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## How to Get Home From Here

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How to Get Home from Here

a novella

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages & Literature  
of Bard College

by

K. Dishmon

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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NS, AG, LR, BL, KB. Thank you for bringing me home.

Spring Grove, PA // *resident's inn*, OH // Lambertville, MI // Ann Arbor, MI // San Francisco, CA // The Woodlands, TX // Abu Dhabi, UAE // *catherine's floor*, MD // *uncle dave's house*, MD // *rich's house*, MD // *extended stay America*, NJ // Rumson, NJ // Bel Air, MD (#1) // New York, NY // *uncle dave's floor*, MD // Bel Air, MD (#2) // Glen Ridge, NJ // Montclair, NJ // Annandale-on-Hudson, NY // Berlin, Germany // Red Hook, NY

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## I. Saint Catherine

Two years ago, Catherine Parker was hit by a car on the front lawn of a house that was his now, and wasn't then.

The problem was the bend in the road. It was a nice enough area— not too many drunk drivers— but the roads were steep and sharp, cutting through the woods with something akin to intent. Fatalities were high— not the highs of war and plague but high for a town of about two hundred people. Catherine got a dedication on the local radio station and a memorial at the spot where she was killed. At first it was a basket of stuffed animals that rotted in the rain. Later it was pictures on sticks. The worst photograph was the most weather-beaten, bleached white and covered in dirt so that only the eyes were visible. Someone, maybe a relative, had painted over the spectacle: *Saint Catherine*. He wondered why they didn't change the picture.

She went to his high school— not one of the important ones. He had attended a number of high schools and, aside from the tragic death, this particular institution had been one of the least memorable. High school was supposed to be a test run, a practice for real life, where nothing mattered in comparison to the stretching highway of the human lifespan. If that was true, what did it mean that he had been to so many? Not just two but seven, a total which everyone knew meant nothing good. The number seven was all anyone needed. They could complete him right there. It wasn't everything about him but it was enough. Too much. They would know he'd been tested. He was always being tested. Now he endured one more test: standing at the edge of his lawn, scrutinized by Catherine's bleached-out eyes, and realizing the snow was coming down harder and the ambulance had not come.

“Catherine,” he whispered through chapped lips. “What the hell am I gonna do?”

Back inside the house, Emma was facedown on the floor.

When the light was gone there would be no reality for the drugs to alter, and the darkness would be a blackboard on which to superimpose his own, darker reality. His world was solid only for now, with TV-screen flickers of what was coming or was perhaps already there. Even in the daylight, rapidly fading as it was, the walls danced with the faint colors of closed eyes at nighttime. If he couldn't drive a car now he doubted he could later. On the floor, Emma writhed, and the ambulance wasn't coming.

"You hanging in there?" he asked, bending down beside her. She wasn't unconscious. She was simply not present, eyes locked on something in another part of space. Every now and then she would breathe— not as regularly as she should have. Then her eyes would roll back in her head and she was gone again. There was the occasional spasm— it went untimed. He tried his best to look at the numbers on the clock and found they were swimming.

She'd sat up once or tried to and then hit her head on the coffee table. After that he'd pushed aside all the furniture in the room. If not for the garbage piling up in the kitchen it could have been a show home. The space was empty but buzzing with near-chaos. It wasn't there yet but he could see it coming.

He drank a glass of water and tried to offer some to her. It dribbled from her lips and onto the floor. When he let go of her head it hit the ground with a wet smack.

911 again.

When the operator picked up he tried to speak but didn't yet, brain struggling to articulate the insubstantial dread filling the home like unseen smoke— descending slowly, touching all.

“The ambulance isn’t here,” he said. “I just got a call that there was no one at the residence where the ambulance arrived. Did you send them to 21 Violet Hill?”

There was static on the end of the line with a few words coming through.

“21 Violet Hill,” he repeated. “In Grisham.”

“The ambulance already arrived at 21 Violet Hill,” came the voice on the line, speaking as if through steel wool. “In Grisham, Nebraska. Could you be mistaken about the number?”

Not about 21 Violet Hill, no. Not about his first permanent address.

“Do you think this is a joke?” he demanded, voice rising above the dull roar of the snowstorm outside the windows. “Someone is overdosing right here on my floor and if she dies it’s because you can’t find a house.”

“What is the name of the individual who’s having the medical emergency?” asked the voice. “We can call relatives who may know the correct address of the place where you’re staying. We should get your name, as well.”

He didn’t so much hang up as drop the phone to the floor.

As he moved through the darkened house he could hear the faint noises of static on the other end of the discarded phone, its light blooming and receding as the call went on and on and then ended. Somewhere out there in the night an ambulance had appeared on someone else’s lawn before disappearing into the dark like the long shadows of dusk. With a rush of energy he dashed back onto his lawn, snow ripping in through his open jacket. The house light wasn’t on. Nobody could see the 21 from the road, especially given the house’s position. The house sat in the deepest crook of a bend in the road, just at the peak of a hill. Maybe five miles down the road there was a gas station, and maybe five miles further there was another house. It was the most

unfortunate wrinkle in the Emergency Services universe, a punch line without a joke. What a wonder Catherine had been killed by a car here. It was a statistical miracle. For one twisting moment he stared at Catherine, watched her faded eyes with resentment and some undulating mania. The feelings changed too quickly inside him as the drugs breathed their first breath. Emma's death would be tragic if it happened—and it wouldn't. His would be less so, the slow creep of inevitability.

He ran back into the house and turned the porch light on, the rusty metal 21 lit up as if in warning. Out in the snowstorm the road glimmered like a mirage before disappearing entirely in a wall of white.

He kicked off his shoes and stared down at Emma, breathing raggedly as he checked her neck for a pulse. Droplets of melted snow rolled down his nose, plopping onto her exposed skin. He half expected it to sizzle. A red flush bloomed in her face.

There weren't many more options, he decided.

His phone still lay on the floor, speckled by the trails of water dripping down off his eyelashes, his nose, the ends of his hair and his fingertips. With numb hands he called the person he had tried to disremember— certainly the one person that required energy to forget. He'd delighted in forgetting all the others. Not this one. He almost laughed at the notion that he had ever tried, that it ever could have worked. The effort only served to reinforce their existence.

Casey was drunk when he answered. It was obvious just from the breathing alone.

“Dakota?” he asked, voice hoarse and words heavy. “Tell me you're really there.”

“It's me,” he mumbled, suddenly losing the sharp edge of desperation. “Hey, Casey. It's been a while.”

“It's been eight goddamn months,” he said, halfway between a slur and a growl. “You wanna call me out of nowhere and tell me, hey, it's been a while? I know how long it's been, Cody, I've been counting.”

“Casey—”

“No. Where the hell have you been? You pack up in the middle of the night, ignore my calls— hell, you even changed your phone number.”

“You started calling from payphones,” he said, trying to keep his voice level. “I couldn't just ignore every random number. What about doctor's offices, job offers— for Christ's sake, Ace, you were calling me five times a day. More, even. I couldn't live.”

“I had to make sure you weren't dead!”

“But I'm not—”

“But you coulda been. Wouldn't talk to anyone in town. Left without a trace— how was I supposed to know something didn't happen to you? Eight months I've been wondering if you're dead or if I mean so little to you.”

“It wasn't...”

“Why'd you even call?”

He pursed his lips, rolling his tongue over his teeth. “My, ah, girlfriend overdosed.”

“Overdosed!” He held the phone back from his ear. “On what?”

“She's not completely conscious and she keeps having seizures. I called an ambulance, but it didn't find us. Someone has to take her to a hospital.”

“And what, you can't do that all by yourself too? Big, tough Dakota, running off to Los Angeles with nothing but a change of clothes and someone else's money—”

“Casey, I never left Nebraska.”

There was a pause in the conversation, but not silence. Outside the blizzard roared like some great medieval beast and through the static on the line he could hear a match strike, a sharp inhale. He closed his eyes and pictured Casey on the threadbare green chair in the corner, smoke settling down into the upholstery. Digging his pinky through the hole in the thin tee shirt he wore now, he remembered what it smelled like when he stole it from his brother’s drawers. When he wore it for the first time he imagined Casey’s smoke and sweat moving like a contagion, transferring from one brother to the next. He imagined he knew what it was like to wear someone’s scent like a costume. It was all of half a day before he threw it in the wash and Casey was eradicated.

“Send me the address,” Casey said raggedly. “I’ll be there.”

He ended the call and fell back onto the sofa. The walls shivered along with him.

## II. Not Molly

Emma was not a drug addict.

If any drug would kill her, it would not be this one. These two. Maybe more. It was unclear what the pair of them had ingested. The only truth was that it had been made in a laboratory, designed with curiosity and purchased with recklessness. Unfortunately the recklessness was only obvious in hindsight, and it was both of theirs to share. It was mixed with pills from Emma’s mother’s medicine cabinet. It was dabbed onto a fruit snack, sucked on and consumed without fear or doubt. If any drug would kill Emma it should have been ecstasy, since that was the only one she loved beyond shame. Emma would snort anything. She snorted her anxiety medication—the kind that was prescribed. She snorted Xanax. It was a perfectly good

waste of Xanax. It was faster under the tongue— not swallowed or snorted, but absorbed directly. He thought about this with unjustified frequency. It bothered him to watch. It was showy, excessive. Unnecessary. She was almost bragging. He would rather just get the job done.

This was not ecstasy, nor was it supposed to be.

Emma wanted them to do it. It made sense that she would be the one to crave the chemical illusion of spirituality. She was the kind of person to find God in leaves preserved between book pages and that wasn't an insult but in this case, a damning statement of fact. If she died it would be his fault even though she was the one who picked it out and paid for it, and that was as much of a reassurance as he could hope for.

He wasn't doing this for fun, but more out of necessity.

When they started dating, she didn't know. She wouldn't have known, since his inability to hide it was only a recent development. His GPA hovered at a steady 3.6 and stayed there, still riding off of midterm grades without counting the months of missed assignments. Now the semester was ending and he himself receded into winter, his days growing shorter until they were swallowed whole. He'd known other people who darkened the same way. Those people weren't on track to graduate early. Those people hadn't taken their brother's car and driven through blasted trees, done homework from the bed of a Motel Six, skipping breakfast to afford something they could call their own. They hadn't worked themselves to the bone. It was winter then as it was winter now and he still wore his family name like a black eye.

His was not a cautionary tale, but a series of contradictions.

### III. Los Angeles

It would take Casey two hours to arrive.

The GPS on his dampened phone said 2:21, but Casey would speed. Depending on how much whiskey he slugged back before his brother picked up the phone he might speed faster. So he would be there fast. Casey was drinking; he was usually drinking. Now that Dakota needed him the liquor wouldn't be a deterrent but a greater motivation. He could be angry and still come. On drugs, any drugs, Dakota himself became less than before— not a Pendleton but an intuition, the vaguest notion of a body with no spirit attached. Casey became more. More loyal, more vicious, more reckless and recklessly charismatic. More righteous and hypocritical in uneasy simultaneity. Maybe it was because Casey was simpler. Maybe it was because Casey's drugs of choice could be bought at a gas station instead of behind one. Maybe it was because Casey was twenty-four and just had more to be.

Somewhere in the night Casey was resting his head against the steering wheel with the world swimming in his eyes and turning the key in the ignition. He could hear the rattle of the old engine. The seatbelts in the back were missing and there were toy soldiers down in the crevices of the seats. Some might fall out as Casey tore down the empty stretch of highway, ripping through ghost towns whose graves were marked by motel signs and drive-thrus. He wouldn't stop for food but he might stop if he ran out of cigarettes. It wasn't an accusation. There had to be something to push him through as he plummeted down into the hollow of Nebraska's wet throat. He would keep moving forward even as the towns behind him ran backwards up the windshield like rain.

He— Casey— was the one who put dinner on the table. He was the first one to get a job, even though he was probably too young. He was the one to pry the bottle out of Jack's stiff

hands and that was good even if Dakota knew who drank it once Casey took it away. If Casey had a car to drive now it meant he'd fixed up a broken down one. The old car—

The soldiers were in his car, then. In Casey's old car, the one Dakota took. They were still out there, then, in the car in his driveway in the snow. He'd never had any reason to fish them out. They sat where Casey had left them years before, jammed way under the upholstery that was peeling off more and more by the day. Dakota hadn't ridden in the backseat for a few years but when he did sometimes he could feel them poking through. He didn't know what his brother's car looked like anymore. He wouldn't know it even if he saw it coming up the road. And maybe Casey's face would be foreign to him too, through the glass and snow and shapes crawling at the corners of his eyes.

He had never left the state, but neither had his brother.

You would've thought it was the first thing he would do with his brother's car when he fled Broken Bow. Kansas was close enough and 21 Violet Hill was the highest point for miles, looking down over a stretch of land flat as a temperate ocean— over all the places he both could and couldn't reach. It was lonely, empty, but those were more truths than complaints. The maps he studied were always empty, satellite pictures of landscapes populated by no one. Magnify the image enough all the way down to sidewalk level and you see nobody. You had to zoom in over and over again and then you might see one person— or not them but their shape, the indentation they had made. There were no people in this world but reflections in the window, unedited shadows and moving cars with black windshields. It was a world for a few people only, and even they moved in secret. They were secrets.

Maybe one day he would reach Los Angeles and nobody would be there.

Maybe Kansas was as bleak as it looked on the map.

Maybe he could see it from his house, though he'd never calculated the precise distance to the state line. For all the years he'd stayed up under his blanket with a flashlight and an atlas it wasn't Kansas he was trying to reach. Sometimes he would wake up at four in the morning after falling asleep for only a moment and see the light still on under the cheap comforter, casting shadow puppets on his brother's face. Jack would still be in the armchair, and his brother on whatever trashed couch the newest motel had to offer. Broken Bow was nice in comparison—Grisham even better. This one bedroom house was four-fifty a month and while the commute to university was bad it was the only way to get a place like this. He was used to worse, but he didn't want to be. And he could go to Los Angeles when his bank account was bigger.

He was starting to suspect it might never be, but that had been the plan. There had always been a plan. However distant it seemed now, there was a plan still.

California was the edge, the western front of the western world that the whole Earth had pushed against for so long. Anything important that would happen to him would happen to him there along the fault line (it could happen in New York, but it was colder there). Only fault lines could make mountains and he was tired of this flat earth. The weight of Sisyphus' boulder would roll back and crush him. Dakota's boulder wouldn't crush him but tire him out. He could push all he wanted and still have nowhere to go. He would not give his maximum effort only to hold his ground. He could see for miles and he could see that there was nothing. In this dark country there were only highways to traverse. He and his brother had ridden them all. And as they rode he lay with his head against the glass in the backseat, watching fly after fly try to smash its way out.

The highways ran through the state like veins through a body and if he wanted to get off them blood would be spilt.

#### IV. Ace

The phone buzzed on his face.

He hit the button without opening his eyes. Instinctually. There was a voice on the line but when he opened his own mouth no sound came out.

“Dakota, are you there?”

“Ace,” he exhaled.

“I’m an hour away. Your girlfriend hanging in there?”

“What?”

“It’s been an hour since you called me.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“What— it’s just me. Your girlfriend, is she okay? What’s going on?”

“You should bring him too,” he breathed. “Go get Dad, okay?”

There was silence on the other end. Static. The world was thrashing outside the windows and someone in the room was breathing hard.

“You’re on it too,” he judged.

“What am I on?”

“Check your girlfriend’s pulse,” he said. “One hour.”

He let go of the phone and it was lost to him.

His world was spinning behind closed eyelids and he could hear his brother’s voice echoing through the darkness, could half feel the man beside him on the couch. As he struggled

to open his eyes he could half-see a specter in the darkness. Maybe it had been an hour. It had been an hour since he called, and it was unclear whether or not he had opened his eyes. When he had called his brother, nighttime moved outside the house like a fist ready to close. Now he was caught in its grasp. If he was moving— if his eyes were opening and closing, if he was sliding off the couch, if he was breathing— it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't matter. He could move and still get nowhere. He was pinned down, cruciform and split wide open—

With a twitch something slid down his face and he grabbed for it, fingertips brushing his cheek and skin melting into skin. Who was touching him? He'd just woken up and there was no one in the house. The lines of his veins formed maps on the inside of his eyelids and he could follow every road to its end. The satellite view pulled in deeper and it was no longer an organic map of highways but a hand drawn web of towns and neighborhoods, so close he could almost see the houses. And closer still he could see the front lawns, see cars and people and if he moved in any closer they melted before his eyes, dark smears of color into dark smears of color. Any closer and it was almost as if he had killed them. He himself was a stain on a sidewalk. He himself was a dot on a map, a speck on God's iris, a shadow of a shadow caught in an image that would be thrown away.

Casey moved beside him and was gone.

He jerked to his feet, eyes shooting open.

