes the clinking glass back to the kitchen asking, "Tall or short?"

What a good host.

"Short."

"Great." he answers. He's back and changed both our drinks to whiskey cokes.

"See anything good?"

"No, well, this is cool." I say putting down the DVD box, taking the whiskey and a seat. "You ever seen anything else with River Phoenix?" he asks. I take a swig.

James rests his arm up on the back of the couch. I never liked couches with the back coming up past the shoulders. Watching James, I realize it was because I like putting my arms up like he's doing. I can't put them up now with James' arm up behind me, though.

"I saw Dogfight, kind 'a gay. Not overtly gay like Private Idaho, but..." James is staring at me with one of his smiles.

*Oh my god he's gay!*

"Oh my god, you're—"



He cuts me off with a kiss. I'm insulted because of the way he's made his move already. Too quick. Makes me feel like just another dumb, pretty face. Not completely unwarranted, but insulting, nonetheless.

I think of Julie from the front desk then pull away as James comes in for another. "Sorry James, I'm not... you know, into penises." I resist making a play on words because James looks bothered as it is. I feel like a tease, almost wanting to be gay just so that I'm not that kind of date. The kind that naively goes out and takes all the perks of a real date, like dinner and a movie or in this case whiskey and a boat party, but selfishly regards you as just a friend. I don't even really consider him a friend.

I'd rather be gay than a tease. I'll give it an honest try. I lean in and give James a meaty ol' kiss, tongue and all. I even take hold of the back of his head. It's not exciting, but it's not as gross as I imagined it would have been. I don't know if I ever imagined this before, though. James starts cupping my groin. Might as well if I'm going to be making the effort. I bet he'll be telling all his friends about how he got to second base with me. I wonder who he talks to about these kinds of things. He starts tugging at my fly. Now I know he either wants to screw me or give me head.

Fuck that, that's gay.

"Whoa there." I say leaning back and finishing off James' whiskey coke. He gets up to carry our empty glasses back to the kitchen and craftily levels his erection with my face.

Real smooth, James.

"Hey James, we should head out to the boat party soon."

"I thought we were just going to hang out here." He says.

"What?"

“I thought you didn’t mind missing the party.”

“Why’d you think that?” I say looking down at my suit. I didn’t get all dressed up just to make out.

“We were at Specs Liquors and I asked you if you didn’t mind missing the party and you said, ‘That sounds good.’”

“Oh man, I heard messing, like you wanted to get messed up at the party. You had two bottles of whiskey in your hand.” Ha! That was pretty good. “Hey, I got all dressed up—”

“So you want to go?” He asks.

“Yeah, I wanna go to the boat party.” I say trying to get him excited about the idea. “How about one more drink first?”

“Sure.” Not a bad idea, but I had already thought of that.

I can tell he wants to just hang out and get me drunk. He’s also taking his time in the kitchen fixing the drinks. Delaying the inevitable, I suppose. He comes back with doubles, hands me mine, and walks over to his DVD shelf.

“I can put something on while we finish our drinks.”

I gulp mine down, “I don’t know, how long you planning on drinking that drink?” I say pointing with my glass of ice. “Well actually, go ahead, I need to use the bathroom.”

“Oh, there’s a half bath down here to your right or you can use the full upstairs just past the master bedroom.

“I might be a minute, so I’ll just use the one upstairs.” I say, because I really need to take a dump and I’m a little shy about the noise I’ll surely be making.

“Sure sure, take your time.”

Following a lot of smoke with four whiskey cokes in fifteen minutes really starts to hit

you after about twenty minutes. And it actually works faster if you're evacuating yourself.

Sitting on the toilet, my head began swimming. Objects began pulsating and giving off a yellowish glow. I get a little paranoid. I feel my heartbeat around my ears, and my right leg falls asleep. It's times like this that always bring something Jonathon Ames wrote to mind, 'You really don't know how drunk you are until you stand up.' and I had a little bit of trouble standing up.

Standing and staring at myself in the mirror, I come to a horrifying realization about James. He put something in that last whiskey coke.

I need help, so I call Costa.

"Costa, you need to—"

"Hey you bitch, that's not cool—"

"Please shut up Costa and listen. There's this crazy guy, and I think he's wants to rape me." I say in a slur-whisper.

"You're fucking with me dude, right?"

"Hey man, I'm totally fucking serious, you gotta come pick me up."

"Man, I don't know if I could even drive like—"

"No man, you're the only... I don't know what else... what do I do man?" I say, crying for the second time today.

"Alright man, don't worry. I'll get you. Where are you?"

"Oh shit, I don't know. I'll have to escape. I'll call you when I get to a crossroads."

"You have to escape? From—"

I hang up and open the window. My stomach on the window ledge, I look out and see the light in the next room, the master's bedroom. He's probably getting rope and all sorts of torture-

sex instruments ready. I crawl out onto the roof, the drug effects intensifying.

Crossing that window would be the shortest route to the back of the house, but because I would surely be captured, I circle around the front of the house, not an easy feat when under the influence of whatever it was I'd been given.

Crawling on my hands and knees I hear James calling and turning on some other lights, he also flushes the toilet. I can only imagine he was flushing the remainder of whatever drug it was he slipped into my drink, thereby ridding himself of any evidence should I decide to go to the police.

With the backyard now in view, I see he's got a tall cinder block fence. I should have expected that. I'm only left with the option of dropping off the side of the house and running through the front yard, but I have to act quickly as I am quickly losing control of my limbs. Had I not so much adrenaline in my body, I'd surely be unconscious.

When I land, I should roll to prevent injury to my back.

I let one leg dangle over the edge, then I fall hard, twisting my ankle, and slamming my shoulder on the ground. I roll on the ground as an afterthought, but it seems ineffective. I get up and limp-run away to the further of the two crossroads.

It is not long after that I black-out, but remain conscious. Costa's account given to me hours later helps me piece together what happened.

"Shut up dude, I already told you, there's no one chasing us. I was driving around all over the place looking for your wandering ass, and there was no one else on the streets, man."

"Where are we?"

"In Grapevine Village, you told me you were in Rosemary Acres when you first called?"

"This isn't Rosemary."

“Shut up, *buey*. You’re drunk as shit,” he says. “Look. You called me at 10:20,” showing me his phone, “told me you were at Grapevine Village on the corner of Craddock and LBJ. Then you call me at 10:34, and you tell me that you’re on LBJ and Walnut, that’s like fifteen blocks from Craddock, *buey*. You ran fifteen blocks in, like, twelve minutes all drunk.”

“I feel sick.”

“You wanted the What-A-Sized, double-meat Whataburger. Look man,” again showing me his phone, “I called you eight times, look, when I was at Walnut. You’re real fucking lucky. I was about to go home when you finally sent me your message.”

“What?”

“Look, ‘im vndr the the bkack turck’ it took me like five minutes to figure it out, ‘I’m under the black truck.’ Hahaha, the fucking truck was red,” he says before I cut him off.

“Pull over.”

“Ah shit, man. Your Whataburger was like eight bucks, man. Ugh, your suit’s all jacked up.”

Costa knows I’ve just been through quite the ordeal, and only narrowly escaped a fate much worse. Yet, it’s remarkable Costa doesn’t ask me about what happened. I’m regretful about most of the night and there’s too much I wouldn’t be able to explain. I think he can sense it’s something I can’t talk about, right now.

He’s doing great keeping my spirits high despite how sick I feel. I regret scaring him and not appreciating him more.

“Blockbuster’s open. You wanna get a movie real quick?”

“A movie sounds pretty cool, man,” I say smiling again.

Costa smiles back, “Hey, we should get *Deliverance*.”

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A MOMENT OF CLARITY

I don't want to have sex with Kasi, even though it's been over a year since I've last been with a woman, but Costa invites her, and she comes to a high-society party with us. She wears a strapless pale blue sequin gown, like one you'd see at a high school prom. She has her blond hair tied up in a bun, adorned with a plastic tiara. I wear a dark grey shirt over black slacks, and a black vest over a red tie. Costa wears a tweed jacket over a black t-shirt and brown corduroy pants. He had to borrow a clean shirt.

Costa has had sex with Kasi. He said that she was terrible, so he decided that they should only be friends. He said that she doesn't move or make any noise, even when she comes. Then, how would he know she's come? I met Kasi only on two previous occasions, but she acts as though we're old friends. At the party, she is always at my side when I am trying to mingle. She's at the door when I'm taking a piss. It's a little annoying, but I don't mind so much after we change parties.

There are two, three-hundred people at the quadplex party. There are two birthdays on the top floor, complete with kegs and cake. On the bottom floor, one of the two rooms is having a White Russian party, the other is not really having a party, but is glad to host anyone wanting to smoke bud. It should have been fun, but I don't know anyone. Even Costa disappears somewhere. I drink too much, and I smoke ugly looking shwag. The guy rolling complains because he keeps finding cat hair and carpet fibers in his weed.

I get an uneasy feeling of anxiety when Kasi takes my arm. I start to judge her. The coffee liqueurs from the White Russians aren't helping the feelings of detestation I feel towards the crowd, either. I really hate anyone who reminds me of me. I hate the guys who dress in suits and vests, but wear sneakers. I hate the guys wearing black button shirts with black slacks. I hate the guys with facial hair that is too manicured. And I hate all the girls.

I'm wasting my life doing this same pointless shit again.

I should be doing something different by now.

This music sucks.

Fucking Muse.

Kasi, sensing my unease, takes me to a more isolated part of the quadplex. We're sitting at a poker table with plastic cups surrounding an empty keg. A few people sit on either side of us.

A person of indeterminate sex starts talking to Kasi. I take the opportunity to take my keys and place them on the table, then, not so casually drop them onto the floor. I stick my head under the table, pick up my keys, and, as silently as I can, throw up on the floor. I'm sure the music helped in concealing my purge, because when I look up, Kasi is still talking with the ladyboy. I get up, careful not to step on my own puke, and walk to the sink in the kitchen to rinse out my mouth. I come back and Kasi is alone. I sit on the other side of her.

After I sit, I can feel Kasi's stare, but I refuse to look her in the eye. She is smart not to talk to me right now. My angry-lit state has left me scrutinizing everything I hear people say. She takes my arm and puts her head on my shoulder. I calm down some. Her gesture does a lot to relieve a little of anxiety. That and Manu Chao comes on in one of the neighboring rooms.

Kasi is not unattractive. I never thought she was unattractive. She is pretty, in fact, and

she has several features that I find appealing. Her breasts are large, and soft I find out after cupping one of them. Her skin is clear and white but vibrant. I don't like her toes, though. They look like chewed-up raisins. Costa said that it was because she does ballet. I find myself staring and wondering what sort of texture they have when Costa's voice accompanied by Manu Chao's wonderful instruments comes through the door.

