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Wastelanders

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WASTELANDERS

A NOVEL

by

MATTHEW JOSEPH TREON

B.A., UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS, 2008

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Stephen Graham Jones

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Treon, Matthew (MFA, Department of English)

Wastelanders

Thesis Directed by Professor Stephen Graham Jones

Set in the shadowy areas of an otherwise sunny Austin, Texas, Wastelanders is a novel about love, violence and unintended betrayal. At the heart of Wastelanders is a bullet that hits a young girl in the chest and the fallout of that bullet’s trajectory. Then there’s John Wesley and Ragland Debbie who are trying to live in a world where love is not enough. This novel explores the ghosts of violent acts and the crisis that is American masculinity today.
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1

NO FISHER KING HERE
All the guys who hang around Fleet Street call her Ragland Debbie. This is our girl. The two guys at the table are asking her where she’s from, how long she’s been here. They know, or at least have heard the stories before, but it’s just to get her talking so they can lose themselves in her small town slur.

The guys look Debbie up and down, take her in. Grey knee-length dress. Devil-may-care hair. Working a pair of high-lacing boots.

The guys want to know what a girl like Debbie’s doing waiting tables at a place like this.

She’s going through her usual gig now and she’s got it down. To these two guys at the table she says, “Well,” and looks side to side in an exaggerated way, then whispers, “I really wanted to come be a bank robber.”

The two guys, eyes all over her, smile and nod.

“Used to be,” Debbie says, “you could really rob about any place you wanted. Most people just never heard how easy it was. Plenty of robberies were never in the papers, at least compared to how often they really happened. If some small business got robbed, they wouldn’t want to advertise how easy it was to take their money. Everyone might do it. Who would work a
nine-to-five for forty years, right?” Then she leans back and feigns a sigh. “But banks are a little harder to rob than they used to be, I’ve heard. So I’ve been here, working while I sharpen my skills.”

The two guys laugh. Fleet Street Diner is a hole in the wall burger joint with a busy back room.

Ragland Debbie walked into Fleet Street her first day in Austin, Texas, dolled up in a way that made her look like a young Debbie Harry. The boss hired her on the spot and started in calling her Debbie. He never even asked for her real name.

“You live back there?” one of the guys says, pointing to where, on the other side of the back wall, all the rooms to Fleet Street Motel are.

“I do.”

“Well, I might’ve left some cash sitting around in your room if you want to go steal that.”

This is the best he can come up with, and it’s about on par for the FS crowd.

“I pay a weekly rate for my room, not hourly. Sorry, boys.” Debbie drops their check and walks off.

She cuts through the room with no little amount of grace.

At the next table, a young man named John Wesley sits down with his friend Floyd Ridenhour across from him. Debbie walks up and Floyd immediately tells her how good looking she is, how he should come here more often, all that. All John Wesley says is hello. And Debbie smiles.
John Wesley is an early twenties something whose outlook on the world sits somewhere between a hellish place to live and not that bad if heaven is next. But like Johnny Cash said, “There is no fence to sit on between heaven and hell.”

Sitting at the table, he holds out his hand. This is how John Wesley and Ragland Debbie meet.

Half a year after, police find a girl dead in John Wesley’s bathroom.

That killing makes the news because people have learned how to make sense of that particular kind of nonsense. It’s the kind of sense people can use to order their own lives, like, “That’s why you have to cherish what you have, because it can all be taken away just like that,” those kinds of people say.

But what about people with nothing left to lose? Or, in other words——Kristofferson’s words maybe——people who are free. What about the people who’re free to stop losing? Mark Twain said, “If you want to see the dregs of society, go down to the jail and watch the changing of the guard.” Whatever the hell that means. Hemingway wrote if you want to know about a culture, spend a night in its bars. Maybe he was drinking when he wrote that. Or maybe that was what Twain said. Either way.
In an alleyway behind a hospital in downtown Austin, John Wesley stands with his back against a short concrete wall that hardly tucks away a filthy green dumpster. John Wesley’s left arm is in a sling, his shoulder bandaged. He has no shirt on and there’s blood on his jeans.

A little ways down the alley, two men walk towards him. One of them, the older of the two, holds a t-shirt in his hand.

Somewhere in his sixties, Big Dick Glen, who everyone calls BDG, hands John Wesley the t-shirt. He says thanks. BDG just points to the other guy with him, says, “Johnny, this is Clef Holland.”

“I know who he is,” John Wesley says.

“Yeah, well.” That’s all BDG says.

John Wesley grits his teeth and ducks his head, pulling the sling up and over. Then he struggles to put the t-shirt on with his one mobile arm.

Neither BDG nor Clef offer any help. Clef maybe would, but he’s clearly following BDG’s lead here. And BDG just stands, staring.
BDG’s face shows his age and then some. It’s hard to see at first, but if you look close enough, his bright blue eyes are slightly different colors. BDG’s right eye is moving just a little, side to side, watching John Wesley. His left eye, glass and motionless, is the slightly duller blue of the two, its color having faded a little in the fifteen years since it was fitted for him. Under this eye a dark scar runs down and around his cheek where the .22 caliber bullet that took his eye had to be dug out of his cheekbone.

BDG’s one eye is still locked on John Wesley, his stare unbroken.

John Wesley finally gets the t-shirt on. “Police took my other shirt,” he says, “even though the nurse cut it off.”

“What’d they say to you?” BDG says.

“The cute one said, ‘No,’ when I asked her to dinner. I don’t remember what the other one said. I didn’t ask her out.”

“Officers Wheeler and McCorquodale,” BDG says, “not the nurses, fuckstick.”

John Wesley says to Clef, “So what’s up with you?”

Early thirties, Clef Holland, formerly Detective Holland, the youngest ever to hit the ranks of detective in Austin PD and the quickest to be fired, pulls a soft pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his black short-sleeved button-up shirt, freshly ironed. He lights a cigarette, offers John Wesley one.

John Wesley takes a cigarette, says, “So what’s this about then?”

“What did Wheeler and McCorquodale say?” BDG says.

“Nothing, really. Wheeler asked me a few questions. Physical description. I told him I didn’t know the guy. And that’s about it. He said they were going to go ask around the block,
witnesses. Said they don’t really have much to go on. Said I might have to come back for a poly.”

“How would that go?” BDG says.

“I don’t know who he was. No one I know.”

“You know the guy?” BDG asks again, in other words.

“You think there’d only be Laurie’s body in the morgue if I knew who the guy was?”

BDG turns, looks at Clef.

Noticing his cue, Clef shifts his weight a little, stands tall, says, “What you got? You have to be able to tell me, us, something. And I already got a physical script from PD. So I mean anything about why this might’ve happened. What’d this guy stand to get from you?”

“I already said I got no idea who it was.”

“Not what I asked,” Clef says.

“Look, the dude, whoever it was, came through the door all hurly-burly, just tearing shit up, shooting. I took this one in the shoulder”—John Wesley points to his bandaged shoulder—“then that was it. If I knew more than that, I’d be on the dude myself. Believe that.”

Clef tosses his cigarette on the ground, kicks it away. “John, I need—”

“What the fuck is this?”

“Johnny,” BDG says.

“We know there’s more than one reason someone around here would be looking to catch you with your pants down,” Clef says, takes a step closer to John Wesley. “I don’t give a shit about all that. But you have a busted-in front door, a bullet hole in your shoulder and a murder scene in your bathroom. So if you’re jerking me around here—”
“Look, man. Like I told you. Like I told BDG. Like I told Austin PD. Like I’m tired of fucking saying, I didn’t recognize the motherfucker. And he didn’t take the time to introduce himself and state his business while he was filling my apartment with bullet holes. He might’ve known me. But I don’t know the dude.”

“What did he take?” Clef asks.

“Man, I told the cops—”

“Johnny, we know what you told the police,” BDG says. “But we all know that the chances of your door being a random door that some random stick-up kid decided to come blazing through are slimmer than—”

“I had a little product from CC that I was turning over. Just a bump.”

“CC DeIbarra?” Clef says.

“I heard you’d gotten a job,” BDG says.

“Yeah, but, you know.”

“So you had some Delbarra shit at your place,” BDG says. “And it was stolen the same night a Delbarra girl died in your bathroom?”

“I know,” John Wesley says. “You don’t need to tell me. I know it doesn’t look good.”

“It looks far worse than not good,” BDG says. “I’m telling you it looks like shit.”

“What about Palafox Delbarra?” Clef says. “Laurie is—”

A scraggily older guy pushing a shopping cart turns into the alley, just a bit off from where they’re all standing. The three of them wait.
The scraggly guy stops his cart next to the dumpster, next to John Wesley. He slides the heavy metal door open. He leans in, the top half of his body disappearing inside the dumpster. The dumpster fills with somewhat wet sounds of trash being tossed through.

John Wesley, BDG and Clef all find places to look. John Wesley smiles a bit.

The scraggly guy comes out with a half-full glass bottle of surely warm soda, a couple magazines and a dirty shirt. He tosses the score into his cart and moves on, never acknowledging the other three men there with him.

Even with the guy away and gone now, Clef still lowers his voice a little, moves into John Wesley’s line of sight, says, “Laurie is Palafox DeIbarra’s little—”

“Was,” John Wesley says. He breaks eye contact with Clef on this one. “I don’t even know if Pala knows yet or not.”

“If he don’t know,” BDG says, “it won’t be long now before he does.”

“I know CC DeIbarra at least enough to know he ain’t going to trouble himself with this situation more than what it’s financially worth to him,” Clef says. “But Palafox?”

“Yeah,” John Wesley says.

“He’s going to want to understand why his sister took a bullet to the chest at your place with CC’s product there too,” Clef continues.

“And he’s probably going to cast the blame pretty wide and relentlessly,” BDG says.

John Wesley tosses his cigarette on the ground right under him, digs a heel into it, grinds it down.

“What about Floyd?” BDG says.

“Huh?”
“Floyd Ridenhour. Johnny, you ain’t never, ever since you was a kid, you ain’t never gotten in trouble without that fuckstick being around.”

“Floyd ain’t got nothing to do with this.”

“Johnny.”

“He was at Fleet Street Motel last night, far as I know.”

“How do you know that?”

“Ragland Debbie. Our friend Debbie. She called me last night, said he was there.”

“Why’d she call you?”

“We got a thing going on.”

“She live at Fleet Street?”

“Yeah.”

“You got an address on Floyd?”

“He’s been squatting in one of those houses over on the abandoned row, you know, over on East Twelfth. Couldn’t tell you which one.”

“What about this Debbie. Ragland Debbie? What room she stay in?” Clef asks.
The old highway called Bowery Row runs from the small town by the same name a few miles outside the city right into Austin and eventually folds into East Riverside. The road takes its namesake from the fact that it was once used primarily as a farm-to-market road, before the land dried up from overuse. It just burned out eventually.

A glitzy black ’68 Coupe DeVille, chrome trim, white wall tires, wide grille with stacked dual headlights cuts through the dusted monochromic used and abused farmland.

Inside the car is Roman Jones and Eddie Ketch, with Jones driving.

“Man, it was some shit straight out of a horror movie, I’m saying, man,” Eddie says.

“And it’s funny, what with all the small time shit I’d done up to that point, that this was how I got locked up for the first time.”

“How long you going to go on about it before you say it? You keep saying you’re saying, but you ain’t saying nothing. What happened?” Roman Jones says.

“It was fucked.”