There was a body on the floor. Drops of water gathered by its mouth. He listened for its heart and could hear only snow hissing into snow. The house moved with the rhythm of his breath, expanding and deflating and if he breathed too deeply it was possible the air would be lost. He imagined it moving inside him, turning corner after corner and escaping his haunted

house body. There was a body on the floor. His phone lay somewhere on the floor and he didn't want to step— there was a body on the floor and it had blond hair and wore his girlfriend's face and he felt for her intangible spirit hanging over her body. He imagined it hanging by the neck.

“Ace?” he asked. “Are you here?”

That was his girlfriend. Her name was Emma, and she was the body on the floor.

She needed an ambulance. The ambulance still hadn't come. Casey was somewhere in the house or in the phone or on the highway and snow was piling up outside the windows, blocking out the moon, blocking out even the night. Darkness wasn't finding its way into the house; it was being created there.

He drifted into another room. He looked around for something. He had to get her water. Somewhere there was water. Metal was cold against his hands and he could hardly see. He didn't know if she was alive. He had to get her—

He sank down in the doorway, the wood cool against his back. The floor was sticky underfoot and as he pressed his bare hands into the filth he could feel himself seeping down between each tile. Emma was lying across the threshold and he couldn't go into that room. That's where the body was.

She needed him. He needed help.

Slipping forward, he pressed himself onto the floor. There it was— the faintest rise and fall of her chest. Or maybe it was another twitch in the darkness. He needed it to be the former and so he decided it was. The room convulsed and he felt himself sliding around inside his own body like water. She needed him. There was a body on the floor and it was her and if he moved towards it he could save her. He had to stay in motion. If he stilled he was lost, lost in the cracks

in the floorboards and the highways dissecting the insides of his eyes. There were whispers as his jacket slid across the battered wood. His feet searched for purchase on the floor behind him.

Maybe she was breathing. But the whole house was breathing and the smaller motions were lost.

He wanted her to be breathing. If he could get to her—

There he was. Her hair was in his hands and he disappeared into it. He pressed his hands on her chest and held her, looking for a pulse or sign of breath—

She was soft. He wasn't. He clung to her and felt for her breath and she was soft in all the places he was not— everywhere. There was nothing for her to hold.

She might have been breathing, but he couldn't tell.

"Take it," he said. "Drink. Emma, drink. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. Drink. It's okay. I brought— drink. Emma, you're beautiful. Where is he? Drink it. Take it."

He rolled her over and she stared at the ceiling, catatonic. Her lips moved and no sound came out— or if it did it was drowned out by the groans of the house in winter, by the whispers trailing from his own lips. When he lifted her hand it didn't fall to the floor when he let go. It hovered by her side, drifting slowly down as her eyes stayed locked on something he could not see. Drink, Emma. He knelt beside her, legs tingling and then going numb. It was an hour or a moment and he was utterly immobile.

Behind him, the glass of water sat still and gleaming on the kitchen floor.

"Ace?" he implored.

## V. Casey

This wasn't the first time Casey had come for him, but it was the first time he'd asked for it. He closed his eyes and remembered the person he had run from.

Dakota was weathering high school. The girl from English class hung beside him like a shadow, fingers tightening on the wheel of her mom's station wagon. She averted her eyes. The outside of the window was half-smearred with bird shit and rain and even still he could see the mottled purples and reds on his brother's face. The smell of perfume hung in the car's stagnant air, sharp and crisp. It was clean here— clean enough. Orderly and sensible.

“Hey, dipshit!”

He was silent, searching for her eyes. There was a rap on the window.

“Ace, I'm *busy*.”

“Busy doing what, Casanova? Pounding gummy bears in an Exxon parking lot?”

He crumpled the bag in his lap, nudging her hand.

“Hey, your mom need anything else?” he asked. “I can go back inside—”

He fingered the collection of dimes in his pocket, begging her not to call his bluff.

“It's hot dogs, Cody. What she gonna need?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you're right. Thanks again—” he broke off, teeth scraping lip as there was another bang on the window. “You didn't have to let me stay for dinner. Vocab homework only takes... we'll probably get done before she finishes.”

“Yeah, well you were hungry.”

“I never said that.”

“Uh-huh. Well, you're gonna help me with the vocab. Fair's fair.”

The banging increased in speed and volume, and now Dakota was the one who couldn't look at her. It was one more moment of normalcy interrupted. Dakota did not have family dinners. Dakota did not have family or dinners in any traditional sense. Now Casey was here to

make sure he didn't forget the reason he guarded these elusive moments with such harsh possessiveness. Dakota tried to anyway. If he stared straight through the front windshield he could see clear out over the parking lot. Behind that was the neighborhood, a small, almost accidental cluster of houses. The one on the back left corner was pretending to be his. The road cut straight through the flat country and off into another neighborhood beyond his eyesight—one he didn't have to see to know, equally accidental and imaginary. Overhead the sky was immense but beneath it the world was so small he could see the curtain in his living room shiver. He watched it move and he held his breath and the sky oozed overhead like an open wound.

“We should go,” he decided, looking at her. “Maybe we'll help in the kitchen.”

Her hand moved on the gearshift and froze. “Your brother...?”

“That's all right. Let's go.”

“No, but your brother—”

He turned. Casey's face was smashed against the window in a grotesque imitation of his own expression, eyelids fluttering. Bird shit clung to both sleeves and the purple on his eye was too bright against the gray of his surroundings. Red pulsed and faded on his cheeks, blood affirming and retracting its confidence in his own consciousness. He breathed, and there was mist on the window. It distorted his image. He looked at his brother's mouth and nose through a thin layer of water. He looked at everything through a thin layer of water, a half-hearted trickle of rain muting the flat country as far as he could see. But Casey's face blocked out the trickle from forehead to jaw and his eyes were flatter than the waste before and behind and above the pair of them. He made as if to gag and the condensation smeared; all of him was mist. There was bird shit on his brother's nose and he had never wanted more to see the Exxon in the next town.

The country before him was a malign guesswork, the same shell game of houses. He was ready to play and lose regardless. He had moved too many times. He had moved away too many times and now all he knew was constant motion, even if he would move in circles. Casey heaved against the window and he knew he couldn't sit still on the road like some arterial blockage.

“Drive away.”

“Looks like he—”

“Drive!”

He stomped his foot down over the divider. The car jerked forward and he manhandled the steering wheel, car lurching back and forth. This was his first time, one of the few firsts he had left when he'd used up so many. He'd never seen the ocean or even a body of water but he'd checked his brother's pulse. Casey's head banged once against the window and he was up with a start, chasing the car as it bounced over the broken asphalt.

“Cody!” she screamed, and he pressed down harder, his foot over hers.

Casey got a hold until his hands slipped. He skidded down the side of the car door, clinging to the handle. It jerked open with a thump and Casey was half on the ground— still hanging on. Dakota reached for the steering wheel again and she slapped his hand away. Red blossomed under his translucent skin.

“The fuck is wrong with you, Dakota?” she shouted, hunched possessively over the steering wheel. “Get out of my car!”

“I'm sorry,” he murmured plainly, seatbelt still fastened. “You don't know—”

“Get the hell out.”

“Okay,” he agreed, bag of gummy bears wadded tightly in his palm. It stayed clenched in his hands, a crackling sound emitting from between his fingers. Slowly he unfastened the seatbelt, stepped onto the pavement, returned to Nebraska. The door closed behind him and the car sped off into the rain.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Dakota—”

“What the fuck *was* that?”

“It’s Dad.”

“What about him?”

“He was wondering where you were.” He grimaced. “He’s drunk.”

“Yeah? So are you.”

Rain ran down his hair, down Casey’s hair, across the parking lot and down into ditches where mud burbled and hissed. The wet dirt flooded out onto the road, seething and then collecting into puddles of still water.

“She invited me to dinner,” he said, quietly now.

“Good thing I got us these,” Casey said, opening his jacket. The inside pockets were lined with frozen burritos, in their plastic sleeves and ripped out of the box. He wrapped the jacket back around himself with a sudden jerk, glancing from side to side.

“Are they the chicken ones?”

As Casey grinned, his brother watched him wince. Casey’s skin stretched from the motion and he watched the color of the bruise spreading like a stain.

“I got you, Dakota,” he promised, stumbling as he jabbed a stolen burrito into his brother’s hand. He gave a conspiratorial grin, as if the two of them shared some great secret. They did and always would. “Nothing but the best for my brother.”

And then suddenly his phone was vibrating in one hand, glass of water in the other. Stepping over Emma’s limp form, he tilted it back and drank.

## VI. Jack

He did it because he was selfish. That was all Dakota could think of him.

## VII. 1:06

The phone was still vibrating in one hand. The shiver passed through his body uninterrupted and unhindered. He was already cold. He was already frightened. Instead of Casey’s voice he heard static, sound instead of speech, and if he himself spoke maybe the words would sound the same— unrecognizable.

“I called to make sure you’re still kicking.”

“Like... a baby.”

“The girl. She’s alive?”

“Her name is Emma,” he murmured.

“Right. Sure. Is Emma alive?”

“I don’t know.” He was far from mourning, far from any feeling he could name.

“You jackass,” he spat. “Get your shit together! Sorry, Dakota, but if you’re gonna ask me to drive out here piss drunk, in the middle of the night, in a blizzard for Christ’s sake—

you're gonna have to do better than that. Do you think this is how I wanted to see you again? Check her goddamn pulse and think about— I don't know. Christ. Just fucking think."

And he slammed back into his body.

For a moment he was conscious in its extremity— heart shaking, hands racing. He was hot. Too hot. The red blinking light of the portable space heater met his eyes in the darkness and even with her eyes closed, he felt Emma watching him. He shed his jacket and his shoes. As they hit the ground, shadows swirled around his feet.

"You're still coming," he asked.

"I can't believe you'd need to ask me that."

"You're still coming, right?"

"Dakota—"

"*Ace.*"

"I'm coming. But I want to know something before I get there. Why'd you run off like you did? Midnight, tell no one, steal my money— the whole shebang. I understand wanting to get out, but you didn't. You never got out."

"I wanted to go to school," he replied, words halfhearted and leaking out.

"Wrong answer." Flick. Inhale. "Tell me why."

"That's it," he pleaded. "You really think UCLA was gonna pay my way forever? You think I could afford a place out west? You think anyone would... like me? I live almost an hour and a half from the university, Casey. I drive that every day. I have to. What do you think, that I blew you off to smoke out on some beach? That I'm having fun?"

Exhale. "Better that time."

“Can I ask you something, too?”

Inhale. Exhale. A car horn blaring and radio static. “Shoot.”

“I tried to get out,” he said. “Why didn’t you?”

Silence.

He pulled the phone back from his ear. Call ended at barely one minute.

### VIII. Gallows

There was cell phone service in Lincoln, but not everywhere else.

There was cell phone service in Broken Bow, but hardly a minute outside. Ten minutes outside, maybe. Or thirteen. Not fifteen, but sixteen, or the other way around. Outside of towns civilization struck in random intervals like an unexpected blow. If not for its minimal but definite physical existence Broken Bow would be one of those places, a waypoint intending only to remind a person that there were other places and then to guide them there. That was if it intended anything at all. If it was anything more than an accident. Dakota had taken the hint and left only to find somewhere smaller. He didn’t know yet if it was accomplishment or failure.

Service popped up along the highway in some places as did torrents of rain, hanging only over specific places, and never the same ones. Rarely was the whole countryside submerged. Nebraska was less a state and more a series of disconnected islands, unattached and floating. If this was a place it was not part of any nation. If this was not a place it was a passageway. Nebraska had one of the fastest Interstate speed limits in the country. Nebraska was the first state to complete its Interstate. Nebraska’s piece of I-80 was the first to cross from one side of a state to the other, all one road with more than eighty exits. All he’d had to do to leave was this: go

straight. Don't stop— and he hadn't. At this point he didn't know if he ever would. The side of highway was the edge of the world and he did not yet know if he had fallen off.

Of all the things his mother ever told him, there was only one he could bear to remember: *don't make a straight line crooked*. Everything was straighter when she was around— his own road, her own outline, the image of her face and the intangible shape of her speech.

Remembering her was an attempt to zoom in on map images, moving in until buildings and people would pixelate. He enlarged her until she blurred into formlessness and was gone.

Broken Bow was functional; that was all. It had everything it needed to— a high school, a fire station, a post office. It had nearly ten restaurants, one of which was a gas station that only happened to sell pizza. It had under four thousand people and five places to stay— two hotels, two motels, and one on the cusp. It was too small to have a diner but just big enough to have a motto. *Rooted. But not standing still*. He never mentioned it but the words resonated with him like a flu shot. He remembered Broken Bow and its green lights with no cars driving through— like cue cards for a television show, held up for no audience. He remembered mosquitos born in brief moments of warmth from the puddle on the porch chair. Broken Bow was standing water.

Dakota did not stand still; he never had. The only stillness he knew was potential energy waiting to become kinetic. Any day now he would spring to life.

Lincoln was a concrete point in a fog of indefinite placelessness, a country not defined by words but counted out in time— in miles, in minutes. Lincoln was an epicenter and houses like his own were nothing more than debris radiating out, not places at all but unintended consequences. So many homes existed in negative spaces, so many towns nameless but calculable, a stretch of twenty miles with one or two buildings that could not be found but only

known. If home were a word only, this was the space between the letters. Lincoln was black text and Nebraska was white space, formless and invisible and pushing against. These were not the only places that felt the same way, that meant the same thing. They were the only ones he'd seen.

People went to Lincoln, at least. People were born in Grisham; they died in Grisham. They died in Lincoln, too, but Dakota got the sense they'd at least been to a museum or two.

Lincoln, at least, almost meant something to him.

The day he arrived for orientation he went to museums after the program was done. The Museum of Natural History. The Sheldon Museum of Art. The quilting center. The museum of tractor testing. The telephone museum.

Dakota walked down every aisle. He read every sign. He took pictures of every display not with his phone but a disposable camera. He bought it at the gas station— a U-Stop Convenience Shop. It was the only one he'd never seen before. He did not have many pictures of himself but he would now, next to old cars and coin phones, in a college sweatshirt, with a smile that held more apprehension than joy. He took a picture with himself and the Gallows Telephone, or tried. As soon as he saw it he knew he would pick it up no matter what the sign said. The plaque read off the year the phone was made in big gold letters. It was the oldest thing he'd ever seen besides the land itself. It was the oldest thing he'd ever seen that did not merely exist but was purposefully invented. Intentional design. He wanted to pick it up and pretend to talk in one end. He needed it. He tried to take a photo with his pinky and the camera clattered to the ground.

“Sorry.” His companion did not respond.

“Sorry,” he said. “I need you to hold this.”

“Dude, I’ve lived here since I was like, two. I’m telling you, this is not the fun shit. ” said a pre-med acquaintance, pacing noisily behind him. “You wanna come back to my dorm? My big brother got me a thirty of Budweiser before he dropped me off.”

“Oh. Yeah, uh, sure.” Suddenly, he felt flushed. “Can I have another minute?”

“I guess? Meet you outside, then.”

Dakota listened to the sound of receding footsteps, loud and strange. He was used to being the one who left. He stood still and read. The Gallows Telephone was one of the first experiments, producing little but scratching noises during use. No words were audible; only sounds. No communication, only evidence of the effort. Years later it was discovered that the model was usable, was correct, ruined by a few minor errors. At the time it was a failure.

Dakota stood and stared. He put the camera in his pocket. The room felt too big, himself, too exposed. Footsteps echoed behind him and he heard the door swing shut. The exit reverberated through the museum. He was surrounded by telephones on every side. He was distrustful of their stillness, their silence. He waited for them to ring— every single one at once, every call for him. He turned to find the nearest exit. It was behind him, the door still swinging on its hinges. Next to him there was a big wooden box: the Kansas Booth. A plastic woman stood at its entrance in antiquated clothing, hand on the door, ready to welcome him inside or shut him out. She had a generic face the way all mannequins did— like she was someone he might know. Familiar but wrong in the smallest of ways. He looked around; no one was watching. He pushed her hand away and climbed inside. The door to the Kansas Booth fell shut. He held his hands to his chest and breathed. It was dark already but he closed his eyes.

## IX. Quinoa

He had not grown up dreaming of going to University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

He had not grown up dreaming of working full time while also being in the honors program. But he had dreamed of working full time— if it was an honest job. He hadn't dreamed of this honors program specifically, but he had dreamed of recognition.

He had dreamed of all the zeroes at the end of his scholarship. Repeatedly.

The house was almost his— because calling it his was generous. If paying for it made it his, then it was his. If owning it made it his then it was some fat cat in Lincoln's and he had no business being there. Or maybe not. He was twenty and a homeowner. A home-renter. He had made it his business to be there.

The car was not his, but if anyone asked, they wouldn't get the right answer. It was very impressive to have your own car at his age and less impressive to have stolen it.

The grades were his, of course. And the illusion was his entirely.

Now he was a student and his phone lit up with messages that weren't dire warnings. Soon he would learn not to jump whenever it rang. These were normal, everyday messages. So things had changed— that, at least, was not a trick of his mind. Now when he left home in the middle of the night it was to make it to his 8:30 classes. Some things were the same: nobody came home with him. Nobody could. Any home of his couldn't help but be a confession, and he was only one confession away from being fully revealed. He wore desperation with ambition's face and anyone who saw too much would see that clearly. That was what ambition meant. Rags to riches was ninety percent rags. Dakota was still working to see if he was as smart as he'd

hoped and wondering what would happen if he wasn't. He hoped not to be proven wrong. He was not impressive but terrified. He was an excellent liar and he had to be.