"Hey Sid, I'm gonna get laid, man!" he shouts, "Let's get out of here before Candice changes her mind."

"What were you gont get laid." I attempt, and Costa shakes his head at my gibberish. He turns to Kasi and scowls.

"Did she touch you, *buey*?" he asks looking completely sincere. "It's okay, you can tell me. You're in a safe place now." He flashes Kasi another angry look. She just rolls her eyes.

He picks up a beer bottle and gently holds it in front of me with both hands and says, "Show me on the doll where she touched you. Did she touch you here?" he asks pointing at the center of the bottle.

"Did she touch you like this?" he asks jerking-off the bottle.

"Like this?" he begins sucking the top of the bottle and cradling imaginary balls. I think this is really funny, even if he is sucking on a random bottle he's just picked up.

"You slip his some rooffees, Kasi? That's seriously messed up. You know Sid won't fuck you no matter how many *tachas* you give him."

"Shut up, Costa. I'm taking care of him. He looks bad."

"He looks bad. Of course he looks bad. You fucked him up on *tachas*. I'm gonna go get Candice. I don't wanna come back and see him all passed out, and you sucking on his knob, you hear?"



“Eat a dick.”

Hearing Costa makes me feel infinitely better. I’m still smiling when Costa comes back with his plump date. She has a hard, low brow and a not-so-faint mustache. I’m glad Costa never has regrets. Costa wants to make out with Candice on the back seat, and Kasi doesn’t have a license, so I drive, which is difficult, but I successfully get Costa to Candice’s apartment.

“I’m still pretty wide awake if you wanna watch a movie at your place, or something?” she asks.

A movie sounds good. I could start having sex with Kasi at any time I choose, I’m sure. I think. I consider whether my breath smells of vomit or the whiskey I’m sipping in my apartment. Probably whiskey. I keep putting off making a move because we’re watching Boondock Saints, and there isn’t a good moment. I go to the bathroom to throw up and brush my teeth.

We finish the rest of the movie at 3:30 in the morning. The exact time where you have to make a move or the girl will let herself out. I see Kasi going for her jacket and she is probably going to ask me to drive her home. I take her hand and walk her into the bedroom. She is on edge with excitement, but I stay in control. I don’t often like what happens when I let girls take control sexually.

In my room, I try to kiss her as she turns away, like she is shy. No way she could be acting like this, now. Like she has no idea what we’re going to do. I feel frustrated and going to sleep suddenly is on par with having sex.

I have not yet regained full language capacity so “Do you want to lie down?” comes out “Comin’ lie down, you ‘ere?” as I extend my hand towards the bed. “Sleeping here’s infinitely more comfortable than the couch. That and that couch has been through all sorts of sin and debauchery, mostly at the hands of Costa, and it’s usually him by himself,” comes out, “Costa,”

giggle, “dirtied then couch.”

“I hate Costa. He’s such a loser. I can’t see why you hang out with him,” she says.

“I can,” I say stripping down to my boxers. I don’t want to talk anymore.

I turn off the lights, lie down and make no other offerings. She is still for a few moments. I can hear her as she undresses silently. She lies down next to me in the same manner. I am awake for five minutes more. Only long enough for me to ignore her once as she presses her ass against me. She lets out one very unenthusiastic moan.

I sleep deeply that night and day. I hear her making noise in the morning, first in bed, then kicking about in my bathroom. I’m glad she’s meek enough to let me sleep in instead of waking me to give her a ride. She quiets down soon enough and settles for reading one of my brother’s books. She’s reading Kundera’s *The Joke* when I wake up several hours later. She looks at me with hard eyes, obviously upset about a lot of things, but mostly about my not screwing and sleeping in.

“Sleep okay?” I ask stretching loudly.

“Can you take me home?” really hard eyes, “I have some things to do.”

“Course, what time is it?”

“Two,” more eyes.

“It’s so early,” I say twisting and cracking my neck and back. “Well... Let me get up and I’ll get you to your things.”

I thought I had a chubby, but I find out it’s a full-on stiffer when I get out of bed. I don’t make any effort at concealing my erection, nor does Kasi make any effort at concealing her gaze. I stretch again, pulling my arms way back and standing up on my toes. Picking up my jeans from the floor, my junk completely comes out of my boxers. I put one leg in then the other. I grip my

erection with all five fingers for effect, and I stuff it back into my pants. I put on a shirt, step into my shoes, and after I brush my teeth, my whole morning routine is finished in four minutes.

“Let’s go,” I say still hard.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### TAKING ALANE

“You’re not supposed to be awake.”

“But you are.”

I like Alane’s company, but I’ve already been got after because I let her stay up late to talk to me. She likes to come out while I doze. She’ll sit quietly and wait for me to wake. I usually smile when I wake up to find her sitting on the floor in front of me.

I had a dream a few nights back where an old boss, he was the manager when I was working as a buser at Binni’s Pub, this manager, Tony, a huge guy, was chasing me with a small silver revolver, like the ones cops used in movies in the 90’s. The tiny gun looks a little ridiculous in Tony’s hand, but I see him shoot one guy and now he’s after me. At some point in the dream, I start dragging Alane behind me trying to save her too. I don’t usually look for any kind of meaning in dreams, but I know that when I dream about girls, I tend to pay more attention to them during my waking hours.

“Do you have anything to read?”

I once made the mistake of loaning a book I hadn’t read to one of the residents. Kiia was on HRSA at the time, so she was sleeping out in the hall and complained about not being able to sleep because of the florescent lighting. I don’t usually have trouble sleeping in these brightly lit halls.

At that time, I had borrowed two books from Samantha. She likes Chuck Palahniuk, so

she'd recommended *Rant* and *Haunted*. At the time, I was halfway done with *Rant*. I wasn't completely impressed with it, but I thought Palahniuk might be fun for younger readers.

So I lent Kiia *Haunted*. She stayed up reading the first chapter. After a half hour, she got up and handed it back to me. She said, "This is a weird book. I don't think this is a good book."

"Was it scary?" I asked.

"No, just... I don't think it's good."

Well that just peaked my curiosity more than a positive review ever could. But I felt bad after I read the first chapter and I regretted loaning her the book.

The first chapter, titled Guts, is about a man who gets his intestines sucked out of his colon trying to get-off stimulating his asshole at the bottom of a swimming pool with the suction drain. Because his intestines are slick with whatever intestinal fluids would have coated them, he can't get a grip and has to chew through them to free himself and come up for air.

"No, I don't have any books, Alane. You should go to sleep," I say.

"Can I read this?" she asks holding up a copy of *Satan Burger* that I *had* in my bag.

"That book sucks," I say, but it doesn't. Merrick III makes Palahniuk look tame. Even the cover is filthy.

Alane ignores the false estimation of my paperback. She finds her place in the story. Evidently, she's been reading it a while.

"Give me that," I say reaching out. She is close enough to where I could take it out of her hand, but you don't snatch from Alane. You wouldn't want to pet a mouse halfway down a snake's mouth either.

Alane ignores me and continues reading.

I tell her, "Go to the library if you want a book so badly," but instantly regret it.

Alane tosses the book at my feet and spins around to face the wall. She can't be that upset because she didn't stomp back into her room. Yet, I feel compelled to conciliate.

"Don't get all butt-hurt, Alane. You can borrow the book," I say tossing back the anti-novel.

"I wish I could get out of this place," she mutters.

"What would you do if you did get out of here?"

"Whatever the fuck I wanted to."

"Like what?" I prod.

Mindlessly chipping away at her blue nail polish, she tells me, "I want to drive a car."

"That's it? You want to get out of here to drive a car?"

I want to mock her lack of creativity, to jest at her inability to conjure up some deep, liberating desire like going sky diving or walking in the forest with penguins or riding a jet pack to Spain when I realize that her going out and driving somewhere would be just as outlandish as anything else.

But driving, of all things, is an experience I could give her, but I'm not sure if—

"I don't know," I say, wiping sleep out of my eye.

She asks, "What?" after some time.

"If I gave you a chance to drive, would you do it?"

"I don't know how to drive."

"I know, but if I gave you the chance, would you take it?"

"But I don't know how to drive."

"Nobody knows how to drive the first time they drive. It's their first time," I argue.

"Sure, I guess."

“Lame,” I say not convinced she wants it badly enough.

Not enough to get me to risk it. It'd be perfect right now, if she had the balls. I've got all my paperwork done, Peralez' done his rounds, and everyone is asleep, including old Brakstock. I could easily take her for a spin around town. There aren't very many people on the streets at 3:30 A.M., any how. Even if a cop pulled me over I could say Alane was my kid sister, or girlfriend even. And even if they checked her for ID, I could—

“Fuck you! You call me lame, you think you're all badass just because you can come and go. You're fucking lame?”

“Alright,” I say, “let's go,” already walking to the side exit.

I grab the walkie.

On my walk to the door, my plans to simply go out for a drive are slightly altered. I turn back and look past Alane at one of the bedroom doors. There, young Abby stands looking back at us. Alane does not notice Abby, because she keeps her eyes forward all the way out the unit. Nonetheless, I don't hesitate on my way through the door. I offer Abby a parting smile before shutting and locking the door.

There is a survival instinct in me to handle these sorts of distressing conditions. Moments I'd normally refer to as 'fucked-up.' I keep my mind from looking too far ahead. Looking too far ahead of my walking out of Springhill Girls with Alane does not have a possible happy ending. Possible happy parts, but no good endings. I am permitted only a foresight extending as far as one or two immediate goals.

First thing, get to the car. The walk from the Springhill Girls to the parking lot is less than fifty yards. A staffer might be outside throwing out the garbage or smoking a cigarette. CSO might be walking in or out of one of the other units. Who knows? There might be some weirdo

lurking out in the bushes.

Not too long ago, Mr. Shrek, another MHT, was fired when he was caught masturbating just outside his unit. He was caught and confronted by Peralez, of all people, but Peralez refused to talk about it. It was old Mr. Shrek who told a few staffers what possessed him to do it.

Shrek said that ever since he started taking blood thinners following heart surgery he hasn't been able to get an erection. His wife didn't leave him, but she's been different with him. He didn't specify what different was, but he said he'd not been taking care of himself as a result. He'd not been keeping up with his medication. He'd taken to drinking during the day and not eating well. So as one might expect, he was falling asleep at work. "But that's when it happened," he told staffers. He woke up, and he's got an erection. He hadn't gotten his dick hard in months, almost a year, he said. He said he had to, simply had to, seize this opportunity. And he did.

I keep the radio on. If I run into to anyone, I could always say I'm walking her to the CSO office.

"Where are we going?"