“Jesus Christ. You gonna tell me or what?”
“Yeah. So I’m with my man and his girly, going to some other girl’s house in Oak Cliff, shitty side of course, you know, to meet up with more girls. Friends of hers. It’s the middle of the night already and my man and I’d been drinking and smoking at the clubs all night already, and we were all on our way to a house party.”

You probably wouldn’t call Eddie Ketch fat, or even heavyset, or exceptionally strong for the matter, but he’s well-upholstered and definitely looks like he’s never been skinny. And he’s sweating profusely right now. You can imagine he’s probably sticking to the DeVille’s leather seats, uncomfortably. He looks like he probably spends much of his life sweating.

“So we pile out the car,” Eddie goes on, “and my man tells his girly to go in to this other girl’s house, get everyone, and that we’ll wait outside. Figured it’d be the fastest way to get out of there. So she walks off towards the house and we stand there smoking cigarettes, waiting. Damn, you got the AC going?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, so, my man’d already fucked himself for the night, right. He hated hanging out with these chicks. So he didn’t give a fuck. He was wasted, tanked, gone. Giving as little fuck possible. But me, I’d kept myself mostly straight. See, I couldn’t stand most those chicks either. I didn’t want to be there. But there was one girl in particular, oh, good night, Irene! So I—”

“Her name was Irene?” Jones says.

“No. Her name was Amber. Irene’s from a song. You know the song—”

“Just go on.”
“Right. So I’m there just for her. Amber Ames. A real carnival of a girly. First girl to ever truly ring my cherries on first sight from across a room, damn. So I’m standing out in the street by the car with my man, waiting for them to come out.”

“So you’re just there for this girl.”

“Yeah. But for like usual they’re taking mother for fucking ever. And my man gets tired of waiting, says for us to just go in and get them so we can leave. And I’m cool with it so I can see Amber, you know. But I don’t know which house it is cause I’d never been there. So I’m just following him and he’s stumbling all over, laughing, but also pissed off, so he doesn’t even knock, just opens the front door and we walk in. And there ain’t a sound in the house at first. You know, I’m mentally prepared to walk in and see the girl of my dreams. But there ain’t no lights on, no music, no one in the living room, and no sound coming from the rest of the house. Then my man spins around on me, and he’s whisper-screaming that we’re in the wrong house. The wrong goddamn house.”

“Wrong house in Oak Cliff. Ha. That’s some shit.”

“That ain’t the half of it. He’s panicking, yelling to get out. I turn around to get out and, you know, you ever had one of those dreams where you try and scream but can’t? That was this situation. I turned around and there’s, I swear, no knob on the inside of the front door.”

“What you mean?”

“The door’s shut because I closed it behind me, and I’m telling you, there’s no doorknob on the inside. No doorknob.”

“Damn.”
“Right. So I reach inside the empty hole thing, like where the lock should be, trying to turn tumblers and shit to open the door, but my fingers won’t fit. So my man just starts kicking the door trying to bust our way out.”

“‘To hell with this,’ he’s thinking.”

“Exactly. But then we hear someone in the back say, like, ‘What in the hell?’ Then a hallway light turns on. And I couldn’t even believe it, but suddenly my man turns and just jumps out a closed window. Just shatters the glass flying out into the lawn. And I look back down the hallway, see some dude coming at me, so I go out the window too.”

“At least your friend had already done the breaking for you.”

“Yeah, well that’s part of it. The girls were three houses down, just—”

“Y’all were off by three houses?”

“Three lawns over, the girls are just coming out into the street, all of them all dolled up and shit. They hear the window break and my man’s girly sees him flying out a window, me right behind him, another dude after me crawling out the window trying to fight both of us.”

“Two against one at least.”

“Yeah, but my man’s so wasted he’s getting the worst of it, right. And remember, I’m out to look good that night, wearing my finest cut of threads. I mean I got my black leather boots on, some straight-leg cut chords, a thick-collared button-up, topped off with a crushed velvet jacket, right. I wasn’t in no position to be throwing down on some dude’s lawn, rolling around in the grass. So I’m just like kicking at the dude in between licks he’s laying on my man. All the while, his girly down the street, all she sees is her man getting the shit kicked out of him. So she runs inside and calls the goddamn cops.”
“Fuck.” Jones pushes in the DeVille’s cigarette lighter. Then he takes a cigarette he has tucked behind his ear and puts it between his teeth.

“And you know in Oak Cliff, middle of the night, there’s a blue suit rolling down every other block looking for trouble. So three patrol cars are on the scene in what felt like seconds. And they’re all over us. Me and my man get taken in, charged with breaking and entering. I do ten months in county. My man had smoke on him, so he gets two years in state. Eventually out on early release. But here’s the kicker. That dude who’s house it was, he had a coffee table full of bagged and tagged bricks of weed. Just a ton of it. Which of course the cops figured was the cause of the whole situation, and he ends up having to eat six years in state prison.”

“So because you’re out trying to get laid, three guys end up sleeping on government beds.”

“Yeah. Ain’t that some shit. What about you, man?”

“I ain’t never been locked up. Too smart for that.”

The cigarette lighter pops out, ready. Jones pulls it out, puts the cherry-red end to the cigarette he’s holding in his teeth. Jones is sporting a neck full of gold chains hanging over his chest that’s otherwise bare except for an open vest to show not only his chains, but how solidly built he is, and the scores of scars he sports. His scarred chest, arms and neck are also all covered with tattoos of a Kama Sutra-esque mural or sorts, with drawings of Roman Jones himself and different women in many different sexual situations.

Getting close to the city, Jones turns the DeVille off Bowery Row and onto East Fourth Street. “You’d have to kill me before I went anywhere with bracelets on, hell. Maybe when you could still smoke in jail. But now, hell no.”
“Yeah. The only book the jail had was the Bible. I’d never really read it, but it was at least something to do. At first I tried reading by match light, but not for long, once the nightshift guard saw me. We weren’t allowed to have matches, and the guy in the cell next to me, who had the hookup, limited my rations once I was caught. Most of the guys in there just tore the pages out of the Bible and used them to roll cigarettes after lights-out. Loose tobacco was easier to hide than grits. So, with my tight match supply, I even tried to take up smoking just to give myself something to do at night. But I don’t see how you do that shit, man.”

Jones rolls down his window. Hot air comes pouring in.

“Damn it’s hot,” Eddie says. “You sure the AC’s running? I’m sweaty as hell over here.”

“Don’t be sweating on my seats.”

“How you want me not to sweat? How am I supposed to not sweat?”

“Just don’t.”

“Yeah. You’re a hell of a problem solver, aren’t you.”

And about this time the DeVille rolls into East Austin, down Fourth Street, otherwise known as Fleet Street.
John Wesley and BDG, walking down the alley, away from the hospital, have that heavy silence around them, that non-sound equivalent of boxers waiting for the starting bell to ring.

BDG talks first: “Car’s just around the corner up here.” It’s a way to break the silence, but the bell hasn’t rung yet.

John Wesley throws a thumb over his shoulder, says that he’s going the other way. He’s willing to play along, like touching gloves.

“No, you’re with me.” Stare-down.

“I got to—”

Now the bell rings. BDG grabs the top of John Wesley’s shirt, pulls him in. He screams, grabs his shoulder. BDG says, “Johnny, I ain’t seen you in almost a year. Hardly more than a phone call from you. Last nigh—”

“I—”

“Shut up. Last night I get woken up with a phone call, a professional courtesy call from Mack Wheeler telling me that you’ve been shot and that Laurie Delbarra is dead in your apartment. APD knows you and don’t give a shit about you. APD knows the Delbarras and don’t
give a shit about them. After today, your situation is going to go to the bottom of a stack of open cases from the east side of town that’s as tall as a stack of job applications from high school dropouts handed in to the McDonald’s on East Riverside every week. But you know who does give a shit about you right now? Palafox Delbarra. So you’re coming with me. And I only hope that Clef Holland can figu—”

“That guy’s a fucking lunatic. Clef Holland. When people say stupid things like, ‘Everyone’s a little crazy. Some are just crazier than the rest of us.’ He’s who they’re talking about.”

“If we can, with his help, find whoever shot Laurie last night, maybe Palafox won’t kill you. And ‘crazier than the rest of us’ is what people could say about me for continuing to care about you.”

“Then don’t.”

“It’s called hedging bets. I’ve put enough into your life to care whether or not you live. But this is it. Now, I know you didn’t shoot Laurie last night. But I also know you ain’t being totally straight with me.” He pulls John Wesley’s shirt a little higher. John Wesley screams again.

“Now tell me what’s going on or start defending yourself.”

“Laurie came over last night to get some things she had at my apartment. She was leaving tomorrow and just wanted her things.” John Wesley’s eyes start to tear up now. “She was supposed to be leaving today, starting school next week. She was going to her mom’s house to say goodbye, or something, and then going off to school.”

“Jesus Christ. She was about to go to college, to get out of the sink hole that is the east side of this city, and—”
“She was just over to get her things. It was a mistake.”

“What do you mean ‘a mistake’?”

“Just like bad timing.”

“God save whoever would just chalk this up to bad timing. Get the fuck in the car.”

And the ending bell rings.
Clef Holland knocks on the door to room 111. The general buzz of daytime television can be heard through the curtained window. Through the not quite as fully curtained window one room over, Clef can see an array of body parts moving wildly, and he can hear some girl screaming about how close she is and a guy loudly taking credit for it.

No answer yet at the door.

Clef knocks again.

The door opens just as wide as the security chain on the other side allows. Ragland Debbie’s eyes are looking out. She doesn’t say anything, just waits for this guy outside her room to say who he is, why he’s here.

“You, uh, Debbie?” Clef finally says. “Ragland Debbie?”

“Most of the time,” she says.

“You know Floyd Ridenhour?”

“If you’re looking for Floyd and you’re knocking on my door,” Debbie says, looking over Clef’s shoulder now, around and behind him, “I’d say you probably know the answer to that question. So what’s your real question?”
“You seen him?”

“How I ever seen a person that I know?”

“How today?”

“What day is it?”

“You know John Wesley?”

“Yeah, I know Johnny.”

“Can I come in?”

“I haven’t seen Johnny today.”

“Can I talk to you in your room?”

“Who are you?”

“Clef Holland. You know Glen Childress?”

“This is starting to feel like a survey. You with some really inefficient Census effort or something?”

Clef smiles politely. Waits.

“BDG?” Debbie says.

Clef nods.

“Everyone around here knows Big Dick Glen. Never knew his last name was Childress though. Always assumed it was Wesley, I guess.” She softly says both names, Glen Childress, Glen Wesley, trying them both out, the sound of each.

“BDG asked me to come talk to you.”

“Now I’ve heard of BDG. But I’ve never met him. Can’t imagine he knows who I am.”

“Floyd Ridenhour. You seen him?”
The door closes.

There’s the sound of the security chain sliding, clanging against the door. Then the door opens.

Inside, a small television set on top of a wooden three-draw dresser is still buzzing daytime shows. Its flickering light and the softened sun coming in through the curtains fill the room. The bed is made and the room is in order. There’s a stack of clothes on top of the dresser, next to the TV. Another couple dresses are laid out on a wooden chair. And there’s an old suitcase on the floor, closed.

Debbie clears the dresses off the chair for Clef, lays them on the bed. Clef says thanks but doesn’t sit.

“You want a beer?” Debbie says, walking over to the bathroom sink, to a small plastic bucket of mostly melted ice with a few cans of cheap beer.