His phone read: *meet up @ the diner in ten?* An hour later he replied *sorry guys overslept lets go now*. He sent it while he was racing down the interstate, one hand on the steering wheel and eyes on the open sky. They lived five minutes from campus and he inhabited the dark spaces on the map.

When he slid into the booth his friends were almost finished with the menu.

One girl flashed the light of a salt shaker top into his eyes and kicked his feet under the table. "Did you sign up for the bio lab on Friday?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm finished."

"What?" a boy accused across the table. "You're so full of it, Pendleton."

*Pendleton*— it was no longer an insult, a prediction of certain failure. Now it was a name.

"Maybe I am," he smirked, "but I won't have another lab until December."

"Yeah, okay, Doctor Dickhead. Hurry up and pick your breakfast."

He turned the menu over in his hands, surveying the prices before the dishes. "Y'know, I haven't started studying for anatomy yet. I was going to do it during the lab slot but I could wait until after. Wanna join?"

What kind of diner served fourteen dollar plates?

"Anatomy's not for two more weeks!" the boy whined.

"We should go to the sports bar," one girl cut in. "The one down the street. Cody, if you study during the lab slot we would all be free. I heard they don't card. Like, at all."

"Free time? That's cute," said the other girl. "Some of us are pre-med, Emma."

Emma shifted in her seat, shooting the girl a sharp sideways glance. “Clearly, you’ve never spent ten hours in a darkroom. So what do you think?” she paused, studying him closely. “You seriously look like you could use a break.”

The cheapest item on the menu besides toast was nine dollars, and he didn't even know what it was. He'd driven over an hour for three slices of hot bread.

“Cody?”

“Right.” He straightened up, fumbling back into reality. “Uh. Maybe.”

“I’m going to have the avocado scramble on focaccia,” the other girl decided. “Or the blueberry almond breakfast quinoa smoothie bowl. The real question is sweet or savory. It’s a big question,” she emphasized. “It’ll change the course of my whole day—”

“Cody,” Emma said. “Your phone is going off.”

Slowly, he looked down at the caller I.D. Unknown.

“It’s no one,” he wished.

“But I also want to get this rose petal tea. Which one would that go better with?”

“I guess no one really wants to talk to you,” she replied.

The phone buzzed again, vibrating its way to the edge of the table. He caught it before it fell off, a slick of marmalade glistening on the plastic case. It squelched in his hand and when it vibrated again he almost dropped it. When it vibrated again he pushed his chair back from the table with a sharp squeal. Orange strands of marmalade hung between his fingers and stuck in his hair as he brought the phone to his ear.

“Dakota,” Casey breathed.

He hung up the phone. He slapped it onto the table. He breathed in deep—

“Your turn to order,” the other girl said. “You should seriously get the mango sprout side salad if you get any eggs, because that way you can eat them together and it tastes amazing. I would totally love to steal a bite. I settled on the quinoa.”

“Toast!” he spat, out of reflex rather than malice. He looked up and the waitress stared at him, the table stared at him. Emma watched him knowingly with her chin in her hands. The phone was vibrating on the table and knocking against the edge of his glass and it rattled in his hand, up his arm and through his body. “I’ll, uh, have the toast.”

When the phone buzzed again he answered it, shrinking back into himself.

“Dakota,” Casey slurred, “you bastard, you don’t pick up the phone when I call and then when you finally answer you just *hang up* the goddamn phone—”

He hung up the phone. He slapped it down on the table and sucked in a breath—

“Cody, who’s the jerk who keeps calling?” the boy asked.

“It’s no one,” he said, rapidly paling. “Uh, what did you end up ordering?”

He snorted “Not the toast. What’s with that?”

“I don’t know,” he quietly panicked, “I like bread.”

The phone vibrated again and he answered it with an unintended twitch.

“You stole from me,” he said, and his voice was low, gravelly, carried on escaping breath. “You owe me this much. You owe me a chance. You really set us back, y’know. Me and Dad were almost out on the curb. And you know what else? I hope you feel like an absolute bastard. I hope you feel how much of a bastard you are, Dakota, because do you know what I coulda done? If you asked I woulda given you every last cent. If you hadn’t asked, even. All you had to do was tell me what was going on. And if you did that... I woulda fought for you. I don’t

know what I ever did to make you think I wouldn't." He swallowed hard and his brother could hear the spit stick between his lips as they pulled apart with a liquor-wince. "Hell, I woulda come with you."

He slapped the phone onto the table, breathing hard. If he closed his eyes for a second he could picture the stoop outside their door, hollowed out by pools of hot, stagnant water. He could picture himself standing there with the thick liquid smacking beneath his shoes, himself stopping until it stilled and receded into silence. Behind him the building was silent. The town was silent and the rest of the world seemed only to reach a dull murmur. Now he'd gone as far as Lincoln and all he could pick up was television static. Maybe out there on the west coast there was something louder, something more. He didn't know exactly what he was looking for but he would check every serpentine highway, blow through every cicada-shell town. He stood just beyond the front door split by cowardice, ambition and utter revulsion and took the first step without knowing which phantom pulled the strings. The course of action was the same regardless: *run*.

"Cody." Emma reached across the table. "Are you okay? You look—"

"Does anyone have a cigarette?"

"You don't smoke," said the girl, eyebrows creasing in disdain.

No matter how far he ran he would still have the same kind of home, the same entry wound where the thought broke in and rattled around without exit. He knew that with certainty. He knew it without having run very far. He couldn't change who he was and was lucky he'd never wanted to. He would remember— not out of respect for the past but resentment of

something harder to name. Broken Bow, Boys Town, Grand Island, Blair, Adams, Dodge and Minatare— they would not be eradicated. They would be kept close and mocked.

“You’re right,” he said. “I don’t.”

It was later. They went to a movie and he made excuses not to, phone turning over and over in his hands as he lied about the bookstore. It ended up not being a lie, not out of intent but happy accident. He pulled a new edition of Homer’s *Odyssey* off the shelf and looked for a moment like the kind of person who would want to read it. His arms were piled high with medical guides and his shirt wasn’t ironed but it was straight like it had been. He smiled halfheartedly at people who walked by. It wasn’t false pleasantness. It was detachment. As his body skimmed the pages he hung halfway above the room.

There was a tap on his shoulder and he swore. A child ducked into the next aisle.

“Shit. Sorry,” said Emma.

He glanced around warily, gaze not returning to her until he’d spoken. “Where—”

“Still at the movie. I said I had to go home.” She took her focus off him then, twisting sideways to rummage through the leather messenger bag at her hip. “Here. I stopped by the Shell station on the way over.”

“Emma...” he stared at her outstretched palm. “I really don’t smoke.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, with a quirk of her brow.

“Really. You left the movies for that?”

“I mean, not just that.” She tossed the pack from hand to hand, peering up at him through a veil of blond hair. “Want that book?”

“I mean, I guess—”

“I’ll buy it for you if you tell me what’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong? No, no. It wasn’t as bad as it looked. Same damn telemarketer has been harassing me for days and I just got a little...”

She laughed. “Weird?”

He flinched.

“Sorry,” she corrected, restless hands going still. “Don’t worry about that.”

“Listen, I appreciate it. I’m okay, though.” He turned. “See you around.”

“Who was it?”

He turned back around to find her standing closer than she had been before, tongue moving anxiously beneath her cheek. “Wh— a telemarketer.”

“No, Cody.”

“My brother,” he challenged.

“Uh-huh.” She nudged him with the tip of her toe, only half meeting his eyes. “And you weren’t happy to hear from him?”

He was silent.

“Listen. I know you barely know me. I know we only met because of my roommate and I get that I don’t go so well with the doctor entourage. I don’t need your whole sob story.” She cracked an uncertain smile. “Just... you’re all right?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

“That’s that, then. But just so you know...” she tapped the back of her cell phone with two bright, acrylic nails. “If you feel like admitting later that you’re lying, I happen to be pretty good with advice.”

He watched her leave. She had beautiful legs.

Days later he sat with his head on the steering wheel of the 1981 Cressida, material worn down and pressing into his forehead. The new cold of late September nighttime seeped into the wheel, into his skin, and he gave the bottle in his lap a white-knuckled squeeze. The only warmth came from his breath collecting slowly between the two windshields, the rare cigarette burning down in his tight left hand. Mist grew moldering and thick on the glass and on the console his phone was glowing.

The first voicemail: Dad's not eating, man. I can't cook for shit, you know that, but I got all these soups, I mean the nice kind, and he won't eat any of it. The living room is full of all these gross bowls with just cities of mold growing on the top and— I dunno, Cody. I'm so goddamn tired. I mean, don't know if the soup is bad or if he's just not conscious for long enough. Fuck he's skinny and I just, I wish... sorry, I should go. I gotta go. Good night.

The second voicemail: I'm sorry, man. I'm— I just wanted... The guys on the job site, you know, nobody wants to be the drama queen. I hope you're okay out there, Cody. I hope you're eating enough and you got a place to stay. I hope Los Angeles is as beautiful as you imagined and I hope you don't miss us at all.

The third voicemail: you don't have to come back. You never have to come back and you never have to see him again. I'll come to you. I mean any day of the week, Dakota, any time of night. I'm *scared*. I'm—

The fourth was just heavy breathing.

He flipped the phone face down. Outside the wind was howling and inside the smoke hung over him like a shroud, gathering tightly before slipping out the crack in the car window.

The cigarette burned in his hand like a little planet and outside the world's surface was just as uninhabitable. In the dark he could almost see it cracking in two along the line of the road, down to the end of the driveway and out into the night where it belonged not to him but to no one. It had never belonged to anyone but he was aware of it then— of what was and wasn't his. Too many things existed between categories, ran down the center of the road like luminescent yellow paint. He wanted these lines to guide his way but more often than not they flashed behind him in the rearview mirror. He had two lives and the goal of each was to eat the other. While they fought, he stayed hungry. He considered the phone and took it back in hand.

*You win, he confessed. I'll take that advice now.*

#### X. Not Smack

“If you're going to break you have to wait until you come down,” Emma instructed, sitting cross-legged on the opposite side of his slanted coffee table. She'd laid the fruit snacks between them as if in ceremonial honor, poured them both glasses of water and burned some sage in a dirty bowl. As she scooted the table closer to him ashes billowed up into the air, drifting back down on the man-made draft of their moving bodies. “No matter how bad the withdrawal gets. It's too dangerous. You are one-hundred-percent not allowed to accidentally kill yourself.”

“What about on purpose?” he spoke through the dryness in his throat and cracked a half-smile as he drained his glass. Saliva jellied his tongue to the roof of his mouth and he swallowed his mounting discomfort.

“At least your sense of humor is the same.” She tugged her bag towards her with the tip of her foot, pulling it close and digging through its contents. After a moment she dropped a sandwich bag on the table. The pills landed with a light click. “It’ll be okay. We’re not gonna leave you hanging. I promised you that.”

His cheeks flushed red and hot. “That’s not what I—”

“Come on, Cody. You didn’t actually think I’d give you an opiate.” She offered a pitying look, dressed up with an underwhelming smile. “You didn’t, did you?”

The redness in his cheeks swelled and spread to his ears. He could feel the blood swelling under his skin and before he realized it he was gasping, shaking hands rattling the table. Water rippled on the surface of the glass. It bounced back against the edges, colliding in the middle—all motion, no direction. It came together and was still. He was the smallest of seismic events.

“How long has it been?” she asked, passing him a wadded blanket. He let it sit at his feet, toes inching forward while his body remained still. “Cody?”

“A day,” he croaked. “Just under. Maybe twenty-two hours.”

“That’s so good,” she said, reaching over the table towards him. He hung forward with his head down, her fingers kneading deep into his back. She hummed a low note and he stared at the pills. “A whole day—”

“What are the others doing?”

“Shush.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Not important.”

He shivered at her touch, at the thought, from the cold both within and without. “They’re studying. I haven’t been to class in a week.”

“Not important.”

“They must know something’s wrong with me!” he managed.

She blinked hard. “Something *is* wrong with you.”

There was no reply but an ugly little gag as he disappeared into the mindless instinct of withdrawal, curling forward and clutching his sides. Silent voice, loud body.

“Well, perk up. This will work,” she said. “In the 70s hallucinogens were acceptable psychiatric treatments. This is for your mind and your body. You’re going to get the answers to questions you never thought to ask— understand who you are and why this happened. Benzos will help with the detox. And you’ll calm down too. You’re going through a lot right now.” She rapped her knuckle against his forehead, finger tracing the creases in his skin. “Wouldn’t want it to get too freaky in there.”

He was still lost in the plastic bag, spread out like a flat landscape between them. The pills sat scattered, points on a map in a sea of empty countryside.

“Are you ready to be healed?”

She pulled the bag away from him and emptied it between them. The pills rattled around on the table. He rattled around the state like a single coin in an empty jar and now he’d been set down spinning. She pressed down on her school I.D. with the butt of her palm and he heard the first pill crushed. He considered genetic destinies. He considered the Cressida and how far it would take him— the sharp, deliberate rush of Emma’s breath— the sweat on his cheeks and arms and back and forehead, and his father asleep or dead in the armchair—

He took one. Two. Three. He didn’t check the dosage. He knew how much he needed: more. He held them under his tongue and felt his fists unclench as the bitterness moved

autonomously through his mouth, onto his tongue, down inside. For someone who never had enough more was the only right amount.

“It’ll hurt later if you don’t save the rest,” she said.

He smiled again or tried to because he was aware of how he looked—sweaty, sharp and shrunken in his old jean jacket. He was afraid of being exactly this: himself. He was a straight A student and a junkie, a self-starter and a degenerate, both and neither. A deepening schism.

With his left hand he grasped her palm, her skin feeling so different from his own. She was warm. He was blistering. With his right hand he fingered the edges of the bag and came to an inevitable decision.

“It hurts now,” he said, and he snatched the pills off the table.

“Cody, fuck!” she yelled, yanking on his hand. Before he could let go he went facedown on the table, bag half-slipping from his grasp. Slowly it moved from the sliminess of his own fingers, his sweat sticking to her like a pathogen. She opened the bag and he yelped. One, two, three and a hard bulge went down her throat. The bag floated to the floor ripped open and empty. “Why would you do that?” he demanded, voice rising. “That was too much! I—I needed... Emma, what did you just do?”

She offered up a tired smile. “The only thing I could.”

She pulled him down beside her, even as he shook so hard he was impossible to hold. They leaned against the side of the threadbare street-corner couch and she whispered to him, voice distant as if in a dream. She told him he was too smart to be lying on this floor and she told him he was too smart to stay like this. She told him he was beautiful, even as he sweated and

shook. She told him that he was nothing like his father. She told him he was nothing like his brother. It was the only true thing she said.

He didn't notice her fall silent. That was fitting. He didn't notice much.

## XI. Gresham

He hadn't noticed the phone ringing in his lap. Nineteen missed calls.

"I can't find your street," Casey said, panic ill-disguised behind a gravelly tone of anger. "This town's a mile across. It shouldn't be this damn hard to navigate."

Now that he noticed the phone, the hitch in his brother's voice, he noticed everything else. He met his own eyes in rippling toilet water. His doppelganger had a hazy look and a face caked in vomit.

"Casey?" he asked. "Has it... has it been an hour?"

"No. Forty minutes. I drove fast."

"That was dangerous," he murmured, voice high with astonishment.

"Don't give me that. Okay, I passed the post office. Tell me how to get to you."

It wasn't so surprising that Casey had driven like the madman they both clearly were. It was even less surprising that he couldn't remember the last hour. He'd lost longer periods than this. He was no longer Dakota but an ugly truth revealed unto himself and that was fine so long as he didn't have to think about it. Now his pills were in Emma's gut and his stomach was turning itself up into the sour water.

"God damn it," Casey breathed on the other end of the line. "So the post office?"

Dakota wiped his lips with his shirtsleeve. "Which direction?"

“North.”

“North? Which... which way is north?”

“Well, it’s usually the opposite of south.”

Dakota coughed, a string of bile hanging from his lips. “Is the post office on the left or right of your car?”

“Left.”

“Keep going up the hill. You’ll see an old farmhouse on your right in two minutes—maybe one, if you keep driving like this. Don’t stay on the same road. You follow the curve when it comes.”

“What hill?”

“The hill!” he snapped. “The hill that you’re on!”

“Dakota, I’m not on a hill.”

“Then squint. Look through the snow.”

“You think it has less to do with the snow and more to do with the fact that you’re giving me directions stoned out of your melon? You’re the one who lives here. I’m staring at the damn post office right now, pulled over on the side of the road waiting for you to straighten up. Grisham, Nebraska, six-eight-three-six-seven.”

Dakota grew cold.

“Say it again,” he insisted through the vomit burning in his throat.