I don't respond. Shushing her doesn't feel right, either.

Thankfully, she doesn't ask me anything else before we reach my car.

Inside, Alane says, "I thought I was going to drive."

I turn the key to the ignition, and in the short moment before the engine turns, I say, "You'll get your chance." The engine and music start up simultaneously. The motor quiets to a hum, and the radio finishes up Life and Limb by Fugazi.

"What's this?" Alane asks, scrunching up her face.

I suck my teeth at her apparent criticism of my taste in music. I guess it is a little creepy. I



eject the tape and turn it over to side B, labeled Happy Punk Music. It starts up with Screeching Weasel, a band I've listened to since high school. Six Percent is one of their better songs, but I push rewind and shift my car into drive.

The tape finishes rewinding as we approach the bottom of the hill, and Cool Kids, the first song on side B, comes out the speakers.

Alane laughs at the silly keyboard opening but then bobs her head in approval, and we leave the grounds.

Before the end to the next song I ask her, "Do you want to go back to Rotary?"

"I thought you were gonna let me drive."

I nod but I don't clarify my question. I meant to ask if she'd *ever* like to return. I head over towards the outlet mall.

We drive through the empty parking lot for several minutes before I spot a security vehicle. I pull up to his driver's side and lower the radio and my window. Alane asks, "What are you doing?" in an unnecessary whisper. I ignore her.

The mall cop lowers his window and I ask him, "Would it be alright for me to give my girlfriend a driving lesson, here?" I lean back in my seat for him to take a look at Alane. I turn to see what she thought about calling her my girlfriend. She sits wide-eyed as far back into her seat, looking as conspicuous as anyone could. I shake my head and turn back to the pretend cop.

"Yeah, just keep away from the buildings and other cars," he tells us. "And the curb. Be careful with all the curbs." he adds before rolling his window back up.

As soon as I finish getting my tinted glass up, Alane punches my arm, "Why you fucking talking to that cop for?" She punches me again, "Why you call me your girlfriend?"

"Ow, stop that. Damn, what'd you think I talk to him for? You think we can just drive

circles around this parking lot at 4 A.M. with drawing attention,” I say not answering her question about calling her my girlfriend. “Come here,” I say stepping out of the car and waving her over to the driver’s seat.

“What do I do?” she asks instinctively grabbing the wheel at ten and two.

“Pull your seat up and fix your mirrors. You got that little knob their to fix them like... yeah, like that.”

She starts driving and I turn the radio back up. My favorite songs from Screeching Weasel’s BoogadaBoogadaBoogada album are finishing up and now random songs from my youth begin playing. As the label indicates, it’s all happy punk music; Tsunami Bomb singing Lemonade and The Invasion from Within, a few songs by the Lillingtons, A.F.I.N.I.A.F.I by Placebo, some NOFX, and Pulley. I know Diesel Boy finishes up side B with a good cover of Punk Rock Girl.

It doesn’t take long before Alane is turning left and right, making full stops, and reversing perfectly into parking spaces. I tell her to take the car to the farthest edge of the parking lot and try to get the speedometer up to fifty. The radio is playing the Ataris’ Hey Kid. She’s going good and moving the needle steadily up when I yell, “Stop!”

She slams the brakes and we skid to a stop.

“What the shit!” she screams looking at me.

“You wanna get something to eat?” I ask smiling.

“You ass,” she says then looks at the steering wheel.

It’s 4:55 A.M. and Alane seems disquieted by the prospect of not going back to the treatment center.

“I think I’m getting tired,” she tells me.

“Okay.”

The only thing I can think to do at this point is drive us back to Rotary House and drop Alane off at the bottom of the hill. I’ll have to give her my key to get back into the unit and the walkie. Abandoning my shift has secured my termination. I could take her back and say that she tried to escape and I was just bringing her back, but Abby saw us walk out together, and I’d have to ask Alane to say all sorts of lies, and it—

“Okay,” Alane says before climbing over the shifter and parking brake. She settles up on my lap and wraps her arms around my neck.

I don’t say anything and I don’t move until she puts her mouth to mine. I allow myself to reach up under her shirt but only as far as her ribcage. She pulls back and leans against the dashboard. She begins pulling off her tee. I don’t help her disrobe even though I know it won’t alleviate any of the blame off me.

In the end, I’ll have to take all the blame. She is seventeen, and I’m... 24.

There are hardly any breasts tucked into Alane’s sports bra, and again I only allow my hand up as far as her ribs but I give special attention to her navel and flat belly. She comes forward again kissing me with all the skill of an experienced lover. She takes my hand and has just placed it on her bud of a breast when there is a rap on the window.

Startled, I quickly remove my hand, and Alane lets out a snorted giggle. This time, Alane lowers the window with all the confidence one wouldn’t expect from a half dressed teenager.

Another uniformed parking lot attendant tells us, “You’re gonna have to take this someplace else. We’re gonna be getting people showing up soon.”

“Thanks officer,” Alane gruffs offering up a mocking salute, “we’ll take it from here.”

“Shut up, Alane,” I tell her then to the attendant, “We’re headed out. Thanks.”

“Yep,” he says frowning and walking back to a golf cart.

“Don’t tell me to shut-up!”

Alane looks unnecessarily bitter at my wording. She push-slaps my face and climbs off my lap and back into the drivers seat. I can’t help but be taken aback. It’s clear to me, I’m quickly losing control of this situation. I shake my head stepping out of the car and scoop Alane’s shirt off the floor.

Walking around the front of the car, I’m at a loss for words. I hope something comes to me before I reach the driver’s side. Something that might give me an edge over Alane’s discomfort.

Nope.

Alane’s locked the door.

I suck my teeth and do the only thing I can that won’t put any more power into this bipolar girl’s hands. I walk away, but this doesn’t work out any better. It isn’t more than a few steps when I hear the engine rev up as she puts it back into drive.

Nope, I’m not going to turn around. I’ll just keep on walking.

Goddamn! This bitch almost runs over me when she tries swinging the car around me. She slams the brakes much like she did during our lesson.

She lowers the window and asks, “Where are you going?”

“To the payphone.” I wasn’t, but the possibility of making a call adds a certain amount of mystery to my walking away.

“Whatever, don’t be a sour pussy. Get in the car.”

The outlet mall sits on the expressway and it’s past five. The first of this morning’s commuters are traversing the streets and letting Alane drive doesn’t sound like the brightest of

ideas, but dying now on a head-on collision wouldn't be the worst end.

"It's sourpuss, not sour pussy," I say walking over to the passenger's side.

"So, are we going home?" she asks.

"What are you calling home?"

She seems confused by this question but finally contents with, "I meant Rotary House."

"You call the Austin Rotary House, home?" I ask, but I know this is not something we want to talk about now. "Let's get some food instead."

"Where not going back?"

"I'm not, but if you want, I can drop you off."

She considers this and finally settles on a decision. "What can we eat for breakfast?"

"Let's get Whataburger."

"What's Water Burger?" she asks sincerely.

This poor girl. How can you get to the age of seventeen living in Texas and not have intimate carnal knowledge of Whataburger.

"I'll show you." She smiles and makes a move to get out of the car, "Where are you going?"

"You're not going to drive?" she asks.

"No, you are. What's the point of showing you how to drive?"

She accepts this and tries to play it tough, but I can tell she is nervous about putting her skills to the test.

I play it cool. By keeping her behind the wheel, I've regained my composure and some control. The tape has finished for I don't know how long. Alane pushes the rewind button.

"I like these songs."

I nod in agreement. We get onto the frontage and the expressway without incident. I have to tell her to speed up or slow down a few times, but otherwise she drives fine. We get to the Whataburger parking lot and Alane looks at the brightly lit orange and white billboard and corrects her misconceived pronunciation of its name giving unusual emphasis to the H in Whata.

“What-a-bur-ger.”

“Let’s go,” I say tossing her her shirt.

I watch her put it on, and we get out of the car together. Inside, there are a few workers wearing one piece coveralls with a petroleum company logo embroidered onto their right breasts. There is a young mother with a two-year-old boy wearing only a diaper and t-shirt and something inside a stroller.

There is no one in line as we approach the counter, and I ask Alane, “What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can order it here exactly like you want it.”

“I don’t...”

The young guy taking our order patiently waits without speaking. I step forward to the counter and place my order, “Let me get a double-meat Whataburger with cheese, grilled onions, extra pickles, toasted wheat bun, and a jalapeno on the side. Oh, and can you put an egg in it?”

“Yes sir,” he tells me and then we both look at Alane. I tried to place as complicated an order as I could to add a bit of pressure and to regain the upper hand, but I think I went too far because I see Alane’s eyes begin to tear up.

“Alane?” I ask gently.

“I don’t know.” Her words come out choked and strained.

“I’ll just get you a regular Whataburger, is that cool?” I say turning back towards the cashier.

“Sheesh,” he says, not quiet under his breath, and then...

“What! What-the-fuck!” Alane screams.

“Whoa, Alane, it’s alright. Come on-”

“What am I suppose to do?” Alane cries out.

Then the cashier chimes in, “Hey, why don’t you chill out?”

Alane shoots forward and shoves everything; order numbers, cups, condiments tray, and credit card machine towards our young friend, “Don’t tell me to chill out, motherfucker. You chill out you—” Alane begins climbing up onto the counter. I grab her by the waist and swing her around behind me.

“Alane! Whoa, it’s cool. Don’t worry about that guy. He’s just a punk.”

I let her go, but I stay standing between her and the cashier. I need to deescalate things, now. One of the rig workers, a white guy with a dirty scruffy beard, walks toward us with a puffed up chest, “Is there a problem, here?”

“What—” is all I manage to say before Alane lets out a terrifying scream. She blows past us and begins attacking the soda fountain. She throws the napkin and lid dispensers in our direction. I back away, and even the rig worker lifts up his arms in defense. She continues screaming, and the infant in the stroller cries out.

“Hey, we’re going to call the police,” another employee tells us from behind the counter. Alane removes the grill from the soda fountain and whirls it toward this other employee. He narrowly dodges out of its path, and a terrible clatter is heard at the fry station. Alane continues grabbing and throwing things.

“Stop it,” the young mother shouts, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Alane don’t.”

Alane speeds towards the rig worker, but this time, he gets out of the way. The young mother and her family are left in her trajectory. Alane kicks the stroller and it violently skids away striking a few swivel chairs. The howls from the infant within call its mother. Alane, frighteningly enough, charges towards the stroller again.

The mother screams, the rest of rig workers stand, several employees finally come out from behind the counter, and someone tackles Alane. She continues screaming on the floor. I look over toward the registers and there is already someone on the phone narrating a play by play of the scene. It takes all three rig workers to restrain her. Alane kicks and bites at their hands and is momentarily freed before being pulled down again. I continue backing away and I’m at the door when the girl on the phone reaches a hand out towards me shouting, “Sir!”