“No. Thanks though.”

“Polite. But seems not to take well to being accommodated.”

“It’s not even noon yet.”

“What, you don’t like to sit in the morning?”

“No, drinking.”

“Oh.” Debbie grabs a beer, opens it, but sets it on the bathroom counter without taking a sip. “So why did BDG send you over here to ask me about Floyd and Johnny.”

“Just Floyd.”

“Okay.”

“Well, it’s about John Wesley. But we know where he is.”
“Where’s Johnny?”

Clef takes in the room a little more, looks at the suitcase, the stacked clothes. “You moving out? Going somewhere?”

Debbie looks at all the things Clef’s looking at. “Always ready to go, right?” she says.

“How long you lived here?”

“In Austin or Fleet Street?”

“You lived anywhere in Austin but here?”

“No.”

“Then both,” Clef says. “I know most everyone over in this area, but I’ve never even heard of you.”

“Should I be offended?”

“No. I’m just curious.”

“About six months now, I’d say.”

“Where are you from?”

“Nowhere I’d imagine you’ve heard of,” Debbie says. “A small town almost over into Louisiana.”

“What brought you here?”

“Nothing, really. A week or so before I moved here, I’d gone out to a bar, had a few drinks, decided I’d call a cab when it was time to go.”

“They have cabs in this small town I’ve probably never heard of?”

“One. And the guy makes a killing. But that night, I had a few more drinks, forgot my whole plan, tried to drive home and wrecked my car into a tree. No one was around. I probably
would’ve just passed out, waited for the sheriff’s deputies to come sweep me off the road, but I was hungry. I could walk away from anything. So I left, but I forgot to take the license plate with me. The next morning a police officer showed up at my house and handed me two tickets with my name on them. One for failure to maintain control of my vehicle, or something. And the other for leaving the scene of an accident. I was fined more money than my smashed car was even worth. So I took the little money I had, hopped a Greyhound, landed here. So, you said you, you and BDG know where Johnny is?”

“He’s with BDG. Just got him out of the hospital. Someone kicked their way into his apartment last night. Looks like they robbed him.”

“Oh.”

“And shot him.”

Debbie’s face gives for a second, then she regains control. “You a cop? Or a detective or something?”

“No. I used to be.”

“Cop or detective?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Detectives are always cooler on TV.”

“I used to be a detective.”

“You just saying that?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Debbie says. “Floyd was gone when I woke up this morning.”

“So he stayed with you last night?”
“He stayed here. Not with me.”

“So he was here?”

“I guess.”

“He was here with you last night?”

“You still ain’t told me why BDG asked you to come here and ask me about Floyd and Johnny.”

“Someone kicked in John Wesley’s d—”

“You said that already.”

“Okay. When APD showed up at John’s apartment, they found him unconscious. But they also found a girl named Laurie Merielle Delbarra dead in the next room. Shot in the chest.”

Debbie gets visibly dizzy on this one, but Clef’s looking at the TV.

“Now,” he continues, “Austin PD has their finest on the case, and all that, working it along with at least two dozen other drug related deaths that’ve occurred in neighborhoods off East Riverside this month alone. More urgent is—”

“BDG’s last name is Childress?”

“What? Yeah.”

“Johnny always talks about him like he’s his dad. I guess I just assumed his last name was Wesley.”

“You already said that.”

“Why are you here?”

“BDG is worried about Laurie’s family. Particularly her brother, Palafox Delbarra. Who we’re afraid—”
“I know Pala.”

“So I don’t at all doubt you understand why his sister winding up dead in John’s bathroom would concern BDG.”

“Bathroom?”

“Looks like a bullet meant for John missed.”

“You don’t think Floyd—”

“No. Unlikely. But you say he was here?”

“Yes.”

“What time?”

“Showed up late in the evening. But I don’t know where he’s at now.”

Clef notices Debbie hasn’t drank any of her beer. “You actually going to drink that?”

“No,” she says. She walks over to the television, turns it off. “It’s yours if you change your mind.”

Clef walks over to the counter. He grabs the can but doesn’t drink any of it either. Just uses it as an excuse to look in the bathroom. He looks around the corner into the shower portion.

A pulled back shower curtain, empty, clean.

Clef sees some empty cans on the ground under the counter. He sees a couple tubes of glass in the sink. The tubes have a smooth side, one with lipstick on it, and both have a carefully broken end, charred black. He sees about half a dozen little bars of complementary soap stacked like a house, like a house of cards, next to the sink. There’s also a tin box of makeup. The box has a picture taped to it. At first it looks like Debbie Harry from Blondie. Then it looks like Ragland Debbie. But it looks like it might also be Debbie’s mother, the age of the picture.
Across the room, Debbie clearly looks like she has no idea what to do with her body. She’s walking but with no real destination, touching things but not really doing anything with what she’s touching. She rearranges some of her clothes. She moves the suitcase on the ground by the bed over to by the dresser. She takes the dresses she had earlier put on the bed and lays them on top of the suitcase.

Clef walks towards the door. “All right,” he says. “Well, I’ll be around most of the day, but here’s my number as well.” Clef writes his phone number inside a little notebook, tears the page out, sets it on a small table by the door. “You see Floyd, you mind giving me a call?”

Debbie doesn’t say anything. Then she snaps herself out of wherever it is her head’s been at the last few seconds, says, “Yeah. Of course. Can I ask you a question first though?”

“Yeah.”

“Johnny say why Laurie was over there, at his place?”

“Not to me. Not yet.”

“You know where BDG is with him?”

“Going over to talk to CC DeIbarra. John said it was something that belonged to CC that was stolen last night.”

And with that Debbie seems done with the conversation and Clef leaves the room, closes the door behind him.

Inside the room, Debbie moves her dresses. She kneels down in front of the old suitcase. She turns the latches but doesn’t open it yet, just stares at it.
BDG rolls down East Riverside in a light blue Crown Vic, John Wesley in the car with him. The Vic turns by a small church with a neon sign that reads Holy Trinity Hall.

The street is lined with small houses, small barely-yards and a few shoddy cars. BDG pulls off to the side, stops the car and sits, surveying one particular house. A small grey house, bars on the front doors and windows. In front of this house, three young men are sitting on the porch.

“Ain’t no point in this,” John Wesley says, in the car.

BDG holds, making a decision. After a few seconds he kills the Crown Vic’s engine, opens the door, steps out. Standing there, he’s got a tall, sturdy fencepost sort of look to him.

A white-throated sparrow perched high on a sagging power line, head cocked to the side, observing the man, repeats a two-pitched call.

BDG adjusts his dirt-worn hat, then he approaches the house with a steady gait to his walk. His steps stir up insects in the tall grass.

The front yard of this house is lined with skinny metal poles that once held up a chain-link fence. Only the front gate remains, about ten feet or so away from the house.
On the front porch, one of the Delbarras sits in a chair by the front door. The two others, on the side of the porch, sit on a bench seat that’s been ripped out of a car. The guy by the front door, CC Delbarra, is clearly the man of this house. The other two are sitting with the body language of young familial henchies.

BDG stops at the closed gate. He looks at the guys on the porch, announces his name and why he’s here.

CC Delbarra gives him a sort of knowing eye and a nod. The other two ignore him at first. BDG and CC stare each other down for a couple beats. CC breaks eye contact first.

“I’m sorry about your cousin,” BDG says.

“How this fool know you?” one of the Delbarras on the bench seat says.

“Shut up, Rocco,” CC says. Then, to BDG, says, “What are you here for?”

“You know where Palafox is?”

“Nah, he ai—”

“Yeah. I figured as much.”

“Damn, homey,” Rocco says, “you gots some John Wayne-sized balls coming round here actually trying to run into Pala when—”

“Rocco, shut the fuck up,” CC says.

BDG steps around the gate, into the yard, reaches into his front pocket with one hand, points at Rocco with the other.

Rocco jumps up off the seat.

CC stands and steps in front of him. “Damn, tonto de culo,” CC says. “Sit the fuck down and shut the fuck up.”
“Chupas mis huevos de John Wayne, Rocco,” BDG says. “I’ll choke you with them.”

CC shoves Rocco back, turns to BDG.

BDG is holding out a wad of cash. “A down payment. Consider it bail money if you want. I know your cousin wouldn’t care much about this. I know Palafox is a ticking time bomb in John’s life right now.”

“Finding who pulled that trigger ain’t mean for sure Pala won’t still be gunning for your boy.”

“I know. But I don’t need you on him too. And I ain’t hardly seen one death over here that didn’t lead to more.” BDG turns to leave.

“No me jodas, old man,” Rocco says.

Walking away, BDG says, “Oh, I’ll fuck with you.” Then he looks back over his shoulder, at Rocco, with a sly smile, and says, “I’ll choke you with em, remember.” Then he walks off.
Clef Holland walks under the interstate highway bridge that divides the east side of the city from downtown. He walks with the certain steps of a man who belongs wherever he happens to be walking. Or at least people seem to look at him like this, taking a step or two over to offer him extra sidewalk real-estate. Maybe it’s because Clef has a way of looking at anonymous people like he’s withholding any real acknowledgement that he sees them, like he’s looking around them for something or someone else. So people move.

Clef winds through downtown, clocking the major street corners that run down Congress Avenue. All around him men in suits walk towards the state capital and into tall buildings with sun-brazen windows you can’t look directly at. All around him women in knee-length dresses move in and out of those same buildings. There are young people standing, sitting, jumping. There are bibles in hands held high above screaming voices. There are people old and new asking for change. There are street performers. There are politicians. There are peddlers.

At Fourth and Congress, Clef sees a guy holding a large bundle of flowers in his hand. Thorny red roses. The guy looks over at Clef, starts to look away, then looks back again in recognition and flashes a smile.
Then the guy turns to a young couple walking from the opposite direction. “Yo, yo, a flower for the lovely lady,” the guy says, sliding a single flower out of the bunch. “Usually three dollars, but for you,” he says to the young man, “two dollars for you, smooth operator.”

The young man shakes his head and the girl says no thanks. They both keep walking. The girl smiles, locks arms with her man and he squeezes her into him.

This rose peddler, he smiles at the young couple. “Yeah, all right, all right,” he says. “You folks have a nice day then. Sharing the love. Shar-ing the love now.”

Clef walks up. “Daryl Movie God Lane,” he says.

Daryl Movie God Lane holds his arms out wide. “Clef Holland, you looking dapper as fuck today, my man.”

Another young couple walks by and Lane tries again, again with no success, but he’s unfazed. He turns to another guy now, walking alone. This guy’s cutting his eyes at the flowers in Lane’s hand. He keeps scratching at the back of his neck. He gives Lane a little nod.

“Pedaling that glass here,” Lane says. “Pedaling that glass.”

The guy says something inaudible but hands Lane a twenty dollar bill.

Lane pockets the cash, comes back out with something hidden in his palm, grabs a flower, hands it all to the guy. “There you go, smooth criminal…”——the guy walks off——“you bumblefuck motherfucker.”

“You got a minute to talk?” Clef says to Lane.

“Oh, you know Daddy’s got to work now,” Lane says. But he nods to a pizza joint behind him selling pizza by the slice out a window. “But a man’s got to eat, too. And I am about to be on my lunch break.” He smiles.
Clef nods. “I’ll join you then.”

“Ah yeah. Movie God here for ya, baby. Talk to me.”

At the window, Lane orders: “Let me get a slice of pep with some mushrooms. Love them mushrooms.”