“Say what?”

“Say Grisham, Nebraska.”

“Gresham, Nebraska. Why?”

“You’re in the wrong town,” Dakota said, barely more than a whisper.

“What? No. How far away am I?”

“You put the address in the GPS, right? Does the GPS not say you’re going to Violet Hill in Grisham? Grisham. G-R-I-”

“There’s no Grisham, Dakota.”

“So you just drove?” he demanded, incredulous. “You just pointed your car at the thing that sounded the closest and went, no questions asked?”

“Grisham, Gresham— you’re blasted! If you’re saying I’m the one who didn’t think this through you can go straight to hell,” Casey said, anger no longer a cover. “Grisham must be an area. A region. Not an official town, but a neighborhood— I dunno, you tell me. Or are you not running out of time?”

“I can’t believe you,” Dakota hissed, furious with his brother and himself. His body was undoing itself as the phone slipped down his slick palm. He suppressed a retch only to deny Casey the satisfaction of being right. “You stay there. Or go home. Do what you want. I’m taking Emma to the hospital. I don’t need your help.”

He hung up the phone and immediately vomited.

He rinsed off his face. He moved to the living room and paced. Outside the snow was casting shadows, dancing mirages across the wet floor. Shapes slid about the room and he felt Casey’s specter behind him, above him, around him. The phone rang and he kicked it into the corner, grabbing for the laptop shoved under the couch. Dakota was not used to being wrong and he wasn’t ready to be wrong now, with his nausea stirring and sweat welling under his skin. He got his scholarship by being intelligent. He left home because he was intelligent— because he

knew Broken Bow had nothing for him, because he knew home was not a place but a concept, a fabrication. He wasn't a loser if nobody could tell he was— and no one could tell. He was intelligent enough to hide it. There was no reason for him to have gotten this wrong. There was no reason for him not to know something so simple.

Gresham was a village in York County, Nebraska— a place smaller than a town, verging on nonexistence. A few years back the population was 223 and three years after that it had gone up by only one. Maybe no one had died, and only one person had been born. Maybe three people had died and four people had been born. The village was nothing but a series of the simplest equations, of the slightest changes. There were more people in his high school. But if Gresham was a village then Grisham was nothing at all, existing only in name, halfway between real and contrived. It wasn't the only imaginary place. Around him the countryside hung in suspended animation, unknowable in all its repetition. Mazes didn't trap people because of their complexity, but their simplicity. Dakota saw the same images over and over and he didn't know how to tell Casey to come to him when the route was both a sequence and a parody: drive half a mile past the gas station, up the hill and into the dark country. It could be anywhere. He could be anywhere, and the fact that he was here meant too little.

It didn't matter that he was a scholarship kid. It didn't matter that he wanted to be a doctor. It didn't matter because he didn't want to help people; he wanted to be rich. It didn't matter because his body was colder than ever and his face was moist with sweat. He couldn't stay still and he couldn't get off smack. The answer to each problem was always the other.

With only subconscious acknowledgement, he realized: this was withdrawal.

He stood up mechanically. He strode across the floor, hours-old melted snow still squelching on the linoleum. Emma gasped behind him and he remembered her for only a moment before yanking a drawer out of the yard sale cabinet. He tore open the paper bag, the whiskey knocking him back from the first sip. The phone vibrated in his hand as he drank and he let it, gulping back more. His face flushed. Sinking down to the floor, he sat over Emma's body. Her face was soft and pliant under his rough hands, and he wanted to hold her but he also wanted to look through her pockets.

The phone rang again. That was okay.

She groaned as he flipped her over. Maybe she was speaking. Her words sounded like riddles to him and his only focus was the sound of crinkling in her pockets, empty bags wearing second skins of powder. He raised them to his lips and licked and it wasn't what he wanted but it was close enough. For a moment his head hung heavy, indifferent and oblivious as the phone pulsed in his hand.

"What do you want, Casey?" he asked eventually, regaining his composure with a lit cigarette in his mouth. Ashes fluttered to the clean floor, meticulously scrubbed despite his intention for no one he knew to set foot in this place. Now Emma was here and he sullied the illusion within the illusion.

"I want to know you're safe," he said. "The problem is, I know you're not."

"Listen. I'm glad you came when I called. But this was a mistake," Dakota said. "I left for a reason."

"Sure," Casey said, riled. "I'm still waiting to hear that reason, by the way."

“I wanted to move on,” Dakota said. “I wanted to be better. I wanted to make something of myself— or maybe not even that. I didn’t want to become something else. I wanted to prove I was right the whole time. That I could do it if I got the chance.”

“And did you?”

The tension was not tangible but skittering and illusory, the dark form of something larger dancing around them like the residual spots still moving at the edge of Dakota’s vision.

“You two were holding me back.”

Casey barked out a laugh. “You sure about that?”

“Of course I am!” Dakota roared, embers falling to the floor with a sharp jerk of his arm. The largest sputtered out against the linoleum, blackening the plastic coating in specks. “It took me two extra years to graduate high school because my transcript’s about as piecemeal as Frankenstein’s goddamn monster. You did the best you could, I know, but Casey— did you think being raised by one drunk wasn’t bad enough? Did you think it was better being raised by two?”

“You shut your mouth,” Casey growled, breath hard on the other end of the line.

“Towards the end you started doing better for yourself. Don’t think I don’t know that. An independent contractor— that’s good for you. That’s about as good as it was ever going to get. But that’s not good enough for me. You’re the kind of person who drives across the state on a whim without even checking the address! You’re a few years out from thirty and you live with your dad and drink out of plastic bottles. I can’t live like that. Like you. That was never the life I was supposed to live. I can feel it.”

“That was all I ever hoped for you,” Casey said, suddenly much quieter. “You were always supposed to have a good life, Dakota. I hope that you still can.”

He coughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m sorry you feel this way,” he said. “And I’m coming whether you want me to or not.”

Dakota threw the phone to the floor. It broke, scattering around him, pieces sliding under the dresser and sofa. There was a moment of regret. There was a moment of pain and the regret was hidden again, wrapping itself in opaque shades of nausea and chills. He extinguished the cigarette on a dirty plate and took Emma in his arms. At first her weight was unbearable. Tremors jerked his arms and his vision swam with the sudden rush of liquor. Once again he was strong enough to hold her, if only because his arms were numb and his head was swimming. “Emma?” he asked, his voice half plea and half promise. If she was awake he would give her what she had tried so hard to give him— strength, security. It wasn’t necessarily for her but he had hoped it existed. If he was held in place it was only through centrifugal force. If it was smack propelling him forwards at least he was moving still, even if it wasn’t in the way he planned. Falling was better than stagnation. Dakota was not one to slow down.

That was why his descent had been so quick.

“Let’s go,” he said, taking one last swig of whiskey before pulling her up into his arms. She was limp at first but suddenly much more pliable, less dead than submissive to the will of his body. As he moved she changed from motionlessness to shapelessness, her unconscious form changing to one of malleability. Her spine curved to fit the shape of his arms and he was either hugging her or clinging as he tried to maintain his own balance.

“Dakota?” she asked, “is that really you?”

He didn’t answer, but led her into the snow.

## XII. October

There were no pictures on the wall of the Big 12 motel.

Whoever managed the place hadn't bothered with decorations. For most people it was only for a night. That's what Casey had been told the first time, what he'd gone on to tell Dakota, hoping the kid would believe it if it meant he would go to sleep. In a way it was just one— now, anyway. Any illusion of Autumn was ending and it was early when he left. It was late when he came home. He'd spent all day in some shut-in's basement and when he stepped outside it was dark again, as if it was all the same unbroken moment. The countryside stretched out into one long night.

Casey had pictures, but they wouldn't last long on the wall. His dad would grab onto anything for balance if he'd already blacked out, expecting sheets of paper to bear his weight. Casey's pictures were in his nightstand and they were few. There was his mother on her wedding day, standing beneath an apple tree in the orchard where they were married, sun warm on her face. He'd stolen that one from his dad. He never even asked for it back. Casey wondered if he thought he'd lost it— considered its absence and deemed it an inevitable casualty. He wondered at what point that idea transferred to people.

It was also possible he didn't notice.

Casey had other pictures too: a Chuck-E-Cheese photo booth print of a nine year old Dakota giving the finger. A polaroid of the two of them on the fourth of July, their lips livid with blackberry juice. *My boys*, read the back. The worst picture of Casey ever taken— him attempting to give both his mom and his brother a piggyback ride. He was halfway through a pained shout when the timer went off. There was himself and Dakota in a diner looking sick,

each holding up twenty-five dollars in barbeque stained fingers. They were only the fourth party to finish The Destroyer and they would continue on to be the sixth and nineteenth. There was a cutout from a yearbook he'd swiped, defaced, and returned— Dakota with his middle school science award. He was twelve then and only just accustomed to always winning.

There were no pictures after that.

“Dad!” he hollered. “Grabbed you a burger. Gonna put it on the table.” He ground a cobweb from the toe of his boot, groaning as it stuck. He hadn't known if they were real cobwebs or not but he rubbed one between his fingers to find it fibrous and plastic. From their one window he saw Jack-o-Lanterns staring out across the street, unlit and waiting. Then he flipped on the lights and the outside world seemed to disappear. He didn't live out there. He lived here. Children were beginning to gather, laughing and pointing at houses. It wasn't Halloween yet but it would be soon. Casey would get loaded and pass out candy in the parking lot— eat most of it, probably. But most kids didn't trick or treat at the Big 12. He couldn't blame them for hesitating, for not walking across a dimly lit parking lot to grab a Hershey's from a drifter with twelve-pack. They wandered in a visible arc around it; its presence was not seen but felt. The motel wasn't a part of the town he was in. They never were. Motels are only nowhere. He lit a cigarette and wiggled a curly fry out of the bag.

He picked up his phone and dialed. It rang one time and went to voicemail. It always did. “Dakota,” he said. “I had a good day. Made some cash. ‘M thinking about the costumes we used to do when you were a kid. And you were gonna be the firefighter and I was gonna be the fire but then you switched it on me. You were the fire. You wanted to run around shrieking and

jumping on shit. I bet you're gonna be at some kinda crazy college party. Just don't drink too much beer, okay?" He chuckled. "Halloween is a liquor holiday. You have fun."

He hung up, then called again. One ring.

"I miss you, you piece of shit," he said, because he knew no one was listening.

"Mmm?" There was a groan on the floor behind him.

"Hell," he said, and slapped the phone down. "Didn't even make it to the bed."

"Didn't need to," his dad grunted, arms flopping at his sides. His speech was liquid as his body, every sentence one long word. Maybe no one else would understand him when he talked. Casey did. Casey understood his dad better than anyone. It was the hardest part of knowing him— understanding quantitatively how little there was to know. There had been something once. There had to have been. Now his existence was a series of the smallest life-altering occurrences. There was no food. The radio glitched out. He was crying and he was sorry and he remembered the day his Casey Jackson was born, the way the light struck his eyes, the moment he knew his son would be strong or was already. He hadn't been there. He had to puke. He had to piss. The telephone rang and the bottle was empty. He lived in his own little motel and Casey was left standing at the edge of the parking lot, knowing better than to approach. "Fine here."

"You wanna move?" Casey mumbled around the cigarette, bending down to lift him up.

"No. Fuck," Jack grunted. He jerked his legs and Casey heard and then smelt the squelching of vomit. "Go to bed. 'N stop walking around. You walk so damn loud. Man's gotta sleep. Was trying to sleep."

"Uh-huh." Casey walked to the kitchen, opened the fridge. "It's nine, you know."

"The hell's that supposed to mean?"

“You gotta cool off. Tell me about mom,” Casey said, wiggling a plastic vodka bottle out from behind the old milk cartons. He poured the dregs into a to-go cup and topped it off with a pour of the whiskey fifth he’d shoved in with the burger. The bottle went under his shirt.

“She’s pretty,” his dad slurred aimlessly. Casey snagged a burn-flecked cushion from the armchair, wedged it under Jack’s head and nudged the cup up to his fingertips. “She was pretty. We got married in Vegas, you know. Didn’t have nothing when we drove out there. I told her, I said, we’ll figure it out and I paid for the honeymoon suite with slot money.”

“Sure,” Casey said, watching him move or try to. His chin was pressing down into his neck and he moved his fingers but the cup didn’t move any closer. Maybe he was moving further away. He leaned back onto one elbow and stayed there. “Sure you did.”

Casey turned his back and looked at the empty wall, the blank whitish yellow of the refrigerator door. The only decorations were magnets from takeout places, a calendar set to the date of eight years before. This was another world, somewhere without time or place. It was eight years before and eight years later and for less than half a paycheck the sum of his life could be bought. This room wasn’t his. It wasn’t anyone’s. He took the fifth from under his shirt.

“On the day she found out she was carrying you she said I was the best thing to ever happen to her. She told me I gave her everything she ever wanted. Best thing to ever happen.” And Casey knew he’d found the drink because his words were even harder to understand. “The best,” he slurped. “The love of her life.”

Casey drank.

“Get me another.”

“No,” Casey said, whiskey stinging on his breath. “Go to sleep.”

“You kidding me? Dakota’s gonna get it,” his dad confirmed to himself, voice drifting in and out of comprehension. “Dakota? Dakota.”

“How much you have to drink?” Casey snapped, fingers tight on the bottle’s neck. “He’s gone, you dumb sonofabitch. You remember that? You were the one who told him to go. If you walk out on this family. If you walk out I swear. And what the hell was your bargaining chip? You? I love you,” he said. “I’m glad he doesn’t. You told him to go and you, Jack— you are never gonna see him again. Maybe neither will I.”

“Mmm,” the other man said, and was asleep.

There was silence and then snoring. Later there would be silence again.

Casey tossed the bottle from hand to hand, sprawled back on the bed and turned on the TV. He muted it right away. The phone still sat on the table in the kitchenette and for a moment it looked much too far away, further than Dakota himself. It was twenty-one hours to Los Angeles. He’d calculated the distance, the price of food, if he could even bring himself to stop. It was through a few states. Dakota would have passed through Las Vegas as the last stains of sunlight were eking from the sky. After hours of driving through the desert he wondered what it must have looked like. It must have felt like a culmination. He wondered if it felt like coming home.

Every time he imagined Dakota reaching Los Angeles, he pictured it covered in light. But Dakota had left in the quietest dark and twenty-one hours later it would’ve been that same way.

Casey had never seen a city at night. Casey had never seen a city at all and he could not imagine how Dakota passed through Las Vegas, drove through the warmth of artificial light into another empty space when those empty spaces were all he’d ever known. Casey felt he could

take the first real town he saw and stay there forever and be happy to do it. He knew that wasn't enough. He just didn't know why. He knew that Dakota would be a doctor and Casey would be the one who'd shoplifted him Jimmy Dean's and it wasn't something to be proud of but he was. His home was the three of them trying to make do, Dad and Casey passing a bottle of whiskey under the table to tolerate the sixteenth game of Candy Land. Dad and Casey getting loaded at Dakota's science fair and buying him an entire cake after, the bond of shared grief and frantic numbness the strongest one they'd ever had. And then driving Dakota to the next town while Jack passed out in the back. The two of them in the front seat. He didn't need to go anywhere but back into the past, down all the same highways with the same few songs playing in the background. To wherever he might find that place again.

His home was the three of them— Dakota, Jack, and Casey. It had been a different three before the accident, but that home was so inaccessible now as to be completely intolerable.

Nobody would like Casey in Los Angeles.

Casey knew it because Dakota belonged there. Dakota belonged anywhere else. Dakota was not afraid of pain or risk or loneliness but that the two brothers were equally important.

It didn't matter. Casey had never planned on giving up anything for their dad and that was because he'd never had much to begin with. Just Dakota. Always and only Dakota. Their dad hadn't always outright hated Dakota, just known him— known that he was smarter than both of them, known that he was all too aware of it. When Jack was awake enough to understand anything he understood this: that Dakota hated him as the thing that killed their mother. It made it easier for Jack to hate him back. Their dad didn't remember the day Dakota was born either, but Casey did. He'd lost their mother in an instant and what was left of his father over two or

three half-forgotten years. He'd lost years of high school, any friend he'd ever made, full weeks of his own memory. Dakota was the only thing that Casey had never imagined losing. Casey, apparently, didn't have much of an imagination.

He put the bottle down and moved towards the closet, nudging the man on the floor.

“Why the hell'd you name him after someplace none of us ever been?” he asked.

He took the warped Candy Land box from down off the shelf, tossing it down on the table and taking the bottle back. When he called Dakota it rang once then went to voicemail. He shuffled the cards and began to play for both of them. He talked into the phone like Dakota sat beside him, drawing cards to go back and forth at random to different parts of the same road.

### XIII. Catherine

Catherine Parker believed in herself like housewives believed in God, and she was indifferent— not antagonistic— to Dakota's existence.