“I’ll be right back. I’m gonna get her medication.” Everyone turns to look at me, but, thankfully, no one follows me outside. I drive straight to my apartment. Inside, Costa is still sleeping. I can’t let myself think too far ahead, otherwise things turn bleak and I might lose my nerve. I need to stay focused.

Inside, I know I should pack and get out of here as quickly as possible. I remove a briefcase from the closet containing my ID’s, cash, and bankbooks. I consider cutting my hair. I decide against it, because changing my appearance makes my departure seem that much more devious.



## CHAPTER XXIX

### I GET A CALLING CARD

“*Yobseyo?*”

“Hi, Yunee... Hello? Yunee...”

“Why do you call me?”

I feel a sharp pain in my gut like a poker rubbing against exposed flesh, but it goes away quickly and leaves no trace of ever having been there.

I start, “I want to go back to—”

“When will you come back?”

“Soon, maybe this week. Next week at the latest,” I tell her. It sounds like she started to say something, but I don’t catch it. “Hello?”

I’m afraid she’s going to ask me why I left. Why had I left? I shouldn’t have left her like that. I don’t remember if we were together or separated when I left.

Had I been cowardly by leaving Korea and not finishing things over there? Was it just an opportune time to change into something new? I digressed, if anything. Or regressed, which ever of those words it’s supposed to be. Only my brother’s books kept my mind from atrophying like the rest of me.

“Are you come back for me?” She asks.

“Yes,” I am grateful to say.

She laughs, trying to be coy, then asks, “Why?”

I am prepared for this question, “When I came back to the States, I didn’t find anything. There wasn’t anybody like you.”

“Why did you leave?” she asks no longer trying to be coy.

“I was...” I start too quickly hoping something would come to me, but it doesn’t.

“You were frightened,” she tells me.

“No, I just—”

“You were frightened, and you left quickly.”

I think about this and answer, “Yes, I was afraid because I’m—”

“Because you think you were going to die.”

When I took on my brother’s name, I also took his social security number, his clean background check, and his birthday. I celebrated my birthdays on the anniversary of my brother’s birth. I was telling myself my age had increased by one year from the day of his birth. I thought of my self in my brother’s years, and that made me twenty-eight years and six months old.

Since that day, I’ve not negotiated the passage of time through my own years. I had hoped to forget about it and let the passage come to an age like forty, so far from the age of twenty five that it could no longer be possible for my life to end.

I allowed myself to live since then without thinking of the real approach to my twenty-fifth birthday, but because of Yunee’s question, I allow my head to calculate Damian’s age.

I am twenty-four years and eight months old.

“I am going to die, Yunee,” I tell her, “soon.”

“How will you die?”

“I don’t know, but—”

“Do you think I will kill you?” she asks.

I hadn't thought of that. That would be one way to die.

“Do you want to kill me?”

“I don't think I will,” she begins, “when I will see you?” but again I'm not sure about the wording or whether this is a question.

“Soon,” I say, “Yunee, can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Did you cut my hair when I was asleep?”

“I will tell you when I see you.”

## CHAPTER XXX

### I USE A LANDLINE

“Hello?”

“Hey Costa, what are you doing?”

“Yo, Sid! What’s this phone number? Where are you calling me from?”

“I’m calling you from my dad’s hometown.”

“Hey they’ve been calling me for you from your work. What the fuck’s up with them?”

They sound all desperate to get to you.”

“Yeah, I kinda just took off and didn’t give them any notice.”

“That’s it? Just because you quit?”

“That and some chick who ran away from there said I helped her escape when she got taken back to the treatment center.”

Costa does not question whether I did help her or not and asks, “No shit, Sid? Did you fuck her? Wait! Don’t tell me. How old was she?”

“She was seventeen, and I didn’t do anything with her.”

“Damn, you should have fucked her. Just tell that bitch not to say anything until she’s eighteen,” he tells me.

“Yeah, probably. Hey man?”

“What’s up?”

“I’m sorry I’m just taking off like this, but I’m gonna be staying here until I take off to

Korea.”

“No man, that’s cool. I understand.”

“I left some checkbooks in my bedroom. You can take one and fill it out for this month’s rent.”

“You don’t think you’ll be coming back?”

“I don’t think so.”

“When are you gonna get your stuff?”

“You can keep it.”

Then there is this long pause in the conversation. It is a pause that is long enough where one would question whether the other was still on the other side of the line, but neither of us did, because we both knew the other was still there. Costa finally manages, “So where’d you think you’re going?”

“Probably back to Korea.”

“Ha, I always thought you were making that shit up about Korea. I never saw you with any girls. And you had nothing with you when you asked me if I needed a roommate.”

“I just finished talking to her on the phone.”

“It was probably that chick you kidnapped from the mental hospital.”

“I didn’t kidnap her, and it’s not a mental hospital.”

“What’s her name?” he asks.

“What girl? The one from Korea or the one from the treatment center?” I ask, unsure.

“The Korean chick.”

“Yunee,” I quickly answer.

“Whatever, you’re making that up. That was Amber from the insane asylum.”

“Amber?”

“There’s probably *chingos* of Amber alerts for her out there with your license plate.”

Costa still makes me laugh, “Shut up, Costa.”

“Oh wait, I’m getting another call. It’s probably another Amber alert,” he says and I continue laughing, “Ah no, it’s Kasi.”

“Really? Kasi’s calling you? I thought she hated you.” I ask him.

“She does. She’s mad cause I keep telling everyone she’s a bad lay.”

“You do.”

“Her and Samantha have been calling you, but your phones not on.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Alright. Hey I’m gonna let you go. I’m gonna pick up on Kasi and see if she wants to go out.”

“Ha. Go for it, Costa,” I tell him.

He says, “Okay. Well, I’ll talk to you later,” and then hangs up.

I wonder if Costa is going to remember our goodbye.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### GOING THROUGH MEXICO

My dad's house is thirty minutes from the Mexican border. I park at a duty free shop and walk across the border into Reynosa carrying my passport and a little under \$6000. They do not check ID on the way into Mexico, and it only costs fifty cents.

I'm pleasantly surprised to find my Korean bank account stayed open and two separate deposits were made after I had left. My last month's pay and a prorated severance total up to 3.8 million won. That's most of another \$3500. I guess Father Soju and Bossman Kim really came through.

In Reynosa, I'm disappointed because the hotel I stay in looks a lot like the hotels in Texas. I had imagined something with big orange Spanish tile on the floor and a large balcony surrounded by an ornate black iron balustrade.

Still, I prefer this to the hotels in Nuevo Laredo. In Nuevo Laredo, the hotels will line edges of their hotels' roofs with broken glass bottles. I don't know whether the broken glass is to keep birds or burglars off the roof, and they might have been motels.

I don't want to eat in this part of Reynosa. All the food is expensive and tastes just like in the Texas side. I'd rather pay a cab the difference to take me father south.

A cab driver outside my hotel takes me to a restaurant where I invite him in to eat with me. He mostly invites himself, telling me he would be willing to wait for me to go anywhere I want. He then casually mentions he hasn't eaten lunch or dinner himself, but he would be willing

to wait with me. He also tells me that if I buy him dinner, he could pick up women or drugs for me.

At dinner, I ask him to find some marijuana.

He takes me to his and his mother's house. He shows me half a pound that he will sell me for \$75. I take a small part of that, what I think should last a few days, and pay him a 20.

I buy some cheap cigars and roll blunts in my hotel room, and I smoke one of the cigars after I'm done getting high to mask the smell. I regret not picking up one good cigar.

I get a knock on my door at 11 P.M. It's the cab driver, and he wants to know if I want him to take me somewhere to get a drink. He tells me he knows of a really nice place, nearby.

Sounds like a good idea.

He takes me to a really seedy place in an alley behind some other bars, but that's not when I question whether it's a good idea. Neither is it when I see armed pedestrians guarding the corners, or when I see a punk kid huffing glue from a paper bag. I question my appetite when we pass a lady outside hosing the area around the dumpster. Some of the water splashes onto the punk kid, but worse yet, it kicks up this horrible garbage-water smell.

The driver steps in before me and orders two beers for the both of us. I take a look around the place. It's small with only two tables and another three seats in front of the bar. As far as I can see, there are no customers in the place. There are three girls who work the floor around a pool table. I wait for the cabby to take a seat at one of the tables before I take one at the bar. One of the girls comes up to me and asks me if I want to buy her a drink. I tell her no, and take a pull from my beer. She asks me to play a game of pool with her and the winner buys the other a drink.

The pool table looks in good shape which seems out of place in a hole like this. Also, the



table and space allotted for shots around it take up more than two-thirds of the whole place.

“*Vamonos*,” I say following her to the pool cues. She racks them loose and tells me to break. I re-rack them and then sink two solids on the break. I sink two more solids before I miss, and she gets a go. She sinks two easy stripes before missing on a bank shot. I’m pretty confident I’m going to win a free drink, but I only get one other turn before she drops the rest of her balls and the eight.

She walks to the bar and orders herself a wine and me another beer. They serve her wine with ice. I ask her why she’s drinking a wine with ice. She tells me she likes it that way and asks if I want to play another game. I say yes, but make it nine ball.

She doesn’t ask me the rules of nine ball and racks them correctly this time before she breaks. Again, I only get one shot in before she beats me, but I finish my beer before she gets a chance to finish her wine. The other two girls approach us and ask if we want to play pairs. Me and the girl who just took me for two drinks against them. I accept and they rack them for us. I break, we each four get only one turn, and I and my partner lose. I would have gotten angry at this point, getting hustled out of buying four drinks for these ladies in less than thirty minutes, but my partner hands a few bills to the bartender and says she’ll pay her share.

I tell them I’ll keep playing them, but the winners are only allowed to drink straight whiskey from this point on. No more watered down wine. They accept, and I still end up winning only one of the next five games. No matter, I drink double whiskeys right along side the champions. When I try to leave, I’m given a tab with fifteen drinks for the girls, twelve drinks for me, and ten drinks for the cab driver.

I feel I’ve been cheated, but when I look at the driver’s table, he’s got more than ten bottles at his table, and I know I’ve have more than twelve drinks. The bartender tells me, my tab

is \$107. I've only brought \$80 with me. He takes my \$80 jovially and pours everyone, including himself, another shot of whiskey. The pride I feel at getting everyone drunk at my expense quickly dissipates when one of the girls asks me if I would like to get sodomized. I decline and smile as politely as I can, trying not to overreact at this girl's cupping of my groin.