“How you been, Lane?” Clef says.

“You know, just keeping my hustle up, getting my cut like everybody else. And some extra cheese on that slice,” he says to the girl on the other side of the window. “Just stealin, stealin, and still in, ya feel me?” he says to Clef.

The girl writes up the order. “That’ll be two-fifty.”

“And some salad dressing, for the crust, you know.”

“Okay, three dollars even.”

Clef laughs, pulls some cash out of his front pocket.

“Oh, and a coke. A large one.” He turns to Clef.

Clef rolls his eyes.

“Hotter than a blistered pecker fucking a patch of peppers today,” Lane says.

Clef starts to unfold some singles.

“Oh, and I gots to get a cookie,” Lane says to the girl. “Macadamia nut, hell yes.”

Clef pays the girl. To Lane, he says, “You know a girl by the name Ragland Debbie?”

“Oh yeah.”

“You been over round Fleet Street lately?”

“Nah, man. I ain’t.”
Clef takes measure of the flowers in Lane’s hand, looks down at the small glass tubes around the bottoms of them that hold a small amount of water.

“Been a few days since I been over round there,” Lane says. “Hard for me. That constant soundtrack of wet bodies slapping and sliding, and blaspheme-ing the likes of which would make Jacob and a handmaid blush. I’m telling ya, just walking through the back of that place, goddamn, you can see everything from winged role players to hooded animal-handling looking dudes carrying everything from tickling feathers to chains. Fleet Street Motel is too much even for me. Swarmy fucks just going at it. Going to town. All day and night. The Grindhouse. Even saw a dude getting his eyeball licked by a girl in this, like, cream-colored rubber mask—”

“Worming,” Clef says.

“What?”

“It’s called worming.”

“I swear to blessed fucking Jesus.”

“How well you know Debbie?”

“Oh, you know, I see her around every now and again. Only time I ever go over to the Grindhouse is to eat at Fleet Street Diner. She works up in there. And I see her around the streets sometimes.”

“It true she runs with John Wesley?”

“So I’ve heard.”

“What else you heard?”

“Bout Debbie?”

“No. John Wesley.”
“Nothing.”

“What about Floyd Ridenhour?”

“No. Uh, well, yeah, I ran into Floyd last night.”

“Where at?”

“Over under the bridge.”

“Round what time?”

“Not sure. Midnight or so.”

“Debbie with him?”

“Uh, no. Nah, not when I was there.”

“What you know about John and Floyd? What are they up to lately?”

“They pulling a gig here and there with the Delbarras is as much as I know.”

“Do you—”

“Clef, are we really talking about John or Floyd here?”

“Well. A Delbarra girl, Laurie Delbarra was killed at John Wesley’s house last night. Shot.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Looks like it was an accident. Or, well, an accident came out of something that wasn’t.”

Lane starts to get a little nervous, starts clocking the street, side to side. “So that’s what this is about.”

“Yeah.”

“I ain’t heard nothing particular to what you say happened last night.”
“All right. To the point. Can you think of any reason why they’d, especially John, would be in trouble with anyone?”

“Well, the word blowing through the weeds is that a trigger man of sorts, debt collector kind of guy named Roman Jones is looking to flex on John Wesley on account of him being under big man Mr. Baker’s thumb for some serious cash.”

“How much?”

“Not sure. But definitely a somebody-gone-get-hurt type of level.”

“You know why?”

“I do not.”

“I’ve heard of Roman Jones. Who’s Mr. Baker?”

“I ain’t ever set eyes on Mr. Baker. All I’ve heard is he, might even just be a made up name, but supposedly he’s some guy who has some land out around Bowery Row. He’s a mystery to me besides that. All I know is most of last year, it was dry as a nun’s sugar basin in this city. Then suddenly business started booming, out of no where, and that name Mr. Baker started being used around town. But I ain’t ever danced with him, so I can’t say for sure what’s up.”

The girl inside the window hands Lane his slice of pizza and the coke.

“You ever see Palafox DeIbarra these days?” Clef says.

“Nope. And don’t want to. Palafox’ll hurt you at the drop of a hat. And usually not even wait on the hat. Pala be the one motherfucker in town I cross the street to avoid. I don’t even be gigging with CC DeIbarra no more, you know, on account of them having the same blood. I once
heard Palafox’s own mother refer to him as a matchstick dipped in Sterno methanol taped to a truck tire on a gravel road.”

“You’ve met Palafox’s mom?”

“No, I have not. But I figure she’d say something like that. Dude ain’t nothing to fuck with.”

“Well, that girl, Laurie DeIbarra, shot dead at John’s place last night. She’s Palafox’s little sister. And I need to find out who pulled the trigger. So, you’re sure you saw Floyd last night?”

“Yeah. Round midnight.”

“And not at Fleet Street?”

“Look, Clef, my man, I always wrap up here around sundown. Gets too territorial after that. I’ll keep an ear out the rest of the day, try and hear if anyone’s talking bout it.”

“Okay. I’ll let you get back to work. Appreciate your help.”

“All right,” Lane says. “Back to your regularly scheduled program. Movie God got ya, baby.”

Clef turns away and bumps shoulders with a guy, but then he resumes his way of walking and people begin to move again, even if they don’t realize it. He heads back towards Fleet Street.

You can hear Movie God Lane’s call for “pedaling that glass” back at the corner again, a young lady, money in hand, approaching him now. The sun off the downtown buildings too bright in her eyes. And she’s squinting like she can’t look at any one of them, or anyone at all.
CC Delbarra pulls up into the parking lot of an old shut down middle school on East Riverside. Another car pulls up from the opposite direction. Across the schoolyard, some kids are playing ball on a bent hoop.

The other car stops. CC pulls up to the driver-side window. Palafox Delbarra sits inside.

“Big Dick Glen came around, talking bout Laurie,” CC says.

Palafox just stares at him.

“I don’t know,” CC says, “Hard to say what BDG’s doing. Rocco checked. John Wesley was in the hospital downtown last night. One gun shot. Out this morning. Don’t seem like Austin PD is holding him. And before you even ask, I don’t know, Pala. I don’t know why Laurie was over there. She didn’t tell no one she was going over. I swear.”

“What was she doing there?”

“Pala—”

“You send her there?”

“Pala, I swear.”

“Someone knew.”
“Knew Laurie was there?”

“No. No one just happened to pick John Wesley’s door to kick in and shoot my sister with thirty thousand dollars worth of drugs belonging to you there. I want to know whose hand the gun was in, and every person involved with it being there.”

Palafox’s door opens and he rises out of his car.

He walks around to his trunk, pops it, pulls out a wooden baseball bat, walks over to CC’s car.

CC starts to roll up his window and tries to shift into first gear.

Palafox takes the butt-end of the bat and hooks it on top of the window, now halfway up. He leans his weight on the bat, holding the window there. Then he reaches in, grapples a second for the keys and turns the car off.

He puts the end of the bat under CC’s chin, hooking it up under his bottom jaw.

“I’m only giving you the benefit of the doubt here because your mom is my mom’s sister. But if I do find out that you had anything to do with Laurie being over there, I won’t care if it had anything to do with anything else, I’ll add you to the list. And, after, I’ll drive your body over to your mom’s house myself.”
Roman Jones and Eddie Ketch inside Fleet Street Diner. The place is near empty. A couple guys at the bar. Bartender drying glasses. A young waitress leaning on a jukebox in the corner of the place, just sort of staring into it. Jones and Eddie in a booth.

“When’s he getting here?”

“Floyd’ll be here at six pm.”

Eddie looks at a large clock on the wall of the diner, hanging above the bar. “The fuck? That’s in two hours. What the hell are we doing here?”

“Waiting.”

“Damn, I’m starving.”

Roman Jones does an exaggerated look of revelation around them. “My god, good thing we’re in a place that serves food then.”

Eddie sniffs the air. “I can’t eat this shit.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I’m a vegetarian.”

“A what?”
“A vegeta—”

“You’re a vegetarian?”

“Yeah.”

Jones leans up some, looks over the table at Eddie’s semi-large frame. “What the fuck salads do you eat?”

“I don’t eat meat.”

“Well order a grilled fucking cheese sandwich. I don’t know. We ain’t leaving.”

Across the room, the young waitress breaks her daze at the jukebox, sees Jones and Eddie. She hops up, walks over.

Not even waiting, Jones orders. “Cheeseburger, medium rare, bacon, extra bacon, fries and a coke.”

The waitress jots the order down. “Anything for you?” she says to Eddie.

“Nothing for me, thanks,” he says, without even looking at her.

“Get something,” Jones says.

“Okay, a tall boy and a shot of bourbon.”

“Food.”

“Okay, a grilled fucking cheese sandwich then.”

The waitress laughs. Eddie looks up, now interested in her interest.

“Anything else,” she says.

“Yeah, fries I guess.”

She jots it down.
Jones looks at her, says, “And can you cut his sandwich diagonally for him? Twice. Eddie likes his sandwiches cut into little triangles. Thanks, sweetheart.”

She laughs again. Eddie just stares at Jones. The waitress says she’ll be right back. Jones raises an eyebrow at Eddie.

“I ain’t eating them,” Eddie says.

“Oh, come on.”

“No. She brings out a grilled cheese sandwich cut into little fucking triangles, I ain’t fucking eating it.”

The waitress walks back to the table. “I’m sorry, did you want anything to drink?” she says to Eddie. “I forgot to ask.”

“He’ll have a glass of milk,” Jones says.

“Goddammit.”

“Milk, really?” she says.

“Water, please,” Eddie says. “Water’ll be cool.”

The waitress finishes writing out the food ticket.

She walks through the kitchen door, into the back.

She jumps when she suddenly sees Ragland Debbie standing by the door, on the other side, straining to see out the small window high on the door.

“Debbie. Hey,” the waitress says. The door swings closed behind her. She looks back, trying to see whatever it is Debbie’s trying to see. “What’s up, girl?”

Debbie doesn’t respond.
The waitress looks Debbie up and down. Now she seems most surprised to see Debbie in jeans and a t-shirt.

“I need to find Floyd,” Debbie finally says.

“Ain’t seen him. Not all day.”

“You seen John?”

“Wesley?”

“Yes.”

“No. What’s up?”

“Who are those guys out there?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I just took their order. Haven’t talked to them besides that. Ain’t never seen either of them before neither. Kinda cute though, the one without all the scars and tatts on his chest. I think he likes me. He got all bashful when I—”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Oh.”

“If you—”

“Oh, wait. No, I ain’t seen Floyd, but Trish, that new girl, started a couple days ago, she was in here earlier, picking up her tips, and I think she said something about him. That he was, no, that she was going over to his place tonight.”

“Either of those guys tell you their names?”

“No. Well, I think the cute one’s name might be Eddie. I think I heard the other—”

“I don’t know an Eddie.”

“Everything okay, Debbie?”
“Yeah. Hey, if you see Johnny, will you tell him…” she trails off, keeps staring through the little window. “Never mind. Thanks, Emily.”

Debbie turns and walks out through the back kitchen.

Hazy late afternoon sunlight starting to cast large, eastward leaning shadows.

Clef Holland knocks on the door to room 111.

“Debbie, open the door,” Clef says.

There’s no answer.

“Debbie, it’s Clef Holland.” He knocks again, harder, louder this time.

Again, no answer. But there’s also no sound coming from inside, no buzzy daytime television. Clef leans his head against the door. At first it’s his forehead, like he needs to rest for a second, just touch it to the door to feel something.