She earned straight B-plusses and owned a dog. The number of people who had seen her online beauty tutorials were double the number of people she knew and she was a good person with a three star average review. She aspired to be a hairdresser and this didn't mean that she was nothing but that she was something important— the kind of person who wanted something not for money but for sheer desire. To want and to want something— the distinction was a technicality Dakota had never learned. Her greatest concrete accomplishment was perfect attendance but she cut her mother's hair to perfection with craft scissors and that counted on a point scale most didn't have the patience to measure.

Her greatest love was herself, but it felt good to love something.

#### XIV. Dakota

His bare feet burned from the shock of the snow, but he was halfway to the car and he would keep pressing forward. Wind whipped in through his open jacket, and Emma's breath condensed and froze in the small of his chest. He tottered as he carried her. The puffs of snow were mostly frozen now. Maybe with no shoes he would slip less— not real opinion, but intoxicated justification.

He met Catherine's eyes as he wrenched open the door of the Cressida, shards of ice tumbling into his sleeves. She was partially submerged in snow, her memorial no longer a cross but a great splintering stake barely jutting through the ice. Her white eyes were split in two, half above the snow line and half below. Soon she would be sepulchered in white.

For one reason or another, he felt they were in a similar position.

He tossed Emma into the passenger seat. She sprawled out in a tangled cluster of limbs, barely more than a shape, darkness reducing her to moving swaths of blackness. He steadied himself while she prepared to speak, fists clenching and unclenching as she began the descent back into her own body. His fingers were waxy on the steering wheel, not cold but numb as he started the car with no slight resistance.

"The—" Emma began, still struggling.

"You're safe now," he said, wrestling with the seatbelt as it slipped through his uselessly deadened fingers. "I'm taking you to the hospital. I've got you."

"The window."

Dakota realized then that their small pocket of darkness was self-inflicted, not the work of nighttime but of weather. He had forgotten to clear the snow off the car.

He shoved the door back open and tumbled out into the snow, dragging his arms along the windows. More snow went into his sleeves but it was cold on top of cold and that wasn't any worse. He hung off the back door. He fell on his ass, but it opened. Strewn across the backseat were mountains of clothes, all hidden under a blanket to conceal the mess. He didn't so much appreciate cleanliness as the appearance of it. Driving from home to school to work at such strange hours and for such long distances, he kept his car well-stocked with everything.

That is, except more smack. That had circled the drain just over a day ago.

He suspected he was soon to do the same.

The backseat held: snacks, warm clothes, a bottle of Old Crow and an ice scraper. He laid the blanket over Emma, tucked the whiskey into his jacket, and brandished the scraper like a weapon. Then it was back out into the snow.

The scraping was too loud, and he winced as soon as he started. Bending down into the quiet space beneath his own jacket he took a swig from the bottle. He doubled over, ground his teeth. Emma needed him and he needed to do his best. He was ashamed his best amounted to so little. He should spit the whiskey out. But that would be a waste, and he decided firmly against it. Back and forth he swished it across his tongue, eyes watering as he chipped away at the frozen window. Slowly Emma's face was revealed to him, piece by piece, legs first and face last. He imagined her slumped against the window. He imagined her not in the car at all, back in Lincoln, with her head on her pillow as Dakota nodded off on his unexpectedly clean living room floor. They would both be asleep. Neither would hurt. He swallowed the whiskey.

His stomach turned, then turned itself over.

He vomited into the snow. He vomited all over the hood of the Cressida and it was not just a motion but a sound, deeper and thicker and more awful than he remembered. Dizzy, he moved to wipe snow from the hood, now gray and orange and glistening in what was no longer quite moonlight. The snow fell to the ground, gone but not eradicated. The discolored sludge lay at his feet and he was moments away from vomiting again, gagging into his frozen palms. It was what he had to do. But all of this had felt like necessity, from the very beginning— from the instant he stopped answering the phone to the half-formed dreams of moments he didn't live through but paid for. Maybe he had needed them. Necessity was an excusable motive. This was not, he feared, an excusable need. All at once he wanted both to be exonerated and to bring the whiskey up one more time.

Emma rubbed on the other side of the glass, peering around the wall of ice to look up at him with soft, hazy eyes.

He gave a tight-lipped smile. He scraped the window and swung himself back into the car, head lolling as he stared out at the landscape ahead of them. The road was grey and the sky was silver, closing in on either side of him with indomitable pressure.

“Are you okay?” she slurred, her speech barely words but sounds with a distinct tone of warmth. Her good intentions pushed through chemical confusion and the pills' artificial exhaustion, formless but sincere. There was something else there— not fear, not yet. Concern. Her body was relaxed but her brow was furrowed as much as it could be.

“You're lucky to be alive,” he hissed, pain stabbing in his gut, “how many pills you took. Especially on top of all the— whatever it was. You wanna break your brain?”

“Break my brain?” she laughed— a thick, throaty sound as she slumped back into her seat. “That a medical term, *Doctor?*”

Dakota stiffened, trying to regulate his breathing. He reached for the key before realizing the car was already on, the scent of burnt plastic filling his nose as the old heater churned to life. She was wrong to mock him— wrong because he was going to help her. She was speaking now but still far from all right, sloshing around inside her own body like liquid in a half-empty bottle. He knew. He’d been there. He’d be there still and happier for it if she hadn’t downed all the pills at her small stature. If she hadn’t been so small the two of them might not have been there at all— the three of them, since Catherine was watching. They were a few hours past the point of a world where this wasn’t happening and the painful closeness of the possibility was almost more painful than the situation at hand. Maybe she was brave to take those pills for him, and maybe she was stupid. The difference was defined by outcome, not intent. Whether or not she had meant to be generous, she was half-conscious in the passenger seat of a car he didn’t know if he could drive, bearing down an icy highway towards an outcome of his own. But she was five-foot-one and swallowed those pills with only recreational experience. Without context it didn’t look so good. And with it.

He didn't do anything for recreation, but he still hoped he might get the chance.

He wasn’t studying medicine because he enjoyed it. It made sense, but that was a different thing entirely. It had made sense for him to work every other night shift at a U-Stop Convenience Shop but he hadn't enjoyed that much either. After three weeks of both work and pre-med he was popping pills to stay awake, as if he could sleep much anyway. As if he wasn’t always ready to leave in the middle of the night. Dakota could do calculus as well as he could

pack a bag in under ten minutes. The secret was not owning much. Had anyone observed the latter skill they might have said it seemed he was preparing for some greater apocalypse, and that was almost the truth. His apocalypse would be much quieter, and he knew that because it had been before— not necessarily smaller but harder to notice. He was lucky most people only picked up on the calculus. It was the only thing he feared more than failure: being revealed. Just one hint would strip him bare, and it was snowing harder than before. It was dangerous to be exposed. He curled his bare toes against the accelerator.

He didn't enjoy; he needed.

“Dakota?” Emma asked. “Dakota, can you drive?”

He pressed down on the pedal and tires spun in the snow, car turning wild and uncontrollable beneath him. He pressed down and reversed, rocking it back and forth as he'd been taught for years. He was half-unconscious and too conscious in incompatible simultaneity, strategy possible only because it was so routine. The car jerked to life and he felt his stomach drop as they skidded out onto the pavement. He couldn't define the feeling in his body as nausea or motion sickness, his only indicator of physical danger disappearing into ambivalence. He felt cognizant but still numb to the touch, body drug-dulled and half-responsive behind the wheel. If the car hydroplaned he would feel little fear. Any nausea would be sickness within sickness.

Still, maybe fear was unnecessary. As Casey used to say, confidence was the first step to being a good driver. If you wanted to merge you should merge. Chances were the other driver wasn't stupid enough to try and stop you. If you decided you could do something you could do it. Dakota followed a similar logic in leaving home.

They pulled out through the small copse of trees and rolled down the hill, falling into a sky that looked more like an ocean he could not see across. Still, he moved on without fear, the recklessness not of bravery but of sheer indifference. He knew he had to get Emma to the hospital. He did not feel it. He felt that his head was heavy and he was hot and freezing all at once. He felt he'd made a great mistake and couldn't pinpoint which one it had been, not when there were so many. So many were born from the others and if he thought back he was sure he could find what had started it all, his own private original sin. It wouldn't be private for long. He drove down into the mouth of the open countryside and knew beyond doubt it could eat him.

It wasn't the first time Dakota had been eaten alive. But maybe, he thought, half aware of the car skidding over ice, of the visual and actual snow flooding his eyes, of the worsening shakes in his fingers— maybe it would be the last.

#### XV. I-80

Dakota was born in the backseat of a car.

Dakota was born in the backseat of the Cressida he drove now, born to a woman who didn't live in Broken Bow because she didn't live anywhere but some intangible place along the side of the Interstate. Jack didn't drink because he was guilty; he was guilty because he drank. Even before, sitting on the couch, bloated like a mass of dying stars. He was the fat red sun and then— at once in a flash of light— she was the dark, quiet universe.

Dakota's outcome was malleable still. Hers was decided.

Dakota considered his mother, her own wooden cross, her unknowable stretch of road as the lone car passing by flashed yellow Morse code across the inside of the windshield, the glass

already obscured by hot breath and cold. The car rocked as the other one passed. The only sounds were breath and static spitting from the old tape player. His mouth tasted like a mouth and if he wanted to fix that he could knock back some whiskey.

No. He couldn't.

He was sweaty. He was drunk. He could hear himself crying in the backseat in the arms of a woman with no face. He wanted a blanket. He wanted to eat something for a second's satisfaction and throw it back up. He wanted Emma to love him and he wanted to love her in return. He wanted to crack a few open with Casey on the Cressida's hood and he wanted his father to be sitting in the driver's seat as it swerved back and forth over the center line.

No. He didn't.

He wanted to drive to the hospital and slam on the brakes. He wanted to slam on the brakes so hard his skull cracked against the steering wheel. He was born in the backseat and could die in the front. For all the miles he'd driven he only made it that far. He couldn't believe it. The distance between start and finish was so small as to be untraversable, not the size of a journey but of one single moment. And that meant Dakota was one single moment, the same story repeating itself in flashes with the incessant need of hazard lights. Returning to darkness every time. It meant that Dakota's ambitions were not goals but patterns. The backseat shook in the rearview mirror. The space between front and back felt like so much more than three feet. It was. Nobody ever counted the sideways miles, but they were starting to add up.

He might die, but he wasn't so much aiming to kill himself as he was to con Oxy off the doctor. And maybe Emma would get some if he drank more whiskey, if he ran them off the road, but she would need it and he would want it because it was something he could actually have.

Emma leaned over and spoke to him. She took him by the shoulder and his breathing was hard, his eyes were half sliding shut. His cold sweat moved to her fingertips and he imagined himself moving from person to person— spreading across the world, across the country, to California. His nose ran. He wiped it on his sleeve and the car lurched to the side. They were fifteen minutes out from Superior. He didn't know if he would make it there.

The phone rang. Dakota jumped and the car moved sideways again, wailing over a patch of ice and then finding traction. It was too early for a normal phone call. It had to be Casey. It was always Casey, always something. That was what happened when it took twenty years to move three feet; the past was right behind him, a passenger in the same car. It would always go the same speed. It would not stop moving. But Casey could call now. There was no interruption, no illusion to unravel. His private life would be at home here, resting on his leg and propped up by a shaking handle of whiskey. His hidden self would be the one to answer the phone.

Emma passed him the phone without answering. If the call was urgent it was his.

“Cody?”

“Mmm?”

“Oh, man.” An urgent voice. “Okay. Your phone's dead? You're close?”

“Casey?”

“Who's Casey?” he asked. “Man, are you okay?”

“Mmm.”

“Well, it's me. From your neuroscience class? We start in twenty minutes. Your phone was dead so I just called your girlfriend. I mean... you know, Emma Winslow. You're in the parking lot or something? I can tell the professor to put you further down the list.”

This was the wrong kind of intrusion.

“Last time you were crazy early,” he said now, a shade darker than confusion. “You... did you sleep in, Cody? Are you even on the way?”

“I probably did it already,” Dakota grasped. “It’s probably fine if I missed class this one time. Tell her I was up late. I was working at the gas station. I mean, scholarships don’t buy bread. Actually... I can email her. She likes me, right? I’ve been making A’s all semester and I babysat her kid in September. She has to like me. I did everything to make her like me.”

This was the wrong kind of intrusion. This was not Casey calling at the diner. This was not long drunken voicemails about Jack, not bouts of swearing that rang out clear even through the static, so unaltered that anyone could hear. This was not the phone ringing again and again in class, not an alert but a demand. This was a reminder— it was not the one he was used to. This was his right life. He was wrong self. With a sudden nauseous fury he wished he hadn’t answered, wished he was the voice on the other end of the line, confused instead of shameful. He was gatecrashing his own life. He wished there was someone else to yell at.

“Wake up, man,” he said, and his voice was far away, carried off in torrents of driving snow. The wind howled around them. The car rocked back and forth and and the cold was seeping in through the windshield. Dakota considered how metal contracted in winter— he remembered it because he could feel it happening. He could the feel metal exoskeleton of their little world grow small, shrinking down until Emma could no longer fit inside. He was next.

“The gas station? What gas station? You don’t have to make shit up, you just have to get here.”

They hit a patch of ice. The car lost traction. The sensation felt like the turning in Dakota’s stomach, and he did not recognize the difference. He put down his head and gagged,

hands leaving the steering wheel. Emma, to her credit, did not scream but stiffened. The car regained its traction and moved forward into what was no longer night but instead a more ambiguous time— not dark but flat, gray. Emma told Dakota to slow down. If he listened, it was because he had started to fade from consciousness. Pull over, she said. Don't be proud. We almost got you to the hospital. He replied only in labored breaths.

“Maybe she does like you, man, but you think that's gonna help on the final exam?”

Hands gripping Dakota's arm. The whiskey bottle falling loose and lidless from his jacket, contents rolling down his leg. “The final exam,” he was saying, tightening his lips as if to make his language more coherent. Changing the state of matter of his liquid voice. “I'll be there. Move me down the list. I'll be there.”

He checked opposing traffic, and felt his two lives stiffen with a fear he was no longer conscious enough to notice. One of them would make it out of this and it might just be him.

All he knew: he wanted more than this.

He jerked the wheel. The car spun down the highway, across the dividing line, over patches of ice and then into snow as it rolled off the side. The bottle smashed Dakota's face as he flipped over, blood running from his nose into his eyes. Emma screamed. Dakota did not feel but witnessed. The glove box twitched and popped open. Spare shirts flew between backseat and front. The bottle bounced back down and shattered on the console. Then his sweatshirt pulled up over his head and over his eyes. Objects flew around them but his face was soft.

He sat there listening to the hissing, the creaking and groaning, the twinkling of powdered glass. The whimpering. He sat and he listened until he heard nothing but snow.

## XVI. Broken Bow

“Porch beer?” Casey asked.

It was cold then as it was cold now, winter blowing into winter like one long sleep. Broken Bow was their longest stint in homemaking and the porch chair was one of the few pieces of furniture they’d gone out and bought. It was doubtlessly the only frivolity. Casey smoked over the kitchen stove like a fifties housewife and the only thing Jack could’ve done to stop it was quit drinking. Liquor was admittedly his only vice, but his commitment was whole and complete. Buying the porch chair was the greatest accomplishment of Jack’s last year, in terms of sheer quantity rather than anything else. The man hadn’t seen the inside of a grocery store since Bush was in office and Dakota commended his success without a trace of sincerity.

He’d been out of school for a few days now. There was no formal graduation. He completed the credits and then he was done. That was all right. He didn’t need a ceremony for being two years behind, a trophy for coming in last place. So he came back from the Exxon and pulled the ice scraper from the Cressida’s icy backseat, holding the letter in one already purpling hand. Without use the chair was nothing more than a habitat for fetid water. Now that it was cold all that had turned to ice. He scraped away at the still frozen pools. Then he sat and drank til he was too sluggish to reach for the cooler, whose primary function was not cooling but theft prevention. The beers had to be outside. If they were inside, Dakota would not be the one to drink them. It was freezing but heat poured off his skin.

Casey held out a stout little bottle of Coors, cracked off his teeth and outstretched in offering. He perched on the porch cooler and pulled his dusty legs up to his chest. “So?”

“It came,” Dakota answered, lips pulling from the bottle like a drunken parting kiss—sloppy, wet. Audible. “Merit scholarship and all.”

“UCLA,” Casey drawled, mud tapping off his boots. “You deserve it.”

“I guess I’m going,” he said, a quarter astounded and three quarters drunk.

“How long you been out here?”

“Couple hours,” Dakota affirmed, nudging the bottles at his feet.

“Didn’t wanna go inside.”

He sighed hard, carbonation fizzing in his throat. “No.”

“What you waitin’ for?”

“You remember when we had a house back in Minatare?” he asked, twirling the bottle cap from finger to finger. “A real house. I mean, moldy bathroom and all that, but what do you expect. We had that barbeque on the porch and shit. And I had my own bedroom. And I would grab those posters from the store, right? Not even real posters, just bright ads.”

Casey snorted, digging around in his pockets. “We have a porch now, don’t we?”

“It’s a stoop.” He drank. “I didn’t like the walls. They were too white.”

“Smoke?”