Outside, the driver takes a piss behind his cab before we head out. The driver drives well considering how drunk I feel. When we get back to my hotel, he follows me into my room and asks if I want to get some girls. He tells me that he can get a couple to come to my room. I question whether he actually knows any girls who would be willing to meet us here at this hour.

He says, "*Claro,*" and tells me that they would not be expensive.

I tell him I don't have any more money. He hands me my briefcase and tells me that I do have more money. He prods me to open it. Foolishly, I do. When he looks inside, he sees my cash and excitedly tells me that we should definitely get a couple of girls to come over. I refuse, again. This time, not offering up any explanation. He doesn't seem too disappointed. He asks me if he can have a few bucks to buy a beer. I give him a 20, and he leaves my room, more than satisfied.

I try to smoke another blunt after he leaves, but I throw up. I end up falling asleep on the bathroom floor and pissing myself. I don't realize I've fallen asleep in the bathroom, nor that I have pissed myself until morning.

And it is in the morning, after my shower, that I find the driver outside, sleeping in his cab. I ask him if he knows of a place where I could use a computer with internet. He nods yes and waves me into his cab. He drives much more poorly than last night. He swerves in and out of his lane and repeatedly and unnecessarily jams on his breaks.

He stops at a pharmacy and steps inside for a moment, then he comes back out, and we

drive to a tortilla and spice shop. Again, he steps inside for less than a minute before coming back out to his cab and driving elsewhere, but this time I follow him inside and buy a cigar that looks good for \$10. We stop at an optometrist and a jeweler before he finally settles at a dentist's shop. There, he asks me if I would be willing to pay the equivalent of \$5 to use his computer.

I say yes. The computer is not actually in the dentist's office, it's in his bar upstairs. The computer is at the bartender's and waiter station. It's one of those touch screens, but it does have internet access. He turns it on for me and I get to buying a plane ticket. I buy a ticket from Monterrey to Fukuoka. The soonest reasonable departure leaves in four days and costs \$900. There is one other flight that leaves two days sooner, but it costs twice as much. I also write an email. It's a short email, only a few sentences long, but it takes longer to compose than it did shopping for a plane ticket.

The cab driver, whose name I discover is Guillermo, and I are both still hung over when we leave the dentist's office. Costa had an expression he used to excuse drinking while still hung over. He used to tell me, the best detox is retox. I had never tried it, but I drink a couple of beers with the *tacos de trompo* I eat for breakfast. The order comes with four loaded tacos on double corn tortillas and a cup of beans. It is too much food, so I'm not able to catch a buzz.

I tell Guillermo to drop me back off at the hotel. I stay asleep until five in the afternoon that day. When I wake, I order a pizza to be delivered to my room. I am told it will take up to thirty minutes for delivery, so I go outside to give Guillermo, who is still faithfully parked outside my hotel, \$20 and ask him to buy me some more beer. We drink the two six packs of Sol and Indio beer he's bought. Both are nice soft beers that go nicely with lunch. I show him how to make a gravity-bong with the ice bucket and an empty two liter bottle of soda.

I'm full, my hangover is gone, and I'm incredibly inebriated again by 7 P.M. Guillermo

and I are arguing, of all things, about the necessity of banks. He tells me that money lenders, what he calls banks, and everything they do are unnecessary and could be eliminated in society. I tell him I disagree and that once a society gets to be a certain size, banks become necessary. I ask him to name any country, state, or large city that doesn't use banks. He tells me to read *La Guerra Del Fin Del Mundo*, and I tell him I will. We finish arguing, and it is still daylight. In this part of the world, the sun lingers in the sky later than at any other time of year before it drops down for nightfall. I've still got another hour of daylight.

I'm drunk-hungry. What I'd like now, more than anything, would be a large bowl of Pho. It feels like it's been only a few hours since breakfast. Regardless, a brothy soup sounds good about now. Guillermo follows me into the restaurant. He claps when we walk in to get the attention of the waitress. He orders our food and another couple of beers.

We sit together, but I feel we are both too inebriated to carry on a conversation in public, so our table remains relatively quiet. While waiting patiently for the food, I consider whether I should stay here in Reynosa or go to Monterrey for my last night before my flight. The food would be just as much here in Reynosa for Guillermo and me, as it would be for myself alone in Monterrey.

I decide it is too risky to spend another night in Reynosa, and Guillermo and I part ways at the bus station where he gives me more weed.

In Monterrey, I don't even see a cab driver, so I prepare for my flight abroad. I buy a leather bag. Something that should last and fits in a Jimjillbong locker. I fill it with a couple of new changes of clothing, and bottled water. I only eat fruits and vegetables from cans and meat well done. I sober up and think practically about the coming months. I need to find some part-time work if I'm going to live comfortably. I'd like to be able to travel over more of Asia, and

I'd like to have Yuneer with me.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### AT LEAST I GET TO SEE YUNEE

I plan on sleeping on the plane. From Monterrey to Fukuoka, it is a 25 hour flight. I arrive at the airport after having smoked the last of my weed.

I take three sleeping tabs and fall asleep wondering why I didn't ask Yunee about that night she went to the police station, and wondering if she's read the flight itinerary I emailed her. I will email her again from Fukuoka after I order a ferry ticket. How long will I have to wait in Fukuoka before I'm ferried over?

I am anxious to get back to Korea and see Yunee, but taking three sleeping tabs soon after take-off is a bad idea. I thought it would make time go by quicker, but I'm interrupted twice during my sleep for meals. I wish they'd just left me alone, because when the actual time to sleep comes, when all the lights in the cabin are shut off and everyone closes their windows, I wake up with a sore neck and twelve hours of flight left. Luckily, Korean Air provides each seat, even coach, with their own personal T.V. embedded into the back of everyone's head rest. I watch three crappy movies and start reading a copy of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* I picked up in the airport.

We arrive.

It's a long walk from my gate through customs and finally, to the buses in the front of the airport in Japan. It takes about an hour and a half and I'm already getting pretty tired. There are plenty of internet cafes closer to port and in Japan, in general. I'm able to schedule a ticket the

same day to Busan, and I want to waste no more time getting back to Korea. I also write another email to Yunee despite her not having responded to the previous one. On the way and once on port, I continue reading *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. I sit on the stern side deck for a first hour, staring at Japan receding. I go back into the cabin when I catch myself dozing in my seat. I wake up again, what may be five minutes or two hours later soon to discover that Korea is approaching. I consider my options should no one be there waiting for me.

There is sleeping at a *jimjillbong* after hunting online for substitute teacher jobs. I also need to get a cell phone and pick up a new copy of my bank book. I bank at Daegu bank, but I don't know if I'll be able to find my bank here in Busan.

It turns out it doesn't matter. When I reach port, Yunee *is* there waiting for me but so are several Korean policemen ready to arrest me. The first thing that comes to mind at the moment of my arrest is, *I hope they let me keep my copy of Guns, Germs, and Steel*, because I really want to finish it. My next thought is that Yunee doesn't look surprised at my arrest. I don't get to talk to her at the police station nor at the jail. I am asked some questions about my length of departure, stripped of all belongings, and held for the night before I am allowed to make a phone call.

I call Yunee.

“*Yobseyo?*”

“Hi, Yunee.”

“Hello. Where are you, Sid?” she asks me.

“I'm in jail. Do you know what is happening to me?”

I know what is happening to me. I was told by the arresting officer in plain English that I am being arrested for having an extramarital affair, an arrestable offense in and of itself, but also

for disappearing during an open investigation. The investigation of blood found in an apartment which led to an investigation of a missing person which was solved.

I having sex with SunJin, the poor crazy girl who scared the shit out of me with that green knife before splitting for the States, was the extramarital affair. She was declared a missing person almost exactly the minute I stepped off Korea and onto that ferry the first time.

It turns out it that SunJin was a married woman, hence the extramarital affair. She was also killed by Yunee. Yunee told police she killed SunJin when she went into our apartment, she told police we were cohabiting, and saw a stranger. She was frightened and cut SunJin's throat in self-defense.

I was told Yunee fled the scene, shortly thereafter. When I ask what happened to SunJin, I'm told that the owner of the building was the one who concealed the body. He didn't want his building to be labeled as the place where someone was murdered, because it would ruin him. The owner believed he'd never find occupants for an apartment where a murder happened, so he took the body and threw it in the Han River.

He was arrested, he confessed, and was jailed.

Yunee never went to trial nor did she spend any time in jail. She readily confessed to killing the girl in self-defense and then to fleeing the scene. SunJin's husband was notified and told of the circumstances surrounding his late wife's death including the affair she had been having with a foreigner. He was told by police he is entitled to receive and accepted compensation for the loss of his wife.

Compensation is sometimes an option when Korean police decide one particular party has been wronged in a civil dispute, and whether monetary compensation is warranted. If compensation is paid then no charges are brought up against the offending party and no legal



action follows.

I am told that widowers wouldn't normally accept compensation for the accidental killing of a loved one, but the fact that she was having an affair made this exception more forthcoming. That, and the affair was with a foreigner.

It's not certain I will be offered a similar option.

"I am not sure. You can be deported. You can spend some time in jail," Yunee tells me.

"Did you tell the police I was coming?" I ask straight out.

"Yes," she confesses a little more easily than I would have expected, "they told me to."

"Why didn't you tell me the police were waiting for me?"

"Police said not to tell you."

The police deny having told her to keep it secret from me. They tell me that they actually preferred I knew of their presence so as not to want to come to Korea. They didn't want to have to arrest me on charges of adultery or fleeing the scene of another crime of which I was never a suspect, to begin with.

After I am arrested, the husband of the woman I had the affair with is notified, but he refuses to speak to me. He tells police that he is sick at what I have done, and he is not sorry his wife is now dead. It's a little much, I think, but thankfully, the man is willing to settle for compensation on the charge of adultery.

In Korea, adultery is a criminal offense punishable by incarceration of up to a year, and this is the same man to whom Yunee had to pay most of her life savings to, to avoid a manslaughter charge. The police further add that she was lucky she didn't have to borrow the money. Only a few money lenders are willing to give loans for manslaughter compensation. Only usurers charging fifty or eighty percent interest and who are typically associated with

organized crime would be expected this type of money. But she didn't have to borrow money. Again, I'm surprised she'd accumulated that much money. She had \$60,000 in the bank. She sold her car for \$10,000 to make up the difference. She walked away without any charges and \$5000 left in her bank account.

“Did you know I was going to go to jail?”

“Where?”

“What do you mean, where? Here.”

“No, I didn't know,” she says, “I thought you choose deported.”

“I don't want to get deported,” I tell her, “It's the same if I choose to stay here.”

“You might spend a year, if you want, in jail, to not be deported.”