Then he turns his head so that his ear’s pressed against the door. No sound at all.

Clef stares at the room’s window briefly, unable to see in. Nothing but the glare and a shadowy distortion of his own reflection, and the parking lot behind him. BDG’s light blue Crown Vic rolls up.

At the car, BDG driving, John Wesley in the next seat, Clef leans down on the open driver-side window.

“CC was over at the DeIbarra’s place,” BDG says. “Didn’t have much to say. Sounds like him and Palafox are a bit estranged these days.”
Clef looks in at John Wesley, whose face has a look that’s begging not to be asked any questions, whatever it is Clef has learned since they last saw each other. So, maybe to control the conversation, John Wesley says, “Clef. You see Debbie?”

“Yeah. I saw her. She don’t seem to be home now.”

“Okay.”

BDG says, “I’m going to take him over to my place, maybe call Wheeler or McCorquodale, see if they’ve found anything.”

Ragland Debbie, in her room, again sitting in front of the suitcase, unlatched and opened.

There’s a knock at the door.

A voice from outside. “Debbie, open the door. Debbie, it’s Clef.”

Another knock, harder, louder this time.

Debbie doesn’t answer, doesn’t move. She sits in her room, no TV, no noise.

When the knocking stops, she goes to the window. She sees BDG’s blue Crown Vic, Clef at the car, John Wesley inside.

It’s hard to say how often a person recognizes when they’re standing before a moment in life where, left or right, whichever way they step, the path not stepped on is erased, gone, was never there. You could say Debbie’s standing with a stillness so certain that she sees this, looking out her window, these three men, one dead girl, a choice.

Debbie’ll mark this moment.

She shuts the suitcase.
Palafox DeIbarra rolling down East Riverside, his car moving at a slow creep.

   Inside the car, no music. No AC running. No one else with him. Nothing.

   Palafox rolls his window down.

   Outside the car, that muffled non-stop thunder of noise on a summer night. All sounds at once.

   At a red light, Palafox slows to a near-stop, but there are no cars crossing the other way, so he slow-rolls through the intersection.

   A young lady in a car on the other side of the light tilts her head in confusion and watches Palafox drive by. He turns and looks at her. His short dark hair that runs a little longer down his neck. His thick, dark mustache sweat-wet and shiny. The dark t-shirt he’s wearing ringed with sweat at the neck.

   The young lady looks at his hands holding the steering wheel, sees a brass two-fingered ring and a mismatched gold bracelet shine bright. There’s something tattooed across his knuckles, but he’s too far away for her to read it.
Further down the street, the parking lot to John Wesley’s small two-story apartment building is mostly empty but for a couple Crown Vics and one marked patrol car.

The door to his place is X-ed off with police tape.

Even from his car, Palafox can see that the frame around the door is in unbroken condition and nothing around the area of the door handle looks out of order.

Palafox eyes this and rolls past.
“Bullets just float into a room,” Officer McCorquodale says to Mack Wheeler.

They’re standing inside John Wesley’s apartment. One of them in the living room, the other in the bathroom, talking through the wall.

“Is that the punchline?” says Mack Wheeler.

“No.”

“So what happened?”

McCorquodale says, “So we’re at Fleet Street sitting next to this stripper with a prosthetic leg who swears her at-birth-given name is Lacey Nightly. She’s at the table keeping me and Holland and a couple other guys more than entertained by showing us how high up her thigh the fake leg attaches. And she’s demonstrating all the things she can do with the remaining knob of flesh that’s left just under her hip. Her nitty-gritty, as she calls it. As in, ‘You gotta get down to the nitty-gritty, boy.’ That’s what she whisper-hums in my ear. Swear to Christ.”

“A transfemoral stripper?”
“Sure,” McCorquodale says. He’s going through a small bag on John Wesley’s bed. Emptying it, spreading the contents on the bed: a few movies, some clothes, a yellow bra, some books.

“So Lacey Nightly’s surprising us all with just how capable she can be with what remains of a limb she got caught in her daddy’s corn harvester when she was fourteen,” McCorquodale says. “And all truths told, she was quite a number, nub and all. But I get to where all I can focus on is these two guys at the table with us. Clint and Billy. I’d never met them before. They just sat with us once she was there. And they seemed like good enough company. But after a while they wouldn’t shut up about possible names for sex positions with a one-legged girl. Shit like ‘the pink flamingo,’ ‘the drunk rudder’—”

“The three-legged race,” Mack Wheeler says. He’s marking measurements in the living room: the distance from the door to the couch, from the couch up to a bullet hole in the wall, from that bullet hole to another blood-circled hole in the couch.

“That’s a good one,” McCorquodale says. “So, I’m sitting there and these two guys at the table with us are all swept up on Lacey Nightly’s particular anatomy, already excited to tell whatever friends they may have all about how one night a one-legged stripper talked their ears off till she took her clothes off. And they’re going on and on. And I look over at Clef. And, you know, this is one of the first times I’d ever hung out with him. We’d both just started, but you could tell right when you met him that he was real. Just the way he looks at you, like he’s already wondering if you and him might end up going a few rounds one day. And I’m just watching him at the table, and it looks like he’s trying to decide which of these two guys he wants to shoot first.”
McCorquodale takes a few pictures of everything laid out on the bed, puts it all back in the bag.

Wheeler’s also taking pictures in the living room.

“And I’m telling you, the more these two guys kept talking, I don’t know why, but the more Holland was just staring them down. Then he’s looking around the diner. And there’re a few people there giving our table dirty looks the louder these two guys get. And I’m getting nervous. Then Holland leans into me and says, ‘Hanging out with a stripper is like eating a noisy bag of chips in church. Everyone might look at you in disgust, but deep down inside they want some too.’”

Wheeler laughs from the other room.

“I couldn’t believe it,” McCorquodale says. “I almost fell out of my chair. I was truly thinking he was going to shoot those guys. Only joke I ever heard him tell.”

McCorquodale walks out into the living room.

“I don’t know about all this,” Wheeler says. “Don’t look right. I mean, I could’ve told you that right when we walked in. But I don’t think the kid’s being straight with us.”

“You think John Wesley shot that girl?”

“No. No I don’t.” Wheeler looks at the door, then at the couch. “But I wouldn’t put it past him that he knows who did.”

“Should we call Holland?”

“Not a chance. Not yet at least. Johnny Boy still with Big Dick Glen?”
The lock on the front door to the abandoned house on Twelfth Street is barely hanging on with makeshift pairings of mismatched screws and nuts. It’s clearly been kicked in before, by the police maybe, more than once, and someone got tired of replacing it.

Debbie knocks on the door like an empty gesture and with no intention of waiting for an answer. Then she pushes it open, no problem.

A couple wooden chairs and some towels on the dirty wood floor of an otherwise empty living room that opens into a kitchen that looks unused. Not clean, just old and unused.

Through the living room, through the kitchen, Debbie walks down a narrow hall, past a small bathroom, on her way to an almost closed bedroom door. Loud music. The sound of low, regularly timed grunting, again and again, like a Nordic rowing song.

Debbie pushes the bedroom door all the way open.

Across the room, a bare male ass, clenched, unclenched, clenched, unclenched and the back of two female legs on either side, the girl bent over an antique dresser, in front of a tall mirror, her eyes closed, making chew of her bottom lip. This guy behind her——one hand
pulling her hair, the other slapping her ass with every grunt—is mostly watching himself in the mirror, behind the girl, occasionally looking down at the girl’s breasts, then back at himself.

Debbie says his name, “Floyd.”

The ravishing continues, Floyd grunting, the girl screaming, the music blaring.

“Floyd,” Debbie says again.

“Oh, Floyd. Oh, Floyd. Fuck,” the girl holding onto the dresser screams.

“Floyd,” Debbie says.

“Fuck, Floyd. Fuck.”

“Floyd.”

Floyd pulls hard on the girl’s hair, says, “Now, girl, now.”

The girl reaches a hand around behind Floyd, her fingers fumbling around for a second, grabbing at him, then she shoves a finger in his asshole.

“Oh fuck,” Floyd hollers and stops his thrusting. His legs shake. His grunt turns into a full-on tenor-pitched howl now and he leans forward, heavy on the girl. “Oh, fuck.”

The girl catches her breath for a second and opens her eyes. She sees Debbie in the mirror.

“Oh, fuck,” she says and spins around, her head snapping to the side a little till Floyd lets go of her hair.

“What the fuck?” Floyd says to her, falling forward onto the dresser, eyes closed, out of breath.

“What the fuck?” the girl says at Debbie.

“Floyd,” Debbie says.
“What?” he says, at the girl, thinking she said it.

“Floyd,” the girl says this time.

“What?” he says again, turning around.

“Floyd,” Debbie says.

“Oh, what the fuck?” Floyd says, seeing Debbie now.

“Can you please excuse us?” Debbie says to the girl.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?” the girl says.

“Please leave,” Debbie says.

“What?” the girl says. “No.” She grabs her skirt off the floor, steps into it.

“Debbie, what are you doing here?” Floyd says, almost laughing a little, and unconcerned with covering up.

“I need to talk to you,” Debbie says.

“I don’t even know who the fuck you are,” the girl says.

“Not you,” Debbie says.

“Trish, this is Ragland Debbie. Debbie, Trish.”

“Hey, Trish,” Debbie says.

“What are you doing here?” Floyd says.

“I need to talk to you.”

“What the hell is this?” Trish asks, looking for her top.

“I need to talk to Floyd.”

“Goddammit,” Trish says. “Fuck you.”
Floyd looks around a second for his jeans. Debbie nods towards them on the floor, on her side of the stained bed that’s been left in this room.

Floyd walks over, puts them on.

Trish has found a bra by now, is hooking it behind her. She gives Debbie a look.

Floyd turns to Trish, motions for her to stay in the room, then walks out into the hall.

Trish rolls her eyes, sighs and grabs at a piece of hair hanging in the corner of her mouth.

Debbie feigns a polite smile towards the girl. “Be careful with that finger,” she says, leaving the room.

Trish flips Debbie off. “Yeah, fuck you.”

“Cool, whatever, slag,” from the hall.

In the kitchen, Floyd grabs a beer out of an iceless cooler on the floor next to the fridge, turns back to where Debbie’s walking into the room now. He starts with sort of a laugh, then asks her what the hell she’s doing here.

“Why did I say you were with me last night, Floyd?”

“What are you talking about? We were together last night.”

“Yeah, you came over at like midnight.”

“Look, I’m sorry you just walked in on that. But I didn’t know—”

“You told me that if anyone asked, to say you’d been there all night.”

“Did anyone ask?” Floyd opens the beer, takes a sip, chokes some on the warmness.

“Yeah, this morning.”

“Who?”
“Some guy—”

“Who?”

“An ex-detective or something. Named Holland.”

“Clef Holland?”

“Yeah, said BDG sent him over to ask me if I knew where you were. And where you’d been last night.”

“Shit. What’d you say?”

“What you told me to say. But why?”

“Why the fuck was Clef Holland there?”

“No. Why the fuck did I tell him you’d been with me all night?”

“I just needed you to help me out. Why would BDG be talking to that crazy fucker Holland?”

“He didn’t lay out the details for me.”

“Why is BDG even—”

“They’d been at John’s this morning.”

“Hmm.”

“Laurie Delbarra was killed there last night.”

“What?” Floyd puts his beer down on the counter. “Wait, what?”