Dakota shook his head. “That was something to leave behind,” he said, staring out at the parking lot, where thinly frozen pools covered rainbow swirls of oil and old rainwater. Every odd day cars might pull in and out of the motel parking lot but for the most part they simply existed there as background characters— a state of congealing motionlessness. After hours of watching he hadn’t seen anyone pull out or in today. He pitched a bottle into the nearest puddle and watched it shatter, watched it ripple. Casey hissed out an exhale and he felt himself sink back

into the chair, melt back into the asphalt and watch the sky pass by overhead. There were no clouds. There was but a front of moving gray, a force more than an image. “This? Shit, Casey. This is nothing.”

“Ain’t that a good thing?” he asked, cigarette balanced between his lips as he grabbed for a beer of his own. He squatted forwards, opening the cooler with a hand between his legs. He fell back on it hard. “Easier to go that way. Nothing to say goodbye to.”

“There’s you,” he said, smile tugging at his lips. He plugged it with the bottle.

“Yeah,” he sighed, “but there’s always me.”

“It’s cold here.”

“Yeah?” Casey snorted amicably. “Go inside then. It’s just Dad. He ain’t got the energy to give you nothing you can’t handle.”

“Jack.”

“Right,” he said, and his voice was lower this time. “Jack.”

Dakota gave him a look and he held out the cigarette. Dakota snatched it up, feeling a current of warmth run up his hand, his arm. He took a quick puff, coughed a little, pulled harder.

Casey took it back, studying him closely. “You don’t have to tell him shit.”

Dakota shook his head, swath of dirty hair falling over his eyes. Snowflakes hung in his hair and his eyelashes and for a moment the world was sparkling white. And colder still. “No.”

“No?”

“No, I do. I have to. If I just up and left, hell. I don’t think he’d even notice. Maybe he’d think I was dead.” A grim little laugh. “I want him to notice.”

“I’ll buy a graduation banner,” Casey offered, grinning. “Tack it up in the kitchenette.”

Dakota smiled again, allowed it to happen. "I'll send postcards every day. You can hang 'em up on the fridge like kindergarten scribbles. I'll send postcards every goddamn day until the fridge is covered inch by inch. After the first fifty he might notice enough to think it's weird. Give it fifty days more and he'll have to knock 'em to the floor to grab the handle."

"God Dakota." He cackled. "I hope that ain't a joke, because I would love to see that."

"Come with me," he said with a sudden severity. Casey lowered the beer from his mouth. "We hang around here for a few months till orientation gets closer, work some shit jobs, save up some cash. Then a few weeks out we wait for nighttime and we go. We drive. We get there in the morning with the sun rising over the city. We don't tell Jack. We never tell Jack anything. We never call to find out how long he lasts. And we think but don't talk about how he won't check where we are till the booze runs out. Till the bills come due. And we wonder what he does and we never say it out loud. We hate him for every imaginary minute of it."

There was a thick silence. Then Casey extinguished his cigarette in his empty beer bottle with a hiss. It rattled around on the cement as he set it down. He did not move for another.

"We know what he does," Casey finally said. "He does it now."

"I know."

"Except he ends up on the street. Or he dies."

"I know," Dakota replied. "That's why I said it."

"You gotta go," Casey said, digging back in his pocket. He considered the unlit cigarette in his hand without much desire. "I really want you to."

"But what do you want?" Dakota blurted, sitting upright, cheeks all red from drinking.

Casey gave a dry little laugh, rolling the cigarette between his fingers. “I dunno, a hundred bucks? Nice car. A nicer kid brother, maybe.” He snorted. “Take your pick.”

“Casey.”

“A lawn,” he said finally, not meeting Dakota’s eyes. He stared down at his hands and Dakota saw his expression reflected in the ice beneath them, warped and shifting. Unreal. “I want us all to have a beautiful front lawn and I want to mow it while mom’s out at work. A surprise. Hell if I know, Dakota. It’s just a dream I get sometimes.”

“A lawn,” he said softly. “Not a better house, or a better car.”

“No.” He smoked. “Is that what you want?”

“No.”

“It’s all I can imagine,” he said. “The lawn, and her. I can’t think about Dad being sober. I can’t think about my own house. I don’t dream of anything else. That’s why I want you to leave. That’s why you gotta leave, Dakota. Because you can.”

“And you can’t?”

He smiled. “No.”

“Shit,” Dakota said eventually, because there was nothing else to say. Nothing else to be revealed. The truth was as naked as it would ever be and it was getting colder by the day.

“I want you to get that degree,” Casey said, voice as low as it had ever been. Dakota processed it as if for the first time, half surprised as he heard it. When he pictured Casey’s voice he pictured it as it had been years before, low but loud and clear. It was only one of those things still. When he heard his brother speak now it was as if he heard an echo, his memory superimposed over and then subjected to reality. Casey was twenty-four. It was a higher number

than he'd ever pictured. "I want you to get that degree," he said again, and there was no longer an illusion. Casey sounded old and Dakota stared out at the parking lot and watched snow harden into ice. "I want you to get it because you can hold it in your hand. Because you can prove it."

"I can hang it on my wall."

"You can," he said. "I hope you will."

And he felt then, instinctively, that he wouldn't.

## XVII. Dodge

"It's ruined," someone said, stunned and familiar.

He opened his eyes and saw Casey the way he'd seen his whole life: through car windows. The glass was cracked and Casey was a schism, bisected. The biggest crack ran from cheek to eye and Dakota imagined the whole of his features sucked down into the center.

There was glass in Dakota's hair. There was blood in his eyes. He stood up and got out of the car and Casey kept staring through the windshield like Dakota's face was suspended in the glass—an image, preserved and motionless. The real Dakota had never been so still.

"I can't go to the hospital," he said. "She needs to go, but I won't. No doctors."

"The Cressida... It's ruined. You ruined it."

"Hi, Casey," he said with sudden, rational uncertainty. "Hey."

Casey looked at him as if with physical force. Dakota looked back, studied his eyes, blue and bloodshot. He looked at the leather jacket their mother had given Jack before the army, back when she was herself instead of his. Instead of theirs, instead of mom. It wrapped around him, enormous and consuming like a shroud. It wasn't a very good one. The elbows were half worn

out and as he shifted Dakota could see a phantom motion of skin. Visible and then gone. It made him look smaller, paler. His freckles stood out like scattered points on a blank map. The zipper didn't work and the front pocket had a little hole. He'd never seen Casey wear it before.

He'd never seen Jack wear it either. On most days it sat spectral and legendary at the bottom of Jack's suitcase— not an object but the sharpest edge of an idea. It glanced him now.

“Casey. How did you find us?”

Nothing. The wind howled around them and Dakota noticed then the pain burning in his limbs, the heat pouring from underneath his skin. The nausea. He breathed and smelled blood. He wondered if it could freeze to his face, if it was really that cold. It would harden, congeal, attach itself to his skin and then the two of them would be inseparable— himself and his wounds. He could wear it until it got warm, the injury frozen in time and made permanent. He rubbed his face and it sloughed away. Casey remained silent.

“Man. It's good to— we coulda froze out here.”

Nothing.

“You left Dad alone?”

“Jack,” he spat out. “Jack, right?”

“Casey—”

“C'mon. Help me carry her into the car.”

He blinked. “Carry...”

“Emma,” he replied, incredulous. “Carry Emma. The reason you called? The only reason I knew where to find you. Goddamn lucky you won't both freeze out here,” he added. “Guess you didn't quite make it to Superior.”

“She’ll be okay after she gets looked at. There’s shock mixed in, superficial abrasions, but it’s not bad as it looks. Lucky even. She has a decent concussion, though,” Dakota said, checking her pupils. She was conscious through actions rather than words, eyelids fluttering, breathing shallow. He was conscious in the opposite sense. The more he spoke the less he concentrated on the shaking that was only half exposure. If she stopped moving she would fall asleep, and then. If he stopped speaking he wouldn’t be able to stand. She was aware enough to tense when they lifted her, Casey by the shoulders, Dakota by the legs. She hardened in his arms, formless and object.

“And what’s wrong with you?” Casey asked.

“I’m cold,” he said. “It’s winter.”

Emma got shotgun. Dakota didn’t ask why. Casey pulled a blanket from the backseat of the Cressida, fabric soft and sticky with whiskey. He laid it behind her head, lit one cigarette off the other, slipped off her blood-soaked sweater and replaced it with Dakota’s extra flannel. He replaced it fast. She shivered in her camisole for only a moment, Casey moving quickly while Dakota stood, dazed. “Are you okay?” he asked while Casey moved back and forth between Dodge and Cressida, tightening a bottle of water and closing her hands around it. “You okay?”

“You’re gonna be okay,” Casey promised. “You’re okay. We’re gonna take you to the memorial hospital in Superior. Ain’t fifteen minutes from here. Keep drinking the water and don’t fall asleep. Give me just one minute and we’ll be on our way.”

Emma sighed into her seat and Casey moved outside the glass. Dakota watched. Dakota watched as God might watch, as a satellite might look down, quiet and unnoticed. Somewhere overhead a camera was zooming in on a lonely county in a lonely state in an empty country.

Somewhere beyond the gray and the clouds, in a black plane of space, it looked down. Casey was a smudge on a lens on the side of a highway and Dakota was even less— a Grisham pressing up against a Gresham. Both too small. Casey dug in the backseat and pulled a soldier loose from the upholstery. He put it in his pocket and climbed into the driver's seat.

Emma wiggled in her seat to see him, eyes only halfway meeting his above the headrest. They exchanged gazes for only a moment before she sunk back down, submerged.

“Dakota,” she said. “It’s you.”

Casey turned the key in the ignition, a brief rush of warmth overwhelming all three of them as Dakota tried for a seatbelt and then let it go. It only felt warm for a moment. Once the heat was running, once it was constant, he realized how cold he was all over again. The car pulled back onto the Interstate, completing the next leg of its circular motion: from Broken Bow to Gresham to a place with no name and only the briefest of histories. He'd made that circle before. And those were the sideways miles, the backwards miles: the distances no one ever meant to go. Everything that had ever happened to Dakota struck along the same road and when everything looked so familiar he could no longer tell if he was moving forwards, if he was moving at all. He traveled the same timeline in every direction, and every meant two. There were only two: towards his goal and further away. There were so many thousands of miles between the backseat and the front. He felt them now, looking at Casey and receiving only pointed silence. He clutched his stomach and his eyelids fluttered and they moved onto the next point on the connect-the-dot, the piecemeal outline of a colorless image.

Dakota did not realize that the inside of a car was the stillest place of all.

“Ace,” he attempted. “Ace—”

“Don’t strain yourself,” he growled, not from malice but exhaustion. “Sleep.”

And for a while, Dakota did.

When he woke up there was no sun but there should have been. The landscape was flat above and beneath them, and what little light there was hung distorted through smoke bluer than sky. Dakota breathed in deeply, tasting tobacco and coffee. The window was mostly closed. He couldn’t tell the temperature outside. It was cold, he imagined, but the Dodge held an artificial summer. The Dodge held the pair of them and no one else. Emma was gone.

It wasn’t that he didn’t miss her. It was that he’d anticipated her absence. In the end Casey was the only other person he could ever know. It had always been Ace and Cody. No one else. He’d never said it to his brother but he didn’t know if he could have it any other way.

He didn’t look at Casey; he felt his motion in their stagnant, tiny world. He looked out the window and saw the highway speeding by, so blurred as to be almost entirely without features. There was grass like anywhere else, he guessed, but it was buried. In the faint light the countryside sparkled. They were— it was— a series of images only half-drawn, half-imagined. The landscape before him was designed only in pieces: a gas station, a diner, existing separate and simultaneous. Independently they were something: a life, a dream, a goal. Together they were nothing at all. He believed that.

But it wasn’t what he felt. He let his eyelids flutter shut, imagining a different car, a different road. He imagined the summer he felt on his skin and it felt like California, but the glass was freezing and it was Nebraska nevertheless. Even with his eyes closed he knew what was outside the window. The gas stations were all the same but somehow they weren’t familiar. Somehow their sameness made them alien. They were an invention, a comforting repetition. To

travelers they were points on a map, not destinations but mile markers. They were built to be driven past. He closed his eyes and blocked them from view.

“Do you remember when we were little?” Casey asked, ignorant to Dakota’s fluttering eyes. One of the mix CDs Casey always made shuffled between Kansas and the Killers, in alphabetical order, and his voice was especially loud in the silence. “That one time. It was your birthday. Maybe you were twelve. Maybe you were thirteen. Hard to say. It was the first one after her, probably. Dad hooked up a sled to the four wheeler and we rode along with a rope tied to the back. You remember how the neighbors stared?” he laughed. “And I fell off the back. They knew one of us was going to. But I thought it was fun. I never minded the winter. And I liked to see you pulled through the snow and smiling at me. You didn’t think I was getting left behind. You thought I was catching up. And you turned around and waved and I ran right after you. I guess I must’ve been sixteen then. I was in high school. And when you yelled and asked for another turn once we pulled back in the driveway me and Dad pounded whiskey in the garage and went back for another round. You were smiling so damn hard, so damn big. How could we stop?”

“You remember when you were fourteen?” he asked. “When I worked at the Sunoco? We still had the house then. The four wheeler and everything. And Dad worked at the shop still and it wasn’t so bad. Maybe you don’t remember that— when shit wasn’t so bad. I think about it a lot, that there was a before. There’s almost always a before and an after and a fault line. But this time there wasn’t. The accident wasn’t what happened. The drinking wasn’t what happened. It was the revealing. And mom dying, dad losing the house, you leaving... it’s like if you get lung cancer you’d cough a lot, maybe cough up blood, have trouble breathing. You’re the boy genius.

I dunno. But the coughing, and the blood, and the breathing— it's the cancer. All of it is the cancer. And everything gets worse and worse as you start seeing... not the next symptom, but the nature of the thing.”

The music started, or got loud enough for him to hear over the rushing of blood in his ears. Dakota opened his eyes again and watched the snow blur around them as heat welled up under his skin. He sweated. And it was as if the smallest of miracles had occurred and then been ruined— that he could see the snow and the winter and feel so separate from it. But he wasn't warm. He was burning. Outside snow crystallized on the windshield and in the car he watched glass shards fall from his hair to the floor.

“It's not just trouble breathing,” Dakota croaked. “You make a lot of noise when you breathe. Like wheezing and shit. It's called stridor.”

The song ended. “You been awake?” Casey asked.

“Not for long.”

Silence again— or not silence, but absence. The car rattled with the force of winter, Dakota's teeth chattered, snow crackling as it melted in his hair. Casey did not speak.

“Are you taking me back to Broken Bow? I gotta go back to Grisham first,” he said. “I got some stuff there. My clothes, some books. If you take me back to Broken Bow I need to bring something that's mine.”

Nothing.

“It's almost winter break anyway. And then I would go back. I would call my professor and tell her I was in a car accident and she would get why I didn't show. Especially if I take a

picture of my face, right? You can't fake that. I probably look wrecked. Maybe she'll feel bad, mark up my grade. It's not ideal but it might be necessary."

Nothing again. Nothing.

"Casey," he said, and his words dissipated into air like snow into snow, meaningful only in their accumulation. He was much the same. He was too much the same, an accumulation of half-realized actions, and he hoped he could be so lucky— that he was half the person he thought he was. It had been snowing for long time now. Dakota had revealed his shape. "Casey, we don't have to go back. I thought I'd never get you to leave and now you did. What if you just don't go back? Drive by. Wait in the car and I'll grab your shit. Then we run. We run like we always ran."

"Sonofabitch," Casey finally spat. "You gotta stop talking, Dakota. Please."

"You gotta start talking, then," he said, but didn't fight harder.

They pulled into a gas station: Casey's General. There was one in Broken Bow just the same. He left the car running and leapt out into the snow. Dakota was slower. He lifted himself up, untangled his limbs. He waded through snow as if treading water. The Dodge read Dakota on its bumper and he blinked, rubbing his eyes again. In the window of the gas station a neon sign said PIZZA. In its brightness it looked more real than the street around them. The two orange lights were diluted, dripping down through the air like watercolor stains. "You drive a Dodge Dakota?" he asked as the front door swung shut. He staggered through the sheer volume of atmosphere, thick enough so as to be alien. He followed the sound of twinkling bells.

The bells rang again as he went inside. "Casey, you drive a Dakota?" he asked again.

Casey spoke without making eye contact. "Two packs of USA Gold 100s."

Dakota turned his back, moving through the aisles. It smelled like plastic and burnt meat but at least it smelled like something— not like the searing air outside. It was thick, hard to walk through, but turned to nothing in his lungs. Vanished. He looked at potato chip bags, electric orange and purple and blue. They were bright enough to make him wonder if he was really seeing them, if he died in the car wreck, if Emma was comatose and Casey was perpetually on his way. Maybe that was the genuine hue of death— not black but bright, too bright, an overcompensation. Life was darker; it had no need to prove itself. But Casey's General didn't look like heaven. It looked like everything he'd ever known. He grabbed two plastic-bottle personals of whiskey that would taste like the devil's piss and fumbled for change in his pocket.