“I will be in jail for three months, probably, and then I will be deported if I want to leave Korea, soon,” I say, “Three months or a year are the same to me, but I want to stay in Korea if I can, so I do not want to get deported.”

“No, it is not the same to me. I think it is harder for the year,” she tells me.

“You should have thought of that before you told the police I was coming.”

“They tell me to tell them,” she pleads. Her English gets worse when she gets stressed, “They tell to call them if you ever come to me.”

“Well... You did call them,” I let the conversation hang there a moment, then I ask her if I should expect a blood test.

“Why do you ask to me?”

“I want to know if I am sick,” and I also want to know if they will be checking my blood for drugs. Korea has very strict drug laws. If someone is caught using, buying, or in possession of any drugs, they will spend several months in jail. Testing positive for drugs, including

marijuana, is considered possession in Korea. If someone takes a blood test at a doctor's office, for example, and that person is tested positive for drugs, the doctor will call the police and the individual will be arrested. The police will confiscate their phone and drug test everyone in their contact list or call history, because being on a known drug user's contact list is considered probable cause and warrants a drug test. And this is why less than five percent of Korean citizens use drugs.

“No. They check you for, uh...,” she translates, “immune disease. Not all sickness.”

“Immune disease? You mean AIDS?” I ask.

“Yes, and drugs.”

That answers my question.

I want to ask her if I can still do time even if the drugs were consumed while in a country where it is legal. I can't think of how to casually phrase the question, plus I don't think she'd know, either way, so I don't ask.

My lawyer does know, though, and the answer is no. I will not spend time in jail for doing drugs in Mexico. He also thinks I have a fair chance of not doing any time for the adultery charge and recommends I not pay compensation to Sung HwangCho, the late Bak SunJin's husband.

I am asked to pay for the lawyer's services up front, but the \$4000 I am being charged will cover all expenses from here on out to the end of sentencing and includes any appeals I'd like to make should I not be satisfied with the court's decision.

A judge determines that I should be sentenced to nine months in jail, and pay a fine of \$2000 for the adultery charge, but the lawyer was correct when he told me I would not be doing time for having the marijuana in my system at the time of my arrest.

The judge tells my lawyer, who translates to me, that I still have the option of being deported and that the judge could even speed up the process. He personally guarantees that I would be flown back to Mexico in three months, max. I pay \$2000 either way, but I cover the cost of transport should I choose deportation. That would leave me with less than no money, and a little more than a week before my twenty-fifth birthday. I decline being deported. Who wants to die broke in Mexico. I have to request the results of my blood work. I'm not sure what to expect, but I am surprised to find that other than the marijuana, my blood work has no abnormalities.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### LIFE IN PRISON

Once I'm taken to jail, I remember having seen them before. Whenever Yunee and I took road trips anywhere, we'd see nondescript buildings like these along the highway. Plain, three or four story buildings with no neighbors and a single chain link fence surrounded with barbwire. If not for their obscure location, you could easily mistake them for office buildings. There are no guards in front or on the roof, and the ones inside don't carry rifles or handguns. They might have air pistols or pepper spray, non-lethals attached to their belts by a retractable steel cable. The windows are of shatterproof glass but there are no bars. The cell doors are not barred gates that slide open by some controller in another room, nor are they the heavy steel slabs manufactured to fend off against riot attacks. They are simple doors that hang lightly on their hinges with elongated windows and keyless entry. The guards will wave their pass-cards in front of a door sensor to enter. Basement level one is the showers. There are enough stalls for twenty at a time. There are two heated pools, one much hotter than the other. Behind the building lie the gardens. The inmates plant, tend to, and harvest corn, squash, pumpkin, radish, cabbage, peppers, tomato, and garlic. During my initial tour, the warden tells me that some of what is planted will change in the coming fall. I ask if all the jails in Korea have gardens like this. He tells me yes, that most will have a lot of land to grow food. It is good for the population. He says that most prisons also have something unique as a part of their rehabilitation program. Some will have a carpentry shop, or art studio, a baseball field, one even has their own radio station.

“What does this one have?” I ask him.

“We have Greenhouse.”

The Greenhouse has twenty eight small trees in it. The youngest tree is seventy-five years old, and the oldest is three hundred and seventy five. Some of these trees have been grown over stones or on statues. Several of these tiny potted trees have been shaped and pruned with wires and shears for hundreds of years. It doesn't make sense because this prison was built twenty years ago, but it is now the caretaker for these brilliant little trees. Of the entire population, only five inmates are given the right to work in the greenhouse. You have to earn that right.

During the first two weeks of my stay in the jail, there wasn't any forced sex, which is a good thing, but there is a lot of fighting in the shower. Only the first time was it exciting to see the fights. It's always the guys with their backs tattooed. They've got koi and dragons, priests and Bruce Lee done up shoulder to shoulder, neck to ass. The guards automatically shut off the water and make everyone evacuate the bathroom, and several times I've had to leave mid suds. It's not the worst problem to have in prison, but the other thing is no one speaks English. It seemed like everyone in Korea spoke English. Not in prison. In prison, everyone knows Taekwondo. It's like everyone knowing how to shoot guns in Texas.

I eat my meals, sleep in my room— which I share with five other guys— and work in the gardens without talking to anyone. Most of the time it's a couple of older guys shouting back and forth, and everyone else listening. During the day I'll hear a constant shouting coming from the gym, but I am not allowed to enter the gym yet for any of my enrichment hours. Not for another six weeks.

In six weeks I find out what all the shouting is about. When I heard it, I used to imagine it was a huge congregation of inmates mimicking some jujitsu master. I know it couldn't really be

since there are only ten or fifteen guys in the gym at a time. Their screams are regular and rhythmic like the beating of a heart. You can always make out four voices. All screaming something on top of each other.

Inside the gym there are no weights only mats, two punching bags, and a wooden dummy. As soon as enrichment time begins, everyone does cardio on the mats or strength training at one of the bags. Some'll shadow box in front of a mirror for a few minutes, but then they clear everything out of the gym's center. They'll pair up and face off each other but at eight feet apart, already marked off with tape and dirty footprints. Then they begin to practice Taekwondo. They'll stand in one of four poses; left, right, front and back stance. Which they'll call out in sync. Then they go at it.

The inmates are allowed to practice martial arts inside, but they aren't allowed to spar. So in a sparring match built much like a game of rock, paper, scissors they start throwing kick, punch, and counters. They will continue to punch and kick and counter for a full minute but they'll never hit each other. Kick beats punch, punch beats counter, and you can beat a kick with a counter.

I don't join in, because I don't understand the rules. At first, it appears as if they are merely facing each other, cycling through different attacks. The calling out and synchronicity of their movements did not have any meaning to me until I noticed they were keeping score. Arguments often start during the initial rounds when no one other than the two men facing each other are keeping score. After three one-minute rounds, half of the men are eliminated. Those eliminated then keep score for the ones still in the match. Sometimes, a few of those eliminated will begin working out on the periphery, but most will stay and watch until there are two left. There are two fighters I like to watch. One with a life sized tattoo of Bruce Lee on his back and a

kid whose muscles are so defined that it looks as if most of the flesh had been ripped off his body. They usually get pretty far in this tournament style sparring, but there are some who are their betters, and the difference in skill continues to grow with the passing weeks.

In time, I've watched enough to know that in the final match they will go up to 20 rounds. Each round is scored and a winner declared, the first to win 11 rounds or the winner of the most rounds out of 20 wins. It is also possible to win before round 20 if a certain number of points are scored over your opponent in a single round. I think it's 20 points, then it's declared a TKO. They'll shout, "Tee Kao!"

Even after I figure it out, I stay out of the matches. It's too fast and I have no martial arts training. Sparring here, like this, would only prove to everyone how disadvantaged I'd be in a real brawl. I feel I need to leave that an uncertainty. I'll do some conditioning, but I don't want to only be running in circles so I set to do push-ups and sit-ups. It's six weeks that I am allowed here in the gym, but I don't want to be keeping track of time, so I stick to this simple regiment, push-ups and sit-ups, push-ups and sit-ups.

In high school, I was on the swim team. On days when we couldn't get into the pool, water was being treated or it was too cold out, our coach would have us do this regiment. He called it a thousand-thousand. Thinking back, he probably didn't know how to train us outside of the water, so for lack of having something better to do, he would pair us up and have us do a thousand push-ups and a thousand sit-ups for our two hours of practice. You begin doing between fifty and eighty at a time, alternating between the two. The sets continue to decrease and level out at between ten and twenty. Only once, did I ever finish the thousand-thousand workout. It was at the end of our swim season. This being after four to five months of conditioning, when I was measuring my swimming in kilometers rather than laps, but even then, I struggled to get that



thousand-thousand out in the two hours of practice. Here I get one. With that hour, the 3600 seconds, I can push and sit up at a rate of about one per second, so that if I could move continuously for a full hour I would be able to do 1800 push-ups and 1800 sit-ups. I always stay out of the matches even when others try to get me to join. My first week, I can't hit 500 of either, and my sets get worse because I don't allow myself a day of recovery, so now I run on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I stick to this artless training faithfully, and by the end of the six weeks some of the guys have joined me in my push-up and sit-up routine. I'm doing 1200 push-ups and 800 sit-ups with my one hour. There are a few who can do more than me. One guy with a tattooed tiger head on his back can do over 2000 of each, but he's usually sparring.

On the second to the last day, a real fight breaks out between two sparring opponents, the tiger and the eldest man from our cell, Bak LoBin. It looked as if it happened by accident, but I'm sure it was planned, because these two men were, more often than not, the last two men left sparring. I guess they wanted to see who would win in an actual fight. Though Tiger was younger and could take a punch, LoBin had skills that made it hard for tiger to even land a single hit. Old LoBin gets in a dozen solid hits including a hard kick to the Tiger's face. Tiger always recovers and could have continued, but both fighters know to stop when the guards run in blowing their whistles, screaming at everybody. Gym privileges are terminated early because of the fight, and I am not able to finish a thousand of each.

In a few days, we will be starting our enrichment hours in the garden. I'm thinking about what type of shoes I should be wearing in the garden when a thought sneaks up on me. I've been here for three months. I don't want to think about that, but it's happening. It's mostly why I didn't want to spar with anyone. I don't figure I'll be dying of natural causes. Because of my regular exercise and diet, I'm in better health now than I've ever been, but that doesn't mean

someone couldn't kill me. Pabs killed himself when he was 18. I suppose I could kill myself, but I doubt it. I'm too anxious about dying to want to commit suicide.