Trish walks into the hallway, behind Debbie, fully clothed now. She goes into the bathroom.

“What are you talking about?” Floyd says.

“Laurie. Her body was found dead in John’s bathroom.”
“What? No, no, that’s not. What?”

“She was shot in the chest.”

Floyd turns pale. He takes a step in the direction of the hallway, towards the bathroom. He stops. Then he turns toward the sink, lunges forward and vomits.

“Someone broke in and shot him and Laurie.”

“Oh my god,” Floyd says, head still in the sink. “What the f—” He throws up again.

He stands up tall, turns the faucet handle, no water. He wipes his mouth with his forearm, then grabs his beer, takes a sip, swishes it in his mouth for a second, then spits into the sink. He turns to Debbie.

“Floyd, why was Laurie killed at John’s apartment last night? Why is BDG looking for you? Who is Clef Holland? And why did I tell him you were with me in my room last night?”
2

IN RATS’ ALLEY
It was as stupid as this, but it was real.

If you’re nearing the end of your rope, do you leave a little with which to hang yourself?

Floyd Ridenhour standing in John Wesley’s living room. The muffled sound of a boombox from the next room, on the other side of the living room wall. John Wesley’s sitting on the couch. Floyd’s standing in front of him. There’s a suitcase next to them, zipped up.

Floyd pulls a pistol from the back of his jeans. He points it at John Wesley.

“No, wait,” John Wesley says.

“What?”

They’re both using hushed voices.

“I might need my right arm,” John Wesley says. “Shoot me here instead,” and he points to his left shoulder.

Floyd aims.

“And make sure to get it in the meat. You know, like this fleshy part.”

“Yeah, your shoulder.”

“Yeah, but, you know, here”—points to the outside—“the meat.”
“The fleshy part.”

“Yeah, don’t hit bone or anything.”

“Okay, that makes sense. I’d hate to accidentally hurt you when I shoot you.”

“Fuck off. Just hurry up.”

“No really. I’d feel bad.”

“And back up.”

“Dude, it’s a .38 caliber bullet. It ain’t going to hurt any less if I back up.”

“No. Entry wound and that shit.”

“The fuck you know about entry wounds.”

“Nothing. But you know, so it’ll look like you were farther away. Like you shot just after coming in though the door.”

“We ain’t got time for entry wounds, dude. What the fuck are you talking about.”

“So it’ll look like I was shot from across the room.”

“It’s just going to look like you’ve been shot.”

“Just back up.”

“Look, I ain’t exactly Doc Holiday. And gunslingin ain’t exactly my specialty.”

“Oh. Okay. Because for some reason I was thinking that. But you’re saying you were not at the OK Corral shootout.”

“I’m saying that if I go across the room I might not hit you right in the fleshy part of your shoulder, and might accidentally hurt you. And I already told you how bad I’d feel if—”

“Fuck you.”

“No really—”
“Just back up.”

Floyd backs up.

“And remember, twice,” John Wesley says. “But make the second one right after the first. So it feels like, so like I only have to get shot once.”

“But I’m shooting you twice.”

“Yeah, but just do it one right after the other, so it’s like one thing.”

“I swear, you’re being the biggest pussy about being shot.”

“You want to switch, hoss?”

“Fuck that business.”

“No. Let’s switch and I’ll shoot you. See if you don’t sit there and get a little particular about it.”

“The day I owe Mr. Baker ten thousand notes is the day you can shoot me. Besides, that wouldn’t make any fucking sense.”

“Okay, forget it.”

“You want to count to three or something?” Floyd says.

“What?”

“Before I shoot you. Do you want—”

“No.” John Wesley adjusts. “Wait, yeah.”

Floyd sits down on the coffee table. Steadies himself.

John Wesley pulls from a bottle of bourbon.

Floyd aims.
John Wesley puts the bottle on the table, next to where Floyd’s sitting. “Wait,” John Wesley says. “Wait, you can’t shoot me sitting down. The angle won’t be—”

“Oh for fucking hell.” And the gun goes off.

The first shot hits John Wesley in the shoulder. The bullet exits and hits the couch. Red-splattered white cotton flies into the air.

John Wesley yells. Not wanting to take the second shot, he turns to the side just as Floyd pulls the trigger again.

The second shot misses.

Floyd jumps up. Then he’s frozen. “Again?” he says, almost laughing.

“No. Fuck. Go.”

Floyd grabs the suitcase and runs out the door, trying not to be loud.

John Wesley holds his shoulder, blood running down his hand. He slumps over some, calls out for Laurie. He’s already starting to pass out.

He lies on the couch.

The music is louder. The hole in the wall behind him.

What little amount of rope there is left now.
Maybe that’s a good way to describe being high: heavy with weightlessness, like swinging from a rope. Or drinking. Or even dying maybe? But of course that’s a hard one for a living person to say. Even harder for a dead person to say, maybe. And what kind of swinging, of course.

Laurie Merielle Delbarra is dead.

They say that there’s truth in every joke. And if this is one long joke? A bullet traveling through the thin wall of an Austin, Texas apartment building, killing a young girl the night before she leaves for college because her ex-boyfriend, unbeknownst to her, owed someone money? This is the truth. This is what really happened. Names have been changed of course, people and places consolidated, details filled in. But these things happened. This happened. The fates cut a young girl’s rope short. But they left just enough for everyone else to hang themselves with.
Floyd puts the pistol in the back of his jeans, grabs the suitcase. Three apartment buildings down, he walks behind a large green dumpster. Behind the dumpster, a different, non-DeIbarra suitcase is waiting for him.

Floyd opens both suitcases up, transfers the drugs from one to the other and tosses the DeIbarra case into the dumpster. Then he takes the pistol from his jeans, puts it in the new case as well, and walks out from behind the dumpster.

East Riverside to his place on Twelfth Street is about twenty blocks. He stands and stairs in that direction for a second, weighing the options: [1] walk the twenty blocks versus taking the chance of a cab driver being able to recognize him, place him here and now if it came to that, and [2] walk through the most wastelandish neighborhoods in East Austin, late at night, with thirty thousand dollars worth of drugs versus hopping on a late night bus with thirty thousand dollars worth of drugs.

Floyd walks about three blocks northwest, stops at a bus stop.

The street lamp next to the stop, worse than being overly bright, is flickering on and off, strobing over Floyd, drawing attention.
He stands behind a metal bench, the suitcase at his feet. He pulls a cigarette from the front pocket of his ratty button-up and a lighter from his jeans.

A car turns off Riverside, towards him. Its headlights cut through the dark around him, then hit him, just for a second. Floyd lowers his head a little.

When the car passes, Floyd lights his cigarette.

After only two drags, a bus turns off Riverside and pulls up to the stop. Floyd tosses the cigarette, grabs the suitcase, pulls a couple wrinkled dollar bills from his jeans and hops on the bus.

The inside of the bus, lit a humming sterile blue from the overhead lights, looks like a hospital waiting room during an electrical outage with a back up generator running. The bus is also stocked with a few people who look like they could be sitting in a waiting room.

Floyd sits alone, next to a window. He catches his breath. He’s almost smiling now.

The left side of his head in the window’s reflection, the side he keeps shaved because of the lines of burn scars where hair doesn’t grow anymore, scars he’s had tattooed over with an image of a zipper being unzipped to reveal pink and blue-tinted flames spiraling around a small black house, the fire fading into his skin tone near the back of his head.

After eighteen blocks, Floyd pulls the stop-request cable. The bus stops at the corner of Twelfth Street under the highway bridge, a few blocks down from Fleet Street.

Three young guys, no more than thirteen or fourteen years old, tops, push to get on the bus without waiting for anyone to get off. One of them bumps Floyd getting on. The boy turns around, arms jutting out in a what-the-fuck? kind of way. He’s half Floyd’s size but comfortable with this motion, confident in it.
Floyd doesn’t even look at him, just hops off the bus.

The bus starts to move and that kid goes to a window, waits for the bus to pull him up even with Floyd.

Floyd’s already reaching in the suitcase.

The bus brings the kid, middle finger pressed against the glass, next to Floyd, and Floyd holds the gun up, points it at the kid. Floyd laughs as he does this, laughs at the kid’s face as the confident sneer behind the middle finger drops and the eyes open with oh-shit shock.

The boy’s two friends jump a little, but they’re also laughing at the boy now.

The bus drives away. Floyd puts the pistol back in his jeans, closes the suitcase, starts walking.
It’s an old fashion bell in the dark. Then a bedside lamp turns on. BDG’s tired face is lit up a sick yellow, both eyes closed. The old phone rings again. Then the one good eye opens and BDG picks the plastic receiver up, says hello.

“Yeah… No. It’s okay… Yeah… Where is he?… Is he being charged?… I know her… Sorry, she’s what?… Where?… Jesus… Johnny okay?… How bad?… Okay, yeah… When?… Okay… Ten minutes tops.”

BDG sets the phone down. He sits up in the middle of his bed.

He swings his feet to the floor, pushes up off his knees.

BDG stands tall, his arms out wide.

His back is stretched cuts of old rope under hard-scrabbled skin. From shoulder to shoulder and neck to hips, his back is covered with an intricately colored tattoo, drawn in a series of squares——framed moments of a scene laid out left to right, top to bottom. The bedside lamp behind BDG now lights this scene tattooed on his back with near-alive looking contrast:
The first frame stretches across the back of BDG’s left shoulder. It shows a long dirt road approaching an old dirty white house with a wooden porch. Green grass all around. Bright sky. A hot looking yellow in the air.

If the picture were to stand alone, it would seem a certain kind of beautiful that speaks to this house as a place where a family lives, where love exists, where life is made.

The very next frame over, this serene image is immediately invaded by a picture of tires belonging to a black van and a light blue Crown Vic stirring up dust on that dirt road.

The vehicles stop in front of the house. This image of the house is from the same vantage point as the first, just now with the encroaching figures.

Two people wearing sheriff’s deputies uniforms—a young male and a young woman—exit the black van and a young BDG with a dirt-worn white cowboy hat steps out of the Vic.

The next frame is a close-up of the young woman, her profile, her hair pulled back into a bouncy ponytail, an almost feline cut to her cheekbones, her lips barely parted, eyes wide, set on—

BDG who’s walking up to the house, motioning behind him for the two state workers to stay in the yard. At the bottom of this frame, the name Ina Mae Wesley is written.

John Wesley’s mother. At this time, an eight year old Johnny would’ve been at home, possibly with one of his mom’s boyfriends, possible by himself. His mother, Ina Mae, only twenty-six years old here.

Then it’s a close up of BDG’s boots stepping up onto the porch, little curved lines that fade away from his feet showing the echo-y sound they must be making on the wooden steps.
Then it’s BDG’s point of view: The front door of the house stands wide open, but the screen door is shut. The bright sun makes it hard to see inside the house. This frame is tattooed on BDG’s right shoulder. This same shoulder is drawn inside the image at the bottom of the frame like an over the shoulder shot. A dialogue circle reads: “Brian Massie. It’s Glen Childress. Come on out.”

Anyone who knew a young Big Dick Glen Childress always says the same thing: BDG loved nothing more than women and to go fifteen rounds with a woman beater, usually only needing one.

Moving down his back, back to the left, another row.

The next frame is an even tighter close-up on the screen door, with a silhouetted man appearing on the other side.