"Surprised there's so much to drink here," Casey said, sliding a twenty across the counter. "Thought it was stricter or somethin'."

"No, son. You ain't in Kansas yet."

"Right. Not yet," Casey said, as Dakota dumbly dropped his bottles to the counter. They both bounced off the other, rolling to the edge. He made a small stack of ones and quarters, scrounging for more. With one long sweep Casey whisked the bottles to the center of the counter. "These too. And two of those big sandwiches, thanks. The salami cold cuts in the cooler. Lucky we stopped. That's where we're headed."

"Why?" Dakota asked as Casey looked right past him.

"You have a good night," Casey drawled, swinging the plastic bag over his shoulder.

"It's morning," the cashier said.

The bells jingled. Casey was all shadows in the sweep of the Dakota's headlights. A cumulus cloud of exhaust hung heavily behind the car, not drifting away but settling down

overhead as if hitting some invisible ceiling. Maybe that was why the sky looked so flat. He walked through it. If they were in a garage, he decided, they'd have suffocated. He wondered if he would take shotgun or if he'd have to climb in the back.

He took the back. He didn't want to look at Casey not looking at him.

Casey looked at the road and Dakota looked back behind them. He imagined he would feel when they passed into Kansas, even if his eyes were closed. He would feel it intuitively, the way a man might feel his own mother had died. He would know. He wanted to watch Nebraska disappear behind him. If Kansas looked just the same, he would rather not see. Casey's ran behind them through the wet windshield, a fixed point springing into illusory motion. Then it was gone, and he was waiting for someone— maybe himself— to speak.

One day all the gas stations would be gone. Not just this one. One day there would be no need. There would be electric cars, miniature helicopters. Better places. There were better places now. And what would happen then, to the places that existed between places, to the dark planes of nameless space? Someday there would be no reason to pull off the road here, or anywhere that he had ever been excepting Lincoln. Someday the whole of here, of Grisham and Broken Bow— someday it would recede, creep so far back off the road that it ceased to exist. Gradually and then all at once it would become its own private nation, a secret and then a dream. What would happen then to the people who knew nowhere and nothing else? No one would live there anymore; they would exist in hiding. Dakota wondered if after so long in this place it would spread out inside him, roads running back and forth across his mind? He could spend the rest of his life driving around there in his memory, the darkest country of his own imagination. He couldn't see the gas station anymore. He couldn't see anything.

“She died there, you know.” Casey finally said. “In the Cressida.”

“Emma didn’t—”

“Emma’s at the hospital. I meant Mom. Or as you might call her,” he snorted, “Daphne.”

“Oh.” Dakota turned enough to see his outline in the glow of the GPS, the words Dreamliner Motel, a thin beam of amber light refracted through the bottle on the console. With the liquid still up in the neck, he couldn’t tell if it was open. “I guess... I wasn’t there when it happened. I wasn’t... I guess it couldn’t have been any other way.”

“No,” he said. “That’s the second time we left her on the side of the road.”

Nothing. Casey was so quiet he might not have been breathing and Dakota was riding around inside himself, watching someone obscure as a shadow drive the car. For all he could see it might not have been Casey. It might have been anyone. He was in the backseat, going.

“Who do you think built that car back up after it happened?” he asked. “After the wreck. Who do you think pushed Dad into the passenger seat after? Who moved from the back into the driver’s seat? Who do you think drove away when he was told? Because he was told. No police, no phone calls, no burial. Who do you think fixed it back up, Dakota? Who? What kind of miserable bastard would do something like that?”

“I’m sorry,” Dakota said.

“I didn’t do that part because he told me to,” he said. “Fix the Cressida. It was the only way to tell her sorry. Now both of them are out there on the side of the road.”

Left unspoken: Jack destroyed her the first time. Dakota took what remained.

They were quiet. Silent. The closest sibling to sleep. Dakota didn’t look at the car window but down at his hands. They shook with the tumult of his stomach. Around them the

Dakota shivered too. He wondered who Casey got it from— what and who it could remember. He wondered about the Cressida, who would find it out there, what they would feel. He wondered if they would find any of the soldiers in the seats. If there was blood.

“Hey,” Casey said, voice not gentle but soft. “Look up. I don’t want you to miss it.”

A sign loomed before them: Welcome to Kansas. *Ad Astra Per Aspera*— to the stars, with difficulties. But it was morning now, if it didn’t look like it, and the stars were gone or hidden. Something stirred inside him and he remembered the motels, remembered the atlas and the flashlight, the hope and the terror. It was blue like so many road signs and he wanted to stare at it anyway— like it was something unprecedented. For an instant it towered over them and it was all he could see, so close it no longer showed words but mere letters, disconnected. He sucked in a breath. By the time he let it go they’d blown by. He exhaled slowly and Casey pitched a cigarette out the window. A little light flew into the gloom and was gone.

### XVIII. Dreamliner

Dakota came to in the parking lot.

“You fell asleep again,” said a person who was someone first and Casey second.

Casey helped him out of his seat, took him around the shoulders and walked him over the asphalt. He didn’t see the building but saw the ground beneath them, the refracted universes of broken glass. He was either drunk or tired. He couldn’t tell which, clearly. He couldn’t tell what time of day it was. He couldn’t tell if he was walking or being pulled. He stared at the asphalt and could see the unseeable curve of the surface of the planet, could see Kansas bend beneath them. If he stared hard enough he could see the turning. He could see the conveyor belt speed of

the world moving underneath them, that unrelenting motion. He could see them running to catch up. He wondered if they would ever run fast enough to escape the feeling of falling behind. He knew they could not outpace it. The best they could hope for was that their feet and the Earth lined up. Casey pulled the glass door open and he saw stained carpet.

He wanted to leave. He couldn't tell if he was able to.

They paid for the room. They moved back out into the cold. He saw his own feet, toes purple and white. He wasn't wearing shoes. Casey took him by the wrist and didn't pull but led. He wondered who was in the other rooms— 13, 14, 15. If they had names, or just numbers. If they had ever left Kansas. The border wasn't more than a half hour away but he had only crossed it with someone else driving.

The door to 16 opened and the room smelled stale. Casey sat him down on the bed and he fell back, dry arms splayed on scratchy blanket.

"I found something in your car," Casey said.

It wasn't Casey speaking. His voice came out of the blanket, the walls, the ceiling. He wondered if there was someone who would come in close, close enough to smell him— would he smell stale? Unused? Would he smell like gasoline, cheap laundry detergent, something burnt and chemical? He was jealous of anyone who could get close enough to pick up that scent. He was jealous of anyone who could tell that he came from somewhere, could identify something belonging to him. Maybe home was the weighty nuclei of intangible particles clinging to his skin. Something he carried with him. Either that or it was Nebraska, or the view from a splintered car window. An image instead of a place. He tried to sit up and only semi-succeeded.

“Come on,” Casey said, and Dakota gripped the edge of the single bed and pulled himself up. The room had one bathroom, one table, one armchair— not green, but brown. He hadn’t opened the drawer on the nightstand but there was a Bible inside whether or not he’d seen it. There was one mirror, thankfully not hanging opposite. The walls were yellow and he didn’t know if they were meant to be that way. “God damn it. Get up. I gotta—”

“Did you really do what you said you did?” Dakota asked. “Roll her out of the car?”

Casey twitched.

“You coulda told me. All those years you coulda said something. I was ready to leave. I was always ready to leave. You were the one who never would. I couldn’t tell if you were scared or loyal,” Dakota said. “I couldn’t tell if you loved him.”

“Jesus, Dakota,” Casey growled, standing up from the bed. It creaked beneath him, sinking and then rising— Dakota along with it. He rolled onto his side unwittingly with the unexpected motion and then his face was pressed into the staleness of the comforter. He wondered how many people had sex on these blankets and how many of them were still within a twenty mile radius. How long ago their cells had died. Maybe the smell wasn’t staleness and disuse but overuse, a combination of too many people— too much perfume, smoke, sweat, shampoo, skin, hair. It was possible they all evened out into something unpleasant and neutral. It was possible that one imprinted history seemed unique but together all of them looked and smelled the same. Casey spat and tossed the armchair cushion from palm to palm. “Jesus. Am I your brother or another problem that you have.”

“I’m not going home with you,” Dakota said suddenly, lips moving against the seventies quilting. “It’s not home to me. I don’t know anyplace that is. You can call me and call me but the only way to get out is to leave.”

Casey stared and said, “I did leave,” and he waited for a response and he asked, “what the hell do you think I’m doing now?” He yanked a pack from his jacket pocket and the almost curtain rustled in his wake, yellow-stained rubber rippling sideways then going still. It didn’t move enough to show the window but Dakota imagined fingerprints on the glass. There was no point polishing something mostly invisible. Casey lit a cigarette and that was the oppressive air of the room: mold under the carpet, the ghost of a stranger’s cologne and smoke that wasn’t his. It smelled different. It smelled different outside your own body—poisonous. More like what it really was. Casey asked, “why’d you disconnect your phone?”

“What?” Dakota said, lifting his head from the blanket. He’d lingered too long. A saliva slick trailed from the corner of his lips and stuck to the quilting, connected.

“You heard me. You been blocking my calls since October.”

“We’re back to this?” Dakota asked.

“Back to this,” Casey laughed, and it came out like a growl. “Back to this. I’m asking ‘cos I want to hear you say how bad you wanted to leave us behind. I want to hear you admit it.”

“You already knew that,” Dakota said, digging his palms into the side of his head. He could hear the blood flowing there, feel the tightness and the tension. His stomach was turning, his sides burned, feeling still hadn’t returned to his feet and he didn’t know where to hold. “What else reason is there to leave for?”

“I didn’t leave to run away from shit,” Casey said. “I left to find you.”

“You left because I called,” Dakota mumbled. “You always come when you’re called.”

“What?”

“Didn’t say nothing.”

“So that’s what you thought, then. You could disconnect your phone so I wouldn’t fuckin’ bother you and then whenever you needed me you could just drop a line. That’s what I’m there for, ain’t it, to never need anything. Call me up, no problem. That’s what you thought.”

“It’s not—”

“It is, though.” Casey paced, the curtain rippled, and Dakota saw their reflection in the sliding glass door. He saw himself sitting on the bed, small, and he remembered that he was the younger brother. The world was black on the other side and the image of the two of them hung phantasmal in the darkness. And Dakota wondered if Casey would stop if he said then that he was haunted— that he was being followed, being chased. That he could feel his own self trailing so close behind him he had to run to get away, to run and carry nothing. “I don’t need. I get needed. When you stole the Cressida I was just happy you were getting the hell outta dodge. I walked three miles to work for a week, do you know that? And I was happy. And I sold damn near everything I owned to get that Dakota and I was happy, even once I figured out you stole a couple hundred off my savings— my savings, a couple hundred and change. I thought, at least you left me something. My brother. And you didn’t answer and I called back and I was happy to talk to your voicemail the same way some are happy talking to God. You didn’t have to answer me. I just needed to know that you were listening. And you weren’t. I sold my radio to buy Dad two handles of whiskey, and you blocked my number. Do you damn well think, Dakota, do you think you’re my reason for breathing?”

He let out a deep, guttural sigh and Dakota was repulsed by the sound of it, repulsed by the blanket underneath him and the edge in Casey's voice and the state of Kansas, the states around them, a whole swath of land stretching out into shapelessness. Casey exhaled and Dakota watched the smoke drift up and then hang, too heavy to move any higher. He wondered again if that was the reason— if the room really wasn't supposed to be yellow. He wondered if every person was like that— leaving their own stain. He wondered if every person was like that, or just Jack. Or if he was like that, too. He wondered what he might have been like if the wrong person never touched him.

“You are,” Casey finally said. “God damn it, you are.”

“Then why didn't you leave until now?” Dakota said, not an accusation but a plea. “Why'd you wait? Why'd you— why'd you let me out here alone? For some sack of shit who broke your nose four times? Who hasn't fed us in years? For Jack?”

Casey's face didn't fall; it melted. He ground out his cigarette and then he was still, perfectly still, restless legs planted on the ground and twitchy fingers interwoven, as if the slightest motion would launch into being a chain of events he could not control. Dakota had never thought of Casey as having control. But then, he had never seen Casey cry— and there had been plenty of occasions. But then if Casey was in the driver's seat then he had been the first one to leave the state, to enter something vaster, something darker. Casey let out a long, slow breath.

“Because he was a reason too.”

*Was.* “You mean...”

“I don't mean he let me down,” Casey said. “Course, he did that too.”

“Oh,” Dakota said plainly. He watched the last of the smoke move along the ceiling, sliding and then clinging. For a moment it seemed as if it would stay there, solid, trapped and unable to dissipate. He stared until it was harder to see, until any hint of motion was dirt on the membranes of his eyes. He watched until there was nothing and wondered: is this hell?

It wasn't. It was the slow creep of inevitability, the short footsteps of a man who could not keep pace with the turning world beneath them. He had imagined what might happen to Jack before, sometimes with delight and sometimes with something he could not admit. He didn't try to drive; there were no cars with Dakota and Casey gone. But when had it happened? How long ago? With Casey working so often he could have needed something, could have run to the Pump & Pantry, seen a flash of light, seen the light. It was unlikely. He'd needed food less and less. But heaven or hell regardless, Jack would have seen a light. Death had to be some material change in the state of existence, something unmistakably more than the same drunk sleep. Dakota didn't know for sure how Jack lived but for his own sake he could imagine only darkness.

When he pictured the way Jack saw his sons he imagined shades of people drifting in and out of shadows, peering through fisheye lenses. He imagined their voices the oil coating on the surface of dreams. At some point his world had shrunk down to fit them, then him, then shrunk even further until his body could not cram itself inside. Until only his mind was left, an island on the encroaching sea. And then. That was why, he supposed, that Jack was almost never hungry, why he almost never drank water, or moved. He didn't want anything the world had to offer. He wasn't a part of it. Jack saw everything as if through a pane of glass, through a car window, not seeing the world as something in front of him but an image on the other side of something

intangible. And Jack didn't see Dakota and Casey but two imaginary people, two loud, looming characters who could not be reasoned with but only driven away. When he hit them KA-BLAM lit up above their heads in neon. It had never occurred to them that they were real people. It had never occurred to him that they would grow up and remember. He didn't remember anything. They were cartoonish projections of grief, and he wanted to turn them off.

He had no idea how Jack saw anything, but that was how he had to picture it.

He wondered if he would find out soon.

Maybe Jack had wandered outside, fallen into a snowdrift, into sleep and then somewhere much quieter. Maybe he choked on his own vomit. Maybe he choked on an order of Taco John's and died with sauce smeared all over his face. Maybe he hit his head opening the refrigerator door too hard. Maybe his reclining chair tipped backwards and broke his neck. Maybe his heart gave out, as it always might have. Just sooner. Maybe he was alone. And maybe Casey watched.

He knew Casey must have been the one to find the body.

Their mom had left Nebraska— though it was the wrong way to talk about it, when she was born in Junction City. Kansas was the place she'd left. Nebraska was the place she'd left to. Jack had left Nebraska. Many times. Jack had been to countries Dakota had only heard of, bled out in towns with names spelled out in shapes he couldn't write. And Dakota wondered where whatever happened to Jack had happened— out there or right here. He wondered if it was something that happened or something that was. If it had happened to him already without him knowing it. If it was happening now.

“Do you want to know how?” Casey asked.

Dakota shook his head. “When.”

“Late October,” he replied. “Right around when it started to be winter.”

“That long.”

“I didn’t know where to find you ‘til just now,” Casey said, voice hoarse. “Didn’t even know how to tell you. I drove to Lincoln twice. Sometimes I’d just drive around. They don’t give out student records, though. Even to a brother. Said I’d have to be your mom or dad.”

Dakota leaned forward slowly, fists tightening around the edges of the scratchy covers.

“Might as well have been.”

“I been living at the Big 12 for almost two months by myself,” he said. “When you called I put everything in the trunk. I’ll take it back if I have to. There ain’t much. It’s all on you.”

It was.

“Not too late,” Casey said, unwrapping the first sandwich. As worn as they were his hands were strangely delicate, used to taking broken things apart and finding what was inside. He slid the sandwich to the edge of the table, towards Dakota, starting on the foil around his own. Dakota raised it tentatively to his mouth. The meat stank. He wasn’t hungry. He wasn’t tired. He was rattling around inside himself not knowing when he would escape. He took a bite and gagged as he chewed. “Not too late to run away. It wouldn’t be running, though, would it. Not now. You have somewhere. You wouldn’t have to work. I’d do that. You’d just go to school. Be a doctor. Pay me back then,” he chuckled, taking a bite.

Dakota put the sandwich down, bread on the covers, the sweat and the ejaculate. He too was a sedimentary construction of human remains.

“Then maybe we could really live,” he said, chewing. “Maybe we could really go home.”

“Stop fucking with me,” Dakota said, moving to his feet.

“Cody?” Casey asked, voice muffled.