*There's no use fighting it. It's a demon that lives with our family.*

I remember when my brother said that. I still retrospectively incorporate that demon into my life. I'll see a shadow at my father's house standing in the room with my brother and me as he lay dying. Other times, it's just watching. When things went well the demon just sits back and waits. It waits for me to slip up, and then it gets me in the ass. I see it kicking my feet out from under me when I'm eight, and I'm falling on the ice breaking my elbow. Every time I got thrown out on the street, I see its shaking shadowy mass pulsating with laughter. Whispering into Yune's ear every time we got into a fight. Maybe my ear.

Can you imagine? A demon literally, burrowing into your brain. It makes me regret not finishing *The Screwtape Letters*. What Screwtape said to his nephew is frightening, but this demon is worse. I see it taking hold of every man in my family when the life fell out of them. It takes my father and brothers and my father's brothers, all of them younger than I am now. Speedy lost a bet with this demon on his twenty-fifth birthday.

When I first started having nightmares at that first apartment with Costa, at night I'd suspect a demon but not in the day. When we changed rooms and they stopped, I forgot about it.

I'd say a prison would make a good spot for demons to congregate, ample opportunity to corrupt and take souls, if souls exist. But maybe not this prison. Not a whole lot of action going on around here. For as strong and crazy looking as some of these guys appear, not a whole lot of evil seems to have settled. I wouldn't get the slightest whiff of it in a place like the greenhouse. The calm and reverence that permeate the air there seem to have magical powers. It's impressive enough to see the discipline it takes to spar in the gym like these guys, that I don't feel it in there

either. At most, I figure there's one or two demons hanging out in the showers and one in the cafeteria.

There must have been a demon inside of Alane. I don't think it was *my* demon. She must have had some sort of beast or a monster inside her head, messing with her mind all the time, making her destroy everything she touches. No, that bullshit. People messed up Alane, not anything else. You don't need anything else to do that to people. That was *me* taking her out of Rotary and letting her kiss me in the car. Nothing pushed me to do it. Taking the path of least resistance, of self-indulgence, that's not evil. That's just lazy. It was weak of me to leave Korea like I did. Fluttering away from Yune and a dead lover because I'm scared. Cowardice. It's evil too. A lazy, self-indulgent, weak coward couldn't be anything other than evil.

Too much time to think. Take away the time spent eating, sleeping, and exercising in the yard or gym, and I've still got more than ten hours in a room with five guys who don't speak English, and who don't do anything other than play cards, drink tea, and watch TV. I've not drunk nor smoked anything for three months. I'm exercising and eating better than I ever have. Without the distractions of having to decide what to do, of frivolous chit-chat, television, or reading, without these things the mind wanders to strange places.

There's this fear that's returned from my childhood. It came back at night when I was sitting in my room. It has nothing to do with my five cell mates. They don't bother me. They rarely acknowledge my presence even. No, this fear comes from within. It comes from a vicarious religious upbringing. My family never went to church, we never read scripture, but growing up, it seemed like everyone else did. Every kid at school seemed to have this idea that after you die, if you're good you go to heaven, if you're bad it's hell for you. Some kids thought that you could come back to earth a few times, but eventually it's eternity somewhere else. I

thought I didn't believe it, but it affected me emotionally. I didn't fear death, nor hell, nor pain. What I feared, what I fear, is a life eternal. When I was younger, eleven to be exact, when I first really considered this idea of living a life after death, I would ponder eternity. Little kids should not ponder on eternity. I would brood and cry from the prospect of living forever. A life that does not end, that continues forever and ever and ever, scares me so thoroughly that I have not permitted myself to imagine that possibility. How could someone appreciate anything after a billion years? As a child, I would ask myself, how do you not get bored or depressed? I'm not sure I had a real grasp on the idea of depression when I was eleven, but how could you not become so totally unwilling to participate in this type of existence after so long a time. A billion years will seem like nothing after a trillion years and then thereafter a hundred trillion, but even that would only be the beginning, because eternity is not a number like ten to the trillionth power, it is an idea that has no end and does not belong with the living, because living is having an end. If you have no end, you are simply existing. To exist with no other purpose other than to be is the only possible outcome for something that has no end. I once tried to tell my brothers about my fear. Describing emotions when you're eleven is difficult, but it's even harder when your older brother is as screwed up in the head as Pabs was. Sid would humor me, but I couldn't put it into words exactly. I remember only telling him that I was afraid of never dying. What's the point of going on and on? This was before I knew of the curse hanging over our family. Either way, he knew I was talking about never dying in the spiritual sense. Sid told me that after you die, you will continue to learn. You never stop becoming smarter or stronger. You can even become a god. How do you know, I asked him. He answered with a question. What do you think the angels were doing pre-genesis, before God made people? I don't know. What could they be doing? Worshiping Him, I guess. The angels were the ones who designed all of the plants and

animals here on Earth. They were the ones who thought up the dinosaurs and pterodactyls, and the mosquitoes, and plants, and bacteria, everything that ever existed here on Earth. *They* designed them, God just *made* them. I don't know where my brother got this idea. I've never seen it written in any religious text since, but his point was that if we could become so powerful as to design life, why couldn't we eventually create it? We're going to have forever to learn how. This did not comfort me so much as distract me from my fear. As an eleven year old, the prospect of becoming god-like does not settle in the psyche so easily. Neither does it when you're a week from becoming twenty-five. No, eternity, even as a god, does not bring me comfort. I see eternity as a black infinite space where the years are represented by distance, and even if you fill it with stars and galaxies, it does not end the ever-expanding blackness of it all. Life without end, sucks. But these thoughts are few and fleeting. I sleep uninterrupted for nine hours. When I wake with the rising of the morning sun and the passing of another day, I remember that I don't believe in life after death. What I have here is all I get.

I wake and do my morning stretches before sitting to a healthy breakfast of pickled radish, fruit, rice, and coffee. I feel strong, healthy, and alert. Then it comes to me during this morning's group prayer, I am afraid of living forever. I *am* afraid, and if I'm in the habit of rejecting or blocking whatever ideas I don't like, like I might be in love with Yune, or how I might be a coward for leaving her and Alane like I did, for taking Alane like I did, and while I've accepted that I am going to die, and die soon, I might be rejecting the possibility of an afterlife as a matter of convenience. So what's convenient for me now?

I feel at ease in the garden even though everyone is carrying a potential weapon. From time to time a picture slips into my mind of someone bashing me over the head with a hoe or driving a shovel into my throat. I'm never in any fear. I know I'm going to die, and I usually

have something in my hands, but I don't worry about the altercations that happen out here, because when the occasional argument does occur, it always begins with the prisoners throwing their tools down to the ground in some angry gesture, and then it's screaming. But even if there's some pushing going on, it's pretty obvious no one wants to fight with weapons.

A new guy comes in, two actually. The nephew of one of the old guards, and a transvestite. The transvestite is staying in our room. The nephew stays in one of the less crowded rooms. I am not sure he is an actual nephew. He calls the old guard *agaci* which means uncle, but that is also a general term for someone older and familiar. For some reason, the tranny is allowed to keep his long hair. I never considered whether long hair was permitted or not, but everyone here has short cropped hair and a clean face. He also puts on a long sleeve thermal whenever he leaves the room. He is the first inmate who tries to talk to me. His name is JinSuk, and the first thing I ask is why he's allowed to keep a wrist watch. He tells me it is because he was told to hide his scars. He has other scars running up the length of his arm that he made as a teenager, and another large one running down the center of his chest, likely a surgical scar. He brings up the subject of Bak LoBin, the elder gentlemen in our room, and sparring hero for gym B. He tells me that he's known him most of his life but doesn't tell me how, and I don't ask. Bak LoBin was in a "more difficult" prison for nine years, and if he does well here in this minimum security prison, he will get out soon. JinSuk turns the conversation back to himself when he tells me he is here because he wants to be. He tells me, self-mutilation is illegal for adults, that this is why he is here and not for prostitution. I never mentioned prostitution, so I can only guess it was one of the charges brought up against him. This is the end of our conversation because when he lifts his shirt completely to show me his scars. I make a face and grimace at his budding breasts. I may have even hissed. Either way, he quickly covers up and turns away from me.

The new kid has a back tattoo. His is a giant sea ship with the bow raised high up to his shoulder. The waves underneath the ship on his lower back partially cover a giant squid grappling with the port side. Its tentacles reach around the front of his waist. He is the only inmate who walks the halls without his shirt, which was the other reason I thought he might have some sort of relation to someone inside. During lunch, he wears his shirt around his waist. He walks across the cafeteria and extends a hand to Bak LoBin, sitting at our table, and asks for his cigarettes. LoBin doesn't seem to notice him and continues lighting his own cig. The nephew doesn't ask again but slaps the lit stick out of LoBin's mouth. LoBin tries to stand, but the nephew punches him on the clavicle where it meets the neck. LoBin collapses back down into his seat. A few of the guys stand but only to help LoBin. No one challenges the nephew or says anything when he grabs the cigarettes and walks away. Later, I see the old guard consulting his young nephew, this being the youngster's first spat. I've never seen his uncle do anything substantial, but he has this droopy face that I don't like looking at.

That day during enrichment, Bak LoBin has trouble working his left arm and spends more time than usual sitting in the shade. When we make it back into our room, LoBin is still rubbing his neck and arm. He takes a seat and JinSuk sits close behind him trying to massage old LoBin. LoBin shouts at Lee JinSuk and pushes him away. LoBin jumps up and grapples with his grooming supplies. He takes out a pair of hand operated hair clippers, like clippers used in barber shops at the turn of the century. He commands the other guys in the room to hold JinSuk down. JinSuk doesn't resist. He doesn't scream or call out for help. I am, for a moment, afraid because I think he might ask me for help. I would have helped him, not because I feel any sort of camaraderie with JinSuk, but because it would be the harder thing to do, the path of greater resistance. The old guard walks into the scene of four men with their hands and knees atop of a

whimpering JinSuk, LoBin growling something as he clips and tears at JinSuk's long hair. The old guard shows no emotion, offers no gesture of approval or discontent, and continues down the corridor. Finally, LoBin tires of taking out his frustrations on this poor pissant and throws the clippers to the wall. JinSuk looks pitiful. LoBin only managed to take out a few random patches on the front and left side of Jin's hair. JinSuk tears up as he touches the bald spots, now trickling with blood.

When the lights go out that night, I refuse to lie down until I'm sure everyone is asleep. Everyone is upset that night. JinSuk has stopped crying and has taken to angry outbursts, even kicking someone in their sleep for snoring. The snorer, ChanSook I think his name is, starts to complain but is quickly cut off by JinSuk's inappropriately loud and caustic rebuke. Then it's silent. It's my birthday tomorrow.