Then a reverse close-up on BDG’s face. The slightest muscle twitch in his left cheek is all the startle that shows on his face. But more alarming is the emphasis the frame puts on BDG’s eye, his left, still working.

A close-up of BDG’s hand hovering next to his holstered pistol, the flared grip of the revolver just under his thumb.

Then back to the screen door just as a small hole opens up in the mesh and a .22 caliber bullet tears through.

The bullet hits BDG’s face. His head snaps back.

His body twists.

He hits the ground, landing on his chest.
He tries to push himself up and a bullet hits him in the back.

Then another and he falls back to the ground, still on his chest.

Then it’s a close-up of BDG’s face again, this time with an inky mess of blood and pulp filling his eye socket, running down his cheek.

Down on the next row of frames, starting on the back of BDG’s ribcage, we’re back on the door, now with three bullet holes torn through the screen. One of these bullet holes is drawn around an actual jagged scar left from one of the shots BDG took in the back.

In the next frame, the door is kicked open and Brian Massie comes out shooting, a small rifle in his hands.

Then it’s a reverse of the lawn, the two deputies standing stock-still, nothing but open space around them, nowhere to go.

We see Massie fire two more shots, one crack after the other. The male deputy drops with two bullet holes in his chest. Ina Mae looks on with scared-to-death eyes, covering her ears with her hands.

Massie turns and lets his final bullet go. It hits Ina Mae in the throat.

Then, another row down, Massie tosses the rifle and pulls a skinning knife from his back pocket.

Massie stands over BDG.

BDG rolls over, draws his service revolver.
With grit-clenched teeth BDG leans back and unloads. He squeezes off all six rounds with one intention. Four of the shots hit Massie: two in the chest, one in his right shoulder. The last bullet hits Massie in his leg. This shot is drawn on top of the other scar on BDG’s back, from the second shot he took.

Massie collapses on the porch, a pool of blood swelling out around him, soaking into the wood.

The final row: bodies on the lawn.

The final image is a close-up on Ina Mae’s face, in the grass. Her eyes are open but lifeless. Her pretty pale cheeks are splattered with blood. In the reflection of her eyes, drawn very faint and small, is the original image of the old dirty white house.
A hard knock on the door. Ragland Debbie is just getting out of the shower. She grabs a thin white towel off the ground and dries one leg some, then the other. Then she runs the towel up her stomach and wraps it around herself. Another knock.

Holding the towel up, Debbie brushes wet hair out of her face and walks to the door.

She leans towards forward, looks through the peep hole. A con-caved Floyd standing on the other side, suitcase in one hand, handful of flowers in the other.

Debbie opens the door. Floyd walks in.

“You ain’t moving in again,” Debbie says.

“What?”

“The suitcase.”

“Ain’t full of clothes.”

“What’s it full of then?”

“Nothing.” Floyd sets the suitcase down. He holds out the flowers. He’s also holding three small bags of crack. He says, “One for you. Two for me.”

“Johnny around with you?”
“Nah. Ain’t seen him.” He pulls the glass tube off one of the flowers. “Well, I have. But not if anyone asks. And, if anyone does ask, I’ve been here, since, say… all night.” He takes his shirt off, tightly rolls up the corner of one of the sleeves and stuffs it into the glass tube, pushing it in as far as it’ll go.

“What the fuck you talking bout? Where’s Johnny? I’ve been calling him all day.”

“I ain’t seen him, remember.”

“Who the hell’s going to ask me if you have?”

“Don’t know. Just in case anyone does.”

“Well I’m asking you, jackass.”

“Well… I’m tel—”

“Whatever. I’m tired of hearing you talk.”

Floyd smiles. “He’ll be here tomorrow.”

Debbie smiles.

Floyd puts the glass tube on the floor, carefully slides the curved end under the heel of his boot and steps down till the end breaks just enough for a few shards of glass to be taken away.

“What’s in the suitcase?” Debbie says.

“He has been shot though?”

“What?”

“Johnny Boy’s been shot.”

“What the fuck? By who?” Debbie looks down at the suitcase, then back up at Floyd.

“Johnny Boy was just robbed. The person who robbed him shot him. He’s okay, Johnny is. And I’ve been here all night. And tomorrow you two are going to be very happy. So he says.
Told me to tell you. And said something about buying a car. I don’t know. You two are beyond me. But for now,” Floyd holds the modified glass tube out to Debbie.
The passenger-side door to BDG’s light blue Crown Vic opens up and Clef Holland gets in.

Outside the car, the sun’s just starting to rise, deep blues and purples turning to reds and oranges on the horizon, soft yellows coming in through the windows. BDG’s slightly off-colored glass eye reflecting the sick yellow light. Clef waits for BDG to talk. He doesn’t, just drives west into downtown.
Clef Holland finds Daryl Movie God Lane at the same corner as before, under a street lamp, no more flowers for the night, just leaning. Clef walks up to him.

“Damn, Clef, you looking dapper as fuck tonight,” he says.

“What’s going on?”

“I got a guy should be here any second.”

“You got a guy?”

“Yeah. Homeboy of mine kicks it with CC sometimes. Says he’d get a feel for whether or not the Delbarras are tracking your boy’s scent. A bunch of bloodhounds them Delbarras. Told my man to keep his ears tuned to any talk about Roman Jones, Mr. Baker or who may’ve jacked your boy.”

“So what are you in this for?” Clef says.

“What you mean?”

“Come on, Lane.”

“Clef, baby. You know Movie God always here for you now.”
Clef steps right into Lane and with a lowered voice he says, “You always had an ear for me because I let you pedal on the corners, no problems. But I know you know I ain’t with the department anymore.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“So don’t fuck with me.”

“No disrespect meant by it.”

“What are you in this for?”

“Well,” Lane says, drawing it out. “What are you in this for?”

“I’m getting paid. You?”

“I swear to blessed fucking Jesus, I’m just helping an old friend out.” Lane cocks his elbows out and back, palms of his hands up, conceding.

And enter Ragland Debbie. She seems to appear out of nowhere.

She reads the look of surprise on Clef’s face. Seems to enjoy it.

“Hey, Daryl,” she says, putting a hand on Lane’s shoulder.

“Ragland Debbie,” Lane says. “You are a pert and murderous ticket if I’ve even seen one.” Lane kisses Debbie on the cheek. “And believe you me I have. But you, Ragland Debbie, mmm, you kill em all.”

“Debbie?” Clef says, sounding his surprise, or maybe curiosity more than surprise. But of course it could be suspicion, too.

“Hey, detective,” Debbie says to Clef, reading him. “I ran into Daryl earlier. Said he was thinking you might be here tonight. So I figured I’d come, too.”
Clef looks behind her, then behind him. Then he tracks the ground back to Debbie’s boots. He eyes her body, all the way up, and when he gets to her face she puts on a crooked laugh and a fishhook smile.
Back at Floyd’s borrowed space, that abandoned house now full of frenzy, him running around, trying to get dressed, sober up just a little, put all this together.

“Where you going?” Trish says.

“Look. I gotta go.”

“Where? What was up with that broad? Y’all have a thing going on?”

“Please move,” Floyd says, trying to push past Trish, searching for a shirt.

“What the hell did she need to talk to you about? Where are you going?”

“Holy fuck, okay, you get one. You get one question.”

“Where are you going?”

“There’s something I really need that I left at Debbie’s and I’m going over there to get it. There’s some shit behind the bathroom mirror if you want it.”

And with that, Floyd’s out the door.

Trish is just standing in the hallway of this small house, nowhere to go, nowhere to be.
Inside Fleet Street Diner, Eddie Ketch, having finished his grilled cheese sandwich, is standing in the corner by the jukebox, chatting up Emily, the waitress.

“Yeah, he’s not like my boss or anything,” Eddie says, pointing back to the table where Roman Jones is still sitting, “I’m more helping him.”

“What do you two do?”

“We’re creditors.”

“You work for like a bank or a company?”

“No. Not exactly.”

Emily is pushing the turn button on the jukebox, flipping through the selections.

“What do you like?” she says.

“Whatever you like.”

Emily stops on a Johnny Cash album. “You look like you might like Cash,” she says.

“Yeah. I do. What’s your favorite song of his?”
“I like the one he sings with June, about going to Jackson. I love the way they sing about just leaving where you are, going somewhere else.”

“I got you, girl,” Eddie says, and pulls a single dollar bill out of his pocket, slides it into the jukebox.

Roman Jones rolls his eyes back at the table.

“So, y’all been here a while. You working, like waiting for someone here?”

“Yeah. Guy’s late. What time you get off?”

“A couple hours.”

Then, to keep pushing this, thinking Emily is into what it is he does, Eddie hollers over at Jones, “Yo, where the hell is Floyd? Some of us might want to go live.”

Jones ignores him.

“Floyd?” Emily says.

“What’s that?”

“Floyd Ridenhour. You’re waiting on Floyd.”

“You know Floyd.”

“Yeah. Everyone here does.”

“You know where he is?”

“No. I’m just asking because everyone seems to be looking for Floyd today.”

“What do you mean.”

“Oh, just a friend of ours was just in here looking for him.”

“Who?”

“Girl named Ragland Debbie.”
“Who’s she?”

“Just a girl who works here. Lives out back. She didn’t say why she—”

Roman Jones has clearly been listening, and is up with them now.

“What room?” is all he says.

“Yo, Jones, hold up,” Eddie says, smiling at Emily.

“What room?”
Trish walks into the bathroom at Floyd’s.

Just standing there, she almost looks like she might cry, but for what reason? She might not even know. She takes a deep breath, looks in the mirror above the bathroom sink. She scrunches her face a little, looking at herself.

She pulls the mirror-door away, opening the medicine cabinet. Nothing. She closes the mirror, stares at herself. She puts her hands on the rim of the sink, leans forward and just stares. She leans a bit closer. Her pupils dilate a little. She almost smiles, but doesn’t.

Trish lets go of the sink, stands up straight. She takes her ponytail out, takes the barrettes out of her hair, lets her hair down. She runs her fingers through it a few times.

She doesn’t notice it at first. She’s not seeing it, the way the shower curtain behind her doesn’t look quite right. The glow from the streetlamp outside, coming in through a small window on the other side of the plastic, translucent curtain, is giving the room a greyish glow. But it’s not evenly distributed throughout the curtain. But Trish hasn’t looked at this yet.

She puts her barrettes back in, but not the ponytail. She runs her fingers through her hair a couple more times, then pushes it behind her shoulders.
Then finally her eyes clearly focus in on a different depth of field in the mirror. Then she turns around. Eyes wide.

There’s clearly a silhouette of someone in the shower, behind the curtain. It’s what Trish is looking at, frozen. She goes to take a step toward the bathtub, then stops. The bottom corner of the curtain is folded back, resting on the side of the bathtub. Trish backs up, reaches behind her, feeling along the wall, finds the light switch. The bathroom light goes off. The shower curtain lights up almost white from the streetlamp, and the dark outline of a person standing completely still is clear to see.

Then the shower curtain flies open and a man jumps out, grabs Trish.

She screams.

“No, no. No. No,” the man is saying. It’s Palafox Delbarra. He’s holding Trish by the shoulders, just repeating, “No. No. No,” as she screams and tries to break free.
“Debbie, Debbie,” Floyd says, trying to sound playful but sounding more urgent than he’d probably like. He knocks on the door to room 111 again, then the window. Then it’s both fists going back and forth.

“Debbie?” He leans his chest on the door, his mouth against it. “Just open the door. Trish says she’s sorry.”