Dakota ran his hands through his unkempt hair, fingernails scraping scalp. That was a different feeling, a distraction. “I’m sorry,” he said, tapping out a cigarette and lighting it. He could feel the piece of sandwich moving around inside him. He could smell his own sweat. “I should’ve said that before. At all.. I’m sorry. I can’t even— I can’t even tell you for what. I’m so sorry. Just please... stop goddamn messing with me. You said you found something in my car? I know what you found. What someone was always going to find. I wish it was different— that I was different. I wish I was the person you came to find. Go home, Ace. Please.”

Casey moved— he didn’t see it, but feel it. If he kept his head turned down Casey couldn’t look at him, not in the way he feared. He couldn’t see Casey looking at him. He couldn’t consider what Casey saw— someone small and frozen in time. Someone innocent and wrong. Someone who had wanted something vaster than himself and gotten it. He knew Jack saw only darkness because he saw only blind light, where everything was not washed away but *more*. He didn’t want to drown his sorrows. He wanted them eradicated. If numbed himself to the evil around him there would be nothing left. He didn’t want to be alone on the island of his mind. He wanted to be everywhere, a satellite, broken down into particles and scattered across a continent. If he couldn’t see the world he would carry it inside him, let it grow until there was nothing left of himself. And he’d done it. Casey could not see the places he’d seen. He thought he’d wanted something. It turned out he wanted anything.

“Go home,” he demanded.

Casey barked out a laugh. “And where the hell is that?”

“Go home,” he begged.

“If you’re sorry, let’s go back to Grisham,” Casey said. “If you’re not, I’m gone.”

“Then I’m not,” he said, dragging off the cigarette. He coughed and his stomach lurched with him. Reaching for the curtains to steady himself, he grabbed only empty air. Then his hand hit the glass door. As he straightened up he saw the oily slick of his own fingerprints. “Go.”

There was pressure and then light as Casey grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him around. His eyes were wide and desperate in a way Dakota had never seen but only known. He took the cigarette from Dakota’s hand, pushed his hair back, looked him in the face. “You are sorry,” he decided, not with anger but authority. “I’m glad you are.”

“You said you found it in my car,” Dakota said, quieter now.

Casey reached into the front pocket of Dad’s old jacket, fingers moving down through leather and finding nothing. Dakota watched his skin poke out through the hole that had always been there, producing nothing but loose thread. Casey hesitated for a moment, smoked, brought his hand to his side. “It was the soldier,” he said, finally. “I wanted you to remember.”

“Oh,” Dakota said, and he was looking at Casey’s face but suddenly could barely see it.

“What’d you think I found?” he asked, and Dakota was not looking at him but the yellow ceiling, the red insides of his own eyelids. “Your acid hippie shit or whatever you two were messed up on? Do you remember how I was after mom? Cody, that’s nothing. Hey. Dakota?”

“Heroin,” he said, and he vomited the sandwich down his shirtfront.

“Oh Christ,” Casey swore, hitching him up over his shoulder. “Oh Jesus Christ, oh God,” and the world was liquid around him, a smear running up a windshield. Or maybe he was the smudge, the stain. Casey laid him down on cold porcelain and he could feel a faucet jabbing into the back of his skull. He wished there was water. He wished there was cold water and he could

feel himself melting into it. Then he'd know he wasn't drifting away, scattering into particles and dissipating into smoke. He would be all right to float around himself. "Dakota, roll over."

He threw up again. He couldn't look at Casey because he couldn't think to do it.

"You hot or cold?" Casey asked.

"Hot," he groaned, and Casey turned on the water.

At first it was so cold he thought he'd disappeared. He came back only in pieces— his eyes first, looking at water pour down curtains of hair without comprehending. He felt his goosebumps, tangible. He felt his toes, which were still dead white, burn.

"Does it hurt?" Casey asked, and Dakota felt no need to reply.

He listened to the water run. Without knowing why he grit his teeth— not out of pain but some deeper terror. Casey's voice was echoing around the bathroom too loose to be gathered and collected into words. All he could hear was the primordial roar of the tap and in the distance, his own splashing. The sound filled him as if it was the speech of the first river, not yet confined by words. It was a new world, a beginner's world, all-encompassing and remote. His shirt floated up around him like a bloated carcass and he thrashed but could not strip it off. Slowly he turned sideways until only his nose was above the water. His mouth was bisected, half above and half below. Opened. Sour pieces of him drifted inside.

"How'd this happen to you," Casey said, not expecting an answer. Not speaking to Dakota at all. And Dakota might have said that it wasn't his fault, that he hadn't done anything wrong. He might have said it if he weren't half-submerged, bubbling. If he'd known whose fault it was. Maybe it was because there was something he wanted, because there was something else he wanted and this was all he could get. He was a natural scientist but he didn't want to be a

doctor. He didn't want to solve puzzles. He didn't even think he wanted to help people. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to be rich. He liked to move forward— to go on long drives, to pay bills on time and to be able to, to win over and to impress. But those were the things he enjoyed, not the things he demanded. He only wanted what was already gone to him.

Somewhere out there was his hometown.

Somewhere out there were his childhood friends— grown now. They'd have office jobs but drink hard on the weekends. They'd live in the suburbs while he lived in the city— close enough to visit and far enough for that brightest illusion of motion. It must have been seven now and they were making breakfast without ever having met him. They mixed vegetables (but bacon too) in with their eggs, drank coffee from a machine and did not notice that they'd never met Dakota Pendleton, who was sinking in a motel bathtub, soaked in vomit. He would be more successful than every one of them and graciously never mention it.

At least once a day they would think fondly of the place they'd grown up, imagine it with heartfelt and earnest uniqueness. And Dakota, having only lived there, would think of it that way too. He would not remember all the towns he'd seen. He had already forgotten all the kids getting drunk in gas station parking lots, the big rocks on remote creeks where you could kiss someone for the first time and years later, open them up and fit yourself inside. There were walls to write on and hills that got the best sun and shops that wouldn't notice if you stole and parents who would cook you extra. He had forgotten all of those places, eradicated them in favor of the imagination of just one place that was almost certainly the same. Somewhere out there that place existed, whether he'd been there or would go there or had the chance and lost it. Somewhere there were people who remembered Dakota Pendleton on swingsets and in parking lots, walking

home from school and smiling in yearbooks. They did not and would not recall that he was something always incorrect, something indefinite and nebulous. He was a dreamer and a degenerate, a prodigy and a prodigal son. In being both he was neither. He was not reduced to pinprick points on a map but trapped in between them, everything he was the dark swaths from headlight to headlight on busy highways he had never seen. He did not want to go home; that didn't exist. He did not exist. Home was not a place but a forcible acquisition, and it was all he could do to get it.

“Does it hurt?” Casey asked again.

It's always hurt. But Dakota couldn't speak, and he was sinking to the bottom and his brother was pulling him up. He broke the surface with the force of some unholy second baptism, expecting no applause but feeling some was almost merited. He couldn't vomit anymore but bile trailed from his mouth and into the bath, collecting on his shoulders and drifting back into the water as he moved. He was at the center of his own dark galaxy. And he wanted to tell Casey that it might have been him in so many fictional towns, walking beside him in July sunset and imagining who he was and who he might have been. But it was hard to picture. Casey wasn't there to make memories. Casey was there to keep him alive. And that was what drew him to these places, so remote as to be almost imaginary. In the lonely universe of dreams things might have been the way they were supposed to be. And Casey might have loved him the right way and he might have loved Casey the right way back— like a brother and not an angry child. And he might not have asked Casey to get high.

Casey lifted him out of the bathtub and moved him to the bed. The shirt that had billowed so fully before was now clinging to his skin, foul and sticky. Through all the smoke in the room

he could smell himself— not his skin but his insides. Casey pulled it away, his torso damp and glistening in the weakened fluorescence. Dakota imagined the lights overhead had been bright once but now he could see the bugs blocking out the glow, clustered together in a swollen shadow. He could still see the outlines of their legs, their wings. They were still now. Droplets of water rolled from his shoulders into the hollows of his ribs and stomach, accumulating into pools— and that was the power of motion. If he moved enough they would spill over and run down his sides.

“At least now you don’t have to worry ‘bout Dad asking why you never bring girls home,” Dakota slurred, bare and shivering.

“Least now you don’t have to worry ‘bout Dad,” Casey countered, fixing his brother around the torso. Dakota felt the scratchy fabric of the motel pillow at his back, felt his head rock back until he was staring at the fluorescence, the flickering and the insects. At this angle he couldn’t see things that were supposed to be seen. Instead he heard Casey as an echo, beginning inside him and reverberating out. And Dakota had never worried about their Dad but worried about becoming him— about being him. If Dakota had come home to find their father dead it wouldn’t be so much a tragedy as an omen.

Dakota didn’t like to look for signs. There were too many right in front of him.

“Help me,” he said again, and he would have looked away if he wasn’t on his back.

“You gonna go to the hospital tomorrow if I get what you want?” he asked, and Dakota nodded not because he was right but because Casey needed to be quiet. He needed to not ask questions Dakota could but wouldn’t answer. The answer to any of them might have been this: that when Dakota was out, unconscious, submerged, elsewhere, the points on the map couldn’t

help but look like stars. And the black country was not a map but a dark swatch of sky, lit up with quiet planets looking to make themselves known. He was ready to imagine the towns he had inhabited and the people had met, ready to create somewhere he'd come from just to imagine he came from anyplace at all. He was ready to play hide and seek in the cool dusk of his own fictions. To invent a history of imaginary places.

That, and he couldn't handle his own disgust.

"I'll be back," Casey promised.

And he was.

Dakota did not see Casey but saw light begin to creep outside the window. The sky was not yet distinctly cloudy or blue. Instead it remained dark, with hot slices of sunrise cutting through with oranges and reds— not looking like part of the sky but something burning underneath, a highway of light moving through dark country. It extended as far as he could see from one end of the sky to the other, as if a sky could have an edge. It reminded him of an atlas, of I-80 so far outside their motel, stretching off beyond anywhere he'd ever thought to go. He heard it went all the way East and he imagined it like a string connecting him and the places he would never see, as if he could tug and bring skyscrapers crashing down into the parking lot. He imagined taking one side of the highway, of the slit in the sky, in each hand— pulling it open and looking inside. Then he saw what Casey held and imagined nothing.

"Don't really know... how you're gonna do this," Casey mumbled. "Don't know if it's good, or a lot, or clean— sure it ain't clean, actually. But I got it."

Casey was no longer a face or eyes but one outstretched hand. As he moved unsteadily to his feet he might have walked in an arc instead of a line, curving along an artificial center of gravity. He straightened out the sandwich foil on the table.

“Jesus. I thought you were gonna shoot it,” Casey said, letting out a stifled laugh. “Least then you’d be damn good at giving patients IVs.”

Dakota moved into the bathroom, socks slopping on wet tile. The water still sat in the bathtub, congealing on top, and for a moment he was certain he could see his own outline. He bent down on wet denim knees and grabbed the roll of toilet paper. He pulled on the paper. It stuck together, wet. He ripped. Clumps of paper smacked as they fell to the floor. Then the wet outside was gone. The rest he yanked up in the air, letting the roll spin around and around, the chamber of a gun. Paper drifted up into the air and then fell. As it touched the wet floor it darkened, adhered itself to each tile. He grabbed the bare roll and sat down on the bed.

Casey had set it down on the comforter already, as if he hadn’t bought it. As if it had always been there, something happened upon rather than a deliberate and painful action.

Dakota only looked at his moving hands, half surprised they were his own.

“Maybe it’s better if you don’t go back,” Casey said. “Not to Lincoln. Guess it’s better you get away from the people that remind you of... Go somewhere else. Stanford, right? Bet you could still transfer. And can’t forget UCLA Merit scholarship.”

“Casey,” he rasped.

“We’d figure out a way to make it out there if it was what we had to do. Dunno how I’d handle L.A. if we’re being honest, but it’s what you want. It’s what you always wanted. Not even being a doctor. Just being important. Going somewhere else. You have that. You’re right there.

What the hell did I ever want? That's what makes you the boy genius. What makes you special. You ever know anyone to want something bad as you do? I watched you try for years and I'm okay with watching you try a little more. You're gonna make it to California. You're gonna have your somewhere else. I just want to be the one to take you. If you need money— shit. I ain't got any money but just ask. We can fix the Cressida and go. You can do anything, Cody. And me? I could do anything as long as it's for you. So what is it? What do we need to do?"

"Casey," he said, "I need you to hold this."

Dakota couldn't see his face, but felt him tense. Then slowly Casey was able to move. He held the tube steady with both hands, as if he thought either he or Dakota might suddenly fly back. Dakota had one hand on the lighter, one on the foil— but his hands were gone to him, Casey's hands were gone to him. He watched the heroin bubble and remembered himself distantly, half submerged, globes of air moving to break on the surface. Bubbles happened when air needed to move through liquid to escape. He thought of himself inside one, floating down a highway headed west.

He inhaled through the tube. For a moment he thought he saw a shift through the sliding glass door, a glint of light indicating sunrise. It was a reflection. The light moved behind him and flashed for a moment as he fell backwards, hitting the covers. His eyes drifted away from the window, away to something else. Then he closed them and returned to the inexplicable perpetuity of nighttime.

## XIX. Heroin

XX. Brother

Dear UCLA,

I am writing to you to recommend my brother, Dakota E. Pendleton, for your pre med program. I think normally you get your teachers to write you something nice and formal about how you are doing good in school. I bet he probably already got all his teachers to do that. They probably said real nice things, true things too. If I'm right they did a great job and you'll accept him fast, no wait list. He'll be the first one in our family to go to college. How about that.

The thing is you are going to give him a financial scholarship. That makes sense, these funds were made for people like him. He deserves it. I don't really know how to ask you to give him a merit scholarship instead, but there it is all out in the open. He deserves that more.

Dakota has gone to seven high schools. You probably saw that in his transcripts. It doesn't look good, and it means his teachers, they don't know him. They can tell you about all the A's he got the past couple months. He tried to apply to places two years ago when he was supposed to graduate. It didn't work, he had so many incompletes. That guy. I thought he was going to take the car and sleep on your steps till you let him in. But thank God he stayed in school and didn't try a stunt like that. He knows better, maybe from watching me. I couldn't stay past sixteen. It should have been too hard to stay in school and then— even do well— with all the moving. Not worth it really. But sometimes it seems like nothing is ever too hard for Dakota.

He plays sports, all kinds. Baseball is his best. He isn't on a team for reasons you can guess from what I said, but I've seen him play and you wouldn't have to see him more than a minute or so to know he's a talent. He also likes stories. We watch movies together and he always knows which ones are really good and which ones are just supposed to sell big at the box.

He likes crime movies a lot even though he says they are dumb. But I know he likes to figure out the twist five minutes in and call it out right before the end. He likes to feel smart. He needs to feel it because there's no way to prove it. Not around here. And if he did it wouldn't mean nothing. He gets perfect grades and then he goes to a new high school and he has to show all over again he's not a lowlife. And we settle down for a week or two in some new motel and he has to try and not become one. He takes day jobs in secret when I tell him just to do his classes. He smiles at people all day even when he's ready to crash. He wears sweatshirts in the summer so no one sees the bruises on his arms. He tries and tries and tries.

You see there are some things that are even too hard for Dakota. It's too hard for him to watch me carry our dad to the bathtub so he doesn't puke all over the sheets. It's too hard for him to even eat some days watching the things we done for money. He can memorize every word a teacher says so he doesn't have to write on take out napkins but he can't look neither of us in the eyes without a little hate. Our room down at the Big 12 is small for him in more ways then one.

He does hate me a little. For some godawful reason it's got to be why I love him so much.

I know this is a strange letter. I didn't want to do what all the teachers and all the other kids would do and just tell you what they think you want to hear. I'm also not looking for pity. He doesn't need pity, he needs someone to believe in what he can do and be. Someone besides me. So here I am just hoping what you actually want to hear is the truth. You need to give him a merit scholarship and show him that this, this is not all he is. This is not any of what he is.

You will know him soon. I hope you understand when you do.

Sincerely yours,

Casey J. Pendleton

The letter sat copied in pencil at the bottom of a drawer in the Big 12 motel, buried beneath loose laundry detergent and saved for sentiment. The plastic Taco John's cup sat still on its side, whiskey no longer dripping to the floor but pooling, running circles around the bases of all the others. Then congealing. The clock was busted, guts spilled against the wall, and Jack was unconscious. Outside cars passed by, headlights tearing through the blinds with their own unsteady rhythm. Rudimentary timekeeping. Jack was snoring. They whizzed by outside and Casey was still, eyes heavy-lidded, thinking about the letter and staring at the door. He imagined years of sharp-edged aimlessness undone. He imagined absolution.

He sat and he listened to Dakota pacing on the porch. He dug under the mattress for his own private bottle of whiskey and drank. Then outside, a car's engine turned over. It was the Cressida's engine. A sound he knew as intimately as his own voice, as his brother's voice. Next time Casey heard him speak he'd be calling from somewhere with sun.

Dakota drove away, and Casey smiled.