I feel a heavy weight on my chest when I wake up on Thursday. I can't manage to distract myself of what today will bring. Breathing seems to be taking more effort than usual. I forget about my breathing during the showers when the nephew drops his soap. It slides down to the stoop of the kid who looks like he has no skin. The kid kicks the soap back towards the nephew who starts screaming something at the kid, maybe at the fact that he kicked the soap over rather than handing it back to him. The nephew stands and throws the bar at the kid's face. The kid takes it in stride and stands to face the nephew. I rush to rinse the soap off of my own head because I figure the water can be turned off at any second. The nephew takes a handful of suds and tosses them at the kid who turns away blinded by soap. I only get a half glimpse of the nephew rushing the kid before soapy water begins running over my face. Then the water is cut off.

“Fuck!” I yell so loud that all else grows quiet. I can hear everyone staring at me, “Why



do you stupid shitbags fight in the shower!” I’m shaking now, not so much from anger as from the reoccurring thought that this might be the end. I yell, “Fuck!” again even louder. Someone pours a ladle of hot water taken from one of the pools over my head. The bathroom is full of staring prisoners and guards, one with his air pistol drawn. No one seems to be moving, but I leave the shower anyway and towel the rest of the soap off my body.

I don’t eat anything at breakfast. I take a few sips of coffee then throw it out when it gets cold. In the garden, I try to shovel and hoe as hard as I can. I needlessly carry twenty kilogram bags of mulch out of storage and pile them around the ends of crop rows trying to tire myself out, but there’s no end to this anxious energy. Someone offers me a tall glass of cold water. I yank it away from him and gulp it all down. My head starts to spin and I’m down on my ass looking at stars fluttering behind closed eyelids. I start to shake, and I’m about to pass out when the guy who handed me the water slaps me on the back, and hard. I snap out of it but don’t get up right away. It’s getting close to the end of our enrichment hours, and I see several guys returning their tools and the bags of mulch I’ve strewn around the garden back into storage. I stay sitting until everything’s been put up. I get up and walk back into the prison for rest.

Even though everyone’s dirty from either working the gardens or sparring in the gym, no one showers in the afternoons. Probably because more trouble’s likely to go down in the showers after a day’s worth of work. I used to think it strange that they don’t sell deodorant at convenience stores in Korea, but now I get it. Koreans don’t stink like Americans do, like I do. JinSuk’s been in the room all day fixing his hair. He sweeps the room a second time after everyone tracks in fresh dirt. There’s a low conversation going on in the room during that hour between enrichment and dinner. It’s interrupted when the old guard walks past our door but continues in its subdued manner after he’s walked away. Even JinSuk takes part in the

conversation like he's already forgotten of what happened yesterday. JinSuk grabs a fresh pack of cigarettes from his cubby and hands it to Bak LoBin who takes it ceremoniously with both hands and offers a serious and slow nod.

At dinner, everything seems staged. There is some conversation, but it sounds fake, even to me. Someone says something to LoBin who makes a production of taking out his cigarettes, and then I see. The nephew starts to walk over in our direction. I stand up almost instinctively, like when a room full of men is suddenly penetrated by the presence of a beautiful woman. But rather than just stand there like a dumb mute waiting for whatever is coming to happen, I walk straight towards the nephew. I see the ripped kid a few steps behind him. I've taking my eyes off the nephew for a second, and he seems to have not noticed me at all. He stops just to my left and is now asking LoBin for his cigarettes. I resist the urge to keep walking and reach way back with my balled fist and bring it down with all my strength on the back of the nephew's head before LoBin has a chance to answer. The nephew's head slams down on the table then he falls into a heap. LoBin gets up and starts yelling at the ripped kid who seems to be confused by all this but does not seem to be backing down. Then everyone but me steps back as the nephew gets up and starts screaming and knocking everything off the table. He's waving his arms about in front of him, and his eyes are darting back and forth in a pleading manner.

He's blind. I blinded him when I sucker punched him in the back of the head. When the guards come pouring into the cafeteria everyone seems confused, but the nephew hasn't lost an ounce of rage. Even the old guard can't seem to contain his writhing nephew. Eventually, everyone is lined up against the wall. The nephew has calmed enough to be escorted out of the dining hall and then everyone is told to return to their rooms.

In our room there are more heated arguments, apparently about what happened in the

cafeteria, but no one seems to have acknowledged my having taken any part in it. By this point, I don't see any reason to explain what I did. I can't make a fist. I sit on my mat and rub my hand. An old guard swipes his card and opens our room door. He addresses Bak LoBin who stands and answers, if humbly, to the old guard. The old guard walks away and LoBin turns towards us and says, "*Naneun ida,*" which I think means, 'I'll do it.' The door stays open after LoBin leaves. It's JinSuk who stands first and follows LoBin, then everyone else, and then it's me last out the door. We catch up to Bak LoBin and the old guard at the stairwell. We go down two flights of stairs past the shower floor. I've never been down to the second basement level. I didn't even know there was a second basement level. It's the solitary confinement cells. There are four prisoners waiting, including a seething nephew, and six guards, plus the old uncle, all in front of cell 1. The hall is wide, and here, the cells doors do look as if they could keep a SWAT team out, or a crazy man in.

One of the younger guards unlocks cell 1 and the old uncle speaks to LoBin in a harsh tone. LoBin starts to say something but is cut off again by a smack in the face and more angry words. LoBin waits for him to finish then turns around to face us. He seems to be staring at JinSuk of all people when one of the younger guards comes up behind LoBin and ties a black blindfold around his eyes. The knot is secured with wire and a black spit hood is then placed over LoBin's head. The nephew is walked into the cell, guided by one of his cell mates. He is still blind. LoBin is then shoved into the solitary cell with the nephew, and the door is shut behind them. The old guard opens the food tray slot and yells at both the men confined in the cell. He alone looks on at what takes place inside.

Everyone listens, heads bowed, fists clenched as the horrible sounds of fists hitting flesh, flesh hitting stone walls and steel doors echo out into the corridor. The hits keep coming and

everyone looks up when the nephew howls in pain, “Ee SangHo!” yells the old guard. SangHo, that must be his name. Then the punches start sounding wet, like sticky sandbags hitting planks of dry wood. The wet slaps continue even after the old guard gestures for someone to unlock the door, and then they sound even grizzlier when the door is flung open. The old guards yells for SangHo to stop. He doesn’t, but he is eventually pulled out. His right arm hangs in at a strange angle, broken. His face looks like someone’s taken a carving knife to it and blood runs down his chest and onto the floor. The old guard takes hold of SangHo’s shoulder and tries to tell him something, but SangHo jerks away and cradles his arm as he walks past everyone. He heads toward the stairwell. Everyone, including the guards and myself, get out of his way. The old guard tells us something then follows behind SangHo’s entourage. The other guards start pointing into the cell telling us to do something. Everyone but JinSuk hesitates to look inside. By the time the rest of us have crowded the door, JinSuk is already taking the mask and blindfold off of Bak LoBin’s battered face. The empty cell is surprisingly small. There are only four cells in this hall but this one here barely seems to measure three meters long, two meters wide. I can’t tell if LoBin’s breathing. I can see the spot on the bare wall where SangHo’s face was split open and all the blind punches wet with blood that missed their mark and struck cement. JinSuk gathers LoBin’s head into his hands and the rest of us lift him out of the cell trying to keep him level. He’s not breathing.

We’re not taken back to our room. Instead we are taken to the greenhouse where we are given shovels and told to dig a hole in the back behind the trees. We dig. We dig a hole wider and deeper than a customary grave. We dig so deep that I begin to think this hole is not just for Bak LoBin. We all suddenly stop, and we help each other out of the grave where we find LoBin has already been washed and prepared for burial by JinSuk. Cocooned over a plank of wood, I

am asked to lift the body. We walk him over to the grave where two men have jumped inside. We hand the body down to them where he is laid to rest. We lie on the ground to help the other two men out of the grave. We are all exhausted by now, but we've hardly caught our breath before we start shoveling dirt over the body. The guards watching us don't have to tell us anything when we're done. We put up the tools and walk back to the building without saying anything.

We are escorted to the showers rather than our room. We all shower in silence, even JinSuk who normally waits for everyone to leave before undressing. Back in the room, conversation starts up again where everyone seems to be more accepting of what occurred than I would have expected. Only JinSuk looks upset, but more angry than sad.

After everyone has fallen asleep which comes easily because of the exertion necessary to bury a body, JinSuk gets in my face and tells me that LoBin died because of me. I had almost forgotten about my part in all of this.

“Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't Bak LoBin tell them it was me?” I ask him.

“He want fight to SangHo, *shiekya!* He want this.”

I start, “That's why you gave him the cigarettes before—”

“No. I no give. He take,” he tells me, then straining the f in fight he says, “He want fight SangHo.”

Lee JinSuk is a different person when full of anger. I can see his scarred-up arms in this dim light. Even with his small tits, he looks like a killer with his crazy cropped hair and cut up scalp. LoBin took the cigarettes from JinSuk to try to start a fight with SangHo, and then I went in and sucker punched SangHo blinding his ass and the whole plan went to shit. Now I see why no one acknowledged my part in all this. It's only after JinSuk falls asleep that I get up to check

the time. I can barely make out the time on his wrist watch, but it's clearly past two A.M. Even in Western time, I've made it through to my twenty-fifth birthday.

*"And then what?"* my brother had once asked me.

Now what?

It seems the demon or curse or disease, whatever it was that meant to take me found another person of interest instead. It came in the form of SangHo, and Bak LoBin died for me because I decided to... to do what? What did I do? Doesn't matter.

Now what?

I still have to make it out of here, a Korean jail with more than a few guys pissed off at me. I've done more than half my sentence already. SangHo might find out it was me who's blinded him. It seems only JinSuk knows the truth about that, and I don't know on what kind of terms we've settled. Three more months seems like a long time. I don't worry about it all that much. I don't have to keep running away. I no longer feel like there's something chasing me. I can face anything now. I don't know how to fix things with Yunee once I get out of here, but I'm gonna try. I won't have a Visa, so I might get deported at the end of my sentence, and if I am, who knows what's waiting for me back in the States, maybe more jail time. Fuck it, I can deal with that too. Even a hard looking future like mine won't get this dumb smile off my face.

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Azael Villarreal received his B.A. in Psychology in 2001 and M.F.A. in Creative Writing in 2014 from the University of Texas-Pan American. Azael has worked as a carpenter, waiter, bartender, delivery driver, maintenance man, sales man, mental health technician, and teacher. He's worked in the fields, pizza joints, restaurants, construction sites, mental rehabilitation centers, universities, and private academies. Azael had a column for *InDaegu* magazine where he wrote extensively on the subject of dating. He lives with his wife and daughter in South Texas where he continues to teach English.