He keeps knocking with both hands, and hits his head on the door a couple times. “Okay, she said to tell you something other than that. But just open the door.” He’s playfully thrusting against the door now, but still the look on his face is one of concern.

Then he backs up. He looks at the door, as if just realizing Debbie might not be here.

“Well fuck,” he says to himself.

He puts his ear to the door. Takes it away. Looks around. Tries to look in the curtained window. He puts his ear to the glass. Looks around again. No one around.

“To hell with this,” he says.
Then he pulls a pocket knife from his boot, flips it open. He slides the blade into the thin space between the two panes of glass. With ease, he opens the metal latch on the inside. Then he slides the window open to the side. He pockets the knife. He reaches in to move the curtain.

From behind Floyd, a python of an arm wraps around his neck.

Floyd stands still.

“That’s right,” a voice says.
On the corner of Congress and Fourth, Movie God Lane’s daytime real estate, Lane is trying his best to shoot the shit with Clef, putting that tongue to use, waiting. Most of the night-goers on the street pass by in both directions, walking either way, parting around them, unconcerned.

Then one guy in the crowd, eyes on the three of them, approaches.

What’s plain to see is that this guy is hung up on a pretty for real habit, how his eyes are on the verge of parting ways, the right eye rolling back, turning into a milk-white gloss, the other eye, color and cloudiness of a neglected fish bowl, cutting off to the side and wobbling there. And he’s missing his two front teeth, knocked out, as if a bit of a testament to these types of situations.

Debbie and Clef both have their backs to him. He walks up right behind them. Then Lane notices him, says, “Oh shit, this motherfucker right here. Irving, where you been, baby?”

The guy, Irving LeDell, gives Lane a hug, largely ignores Clef and Debbie.

“Shit, been locked up.”

“Damn, again?”

“By choice this time. Room and board. On the house.”
“You leaky bastard.”

Irving turns so he’s facing all three of them now, and talks like he knows everyone. “Shit, I ain’t gotta tell y’all how it’d been colder than a well-digger’s ass out here this winter. So I went up to the police station back in February trying to get locked up, you know. But there was this officer at the front desk, this real uptight, shirts-freshly-pressed-and-starched kind of guy looking like he’d just been handed his real bullets. Well, he said, ‘This ain’t a hotel. You can’t just check in.’"

It’s a spellbinding sort of thing, it seems, the way these street hustlers can start telling stories like this, and just distract you.

“So I said I’d be right back,” Irving is saying, “and walked on down to the liquor store. This little Korean joint down the street. And I went straight in and grabbed a forty of Old English, popped that bad boy open, walked out the store sip-sippin, smiling, cutting my eyes at the clerk. the clerk was this young fella with a handful of pubic hair that looked like it’d been sprinkled on his chin and cheeks. I was making sure he saw me.”

Clef and Debbie are listening, but Lane keeps looking around, clocking the street up and down. But he’s smiling and laughing too, so?

“Don’t let this grey hair fool you now,” Irving says. “This old bloodhound still got some tricks. So I walked on down the block, back to the station and just stood out front enjoying my adult beverage, like a gentleman. And I was savoring every sweet drop, except for all of it that was running down my chin cause I couldn’t stop laughing at the clerk boy running after me. I hollered out, ‘Does it look like I’m trying to get away? Take your time.’ And he came running up all out of breath. Bout that time that officer who’d before refused my patronage came out, said,
'That’ll do.’ And he just held the door for me as I waltzed in. And as long as it was winter, I was up in there causing just enough trouble. Saw the sun starting to shine as Spring creeped in. I served out my bad behavior through March till the beginning of April. Just got out a couple weeks ago.”

“Shit, how you been since then?” Lane says.

“Got a string of charges bout to turn into money owed I ain’t got. Like usual. But they ain’t gonna do nothing bout it in the end. So all and all, I can’t complain.”

“Hey, Irving, meet Clef Holland and Ragland Debbie.”

“Pleased, pleased,” Irving says, shaking hands with each of them.

“Clef, this’s my guy here.”

Clef raises an eyebrow, leans into Lane’s shoulder and in a low voice says, “This is your guy? It sounds like you haven’t seen him in a while. I thought you said you’d talked to him earlier today.”

“Yeah, but through someone, you know. I sent another one of my boys to deliver a message. Shit, you know we ain’t got no phones out here. Movie God run it old school, baby.”

Then Lane drapes an arm around Irving’s shoulders, says, “Let me holler at ya for a minute, Irving,” and leads him down the block a little.
In the bathroom, Trish is lost in a fit of horror with Palafox trying to talk to her, tries to let her know he’s not here for her.

“No. No, just be quiet. Be quiet and I won’t hurt you.”

“What do you want? Oh my god, please don’t.”

The light is still off, the room still a ghostly grey.

Trish won’t open her eyes though. Palafox has her by the shoulders. He’s not hurting her, but he’s also not letting her go.

“I just need Floyd.”

“He was just here.”

“I know. Where did he go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do. Think.”

Trish is crying now, eyes still closed, as if this might all go away as long as she doesn’t look, doesn’t acknowledge.
“This isn’t going to go away,” Palafox says. “But you’ll be rid of me as soon as you tell me where he went.”

Lips shaking, “Debbie’s place.”

“Who’s Debbie?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where’s her place?”

“I don’t know. Please. She works at Fleet Street Diner. That’s all I know.”
Eddie Ketch slaps Floyd across the face. “That’s a bitch-slap,” he says. “And it’s only gonna get worse from here on out.”

“Fuck you,” Floyd says. Roman Jones is behind him, his armed locked around Floyd’s throat.

“No, man,” Eddie says, “fuck you.”

“Fuck you.”

“All right, I got this,” Eddie says.

So Jones lets go, takes a couple steps back.

“This is what happens when you’re late, Floyd,” Eddie says, and goes to slap him again, but this time Floyd ducks it, comes back with a big right hand of his own. A piece of tooth breaks off, flies off, and Eddie buckles with a bloody lip, straight to the ground.

Floyd puts a boot in his ribs, and again, fast. Eddie curls up.

Then Floyd turns to take on Roman Jones, but Jones already has a quick upward-thrown elbow on the move and lands it on the Floyd’s jaw. Then he lands a kick to Floyd’s knee. Floyd goes down onto his stomach.
“Oh, I see,” Jones says to Floyd, standing over him, “you thought you had the low-hanging fruit here.”

“What the fuck?” Eddie says, getting himself up, holding his ribs.

“Sorry, man,” Jones says. “You seemed like you had it, so——”

“So… So you just let him hit me and then kick me in the ribs a few times.”

“You said it. You said, ‘I got this.’”

“Oh, so you just tagged out? ‘Fuck it,’ you figured.”

“Well, who slaps someone and then says, ‘That’s a bitch-slap’?”

“What the fuck does that have to do with it?” Eddie says and rolls Floyd onto his back, pulls him up off the ground with Jones’ help.

Eddie takes a step back, spits out some blood and a few more small gritty pieces of his broken tooth, then he slides a hammer out of his jacket——though it seems to come out of nowhere——puts the back end to Floyd’s throat and pushes him against the brick wall next to Debbie’s door.

Eddie grabs Floyd under the jaw and sticks the hammer in his mouth. Floyd struggles, turning his head side to side, trying to keep the hammer from going in, but it’s already catching on his cheeks, digging in with each turn of his head and so he eventually stops, both ends of the hammer bulging out now.

“Give it up,” Jones says.

Floyd closes his eyes.

“In ten seconds, Eddie here is going to turn the back of this hammer into the roof of your mouth. Then he’s going to pull down and see what breaks first, the handle or your jaw.”
Floyd puts his hands in the air, pulls his chin up a little, tries to talk but can’t. It’s just moans and airy H sounds.

Eddie lets go of his jaw and Floyd snakes his neck backwards till the hammer’s out of his mouth.

“Okay,” Floyd says.

Inside room 111, Floyd is scrambling to try and say why the suitcase might not be here. How he left it here, it was here when he last left, but what might be the reason it’s not anymore.

“It was right here earlier.”

“Well, ain’t that the rub,” Eddie Ketch says.

“I can go find Debbie. She must’ve taken it. She’s the one trying to rip you guys off. But I know where she is. I can go get her. I can get it. Wherever she’s at, I’ll get it. I’ll be Dukes of fucking Hazard about it.”

“We’ve been waiting on you all day,” Roman Jones says. “So how bout you be Grease fucking Lightnin about it.”
Palafox Delbarra walks up to Holy Trinity Hall. Right now, outside, a hunchbacked drunk with a bottle of wine in hand sips and stumbles. A young mother holds a crying baby, tells it not to be scared, that heaven is eventually coming and everything’ll be okay. Another citizen stands naked and scoffs and swings out at anyone too close to him.

Palafox enters.

The cathedral ceiling of HTH is no cathedral ceiling at all: slightly pitched with a single dented-in speaker at the center and a crimped wire that runs the length of the room to a reel-to-reel tape console. On the reel-to-reel a recording of actual cathedral bells loops every hour. The rest of the church is an altar at the front of the room, half a dozen pews and a confessional in the back.

The confessional is hardly more than a plywood boxed-in booth with floor-length curtains serving as doors, a couple wooden stools and a mesh partition—a rusted screen from a window, really—that splits the top third of the booth, but conceals no one’s identity.

Palafox enters the confessional.
Outside the booth, a few people are milling around, mumbling prayers, looking for the bathrooms, refilling the holy water, etc.

After a minute, Palafox exits the booth, walks through the others in the church. He doesn’t acknowledge anyone, just leaves.
With Clef trying to watch Lane and Irving, maybe even hear them, though they’re too far away, Debbie is trying her best to talk to Clef.

“So, the cool TV detective.”

“Former.”

“Yeah, but those are always the coolest, right? Gone rogue. America loves good men gone rogue. Maybe because they get to be bad but still stand for something good, some good idea, even if they are bad themselves. Maybe that’s America.”

“Or maybe that’s just how things happen sometimes.”

Debbie juts out a hip, hand on it, head cocked——a purposeful embodiment of sass.

“Now, Detective Holland, who hurt you?” She laughs that crooked laugh and throws her fishhook smile at him, into him, baiting him, and for good measure adds, “But of course we both know what I’m really asking you is what did you do. What did you do to becomes ex-detective? Who did you hurt?”

Clef is trying to concentrate on Lane and Irving but can’t keep himself from Debbie. But he counters: “What’s your relationship with John Wesley?”
“I’ll go round and round with you,” Debbie says, quick on the draw because she was ready to pull.

“Okay. You first.”


“All right. I was forced to resign three months into becoming a detective. My first case. A missing persons case.” Clef nods to Debbie, to indicate it’s her turn.

“I met Johnny shortly after I moved here. It was my first Friday night working at Fleet Street. He came in with Floyd. And Johnny was the only guy that night who didn’t ask me if I wanted to go back to my room for a bigger tip. You may not think too highly of him, but a man who has the ability to act decent in a world that no longer expects him to has it in his heart to be good even if he lacks the will.”

“It was a missing girl, seven years old, last seen playing in front of her house on East Riverside, playing with a toy fishing rod, a Snoopy rod, fishing in a rain puddle the neighbors said. After about seventy-two hours of nothing—no leads, no suspects, no witnesses, nothing—a call came in saying someone had reported seeing her fishing rod by Ladybird Lake. Now you.”

“When you live in a world of lost men, and a decent one as cute as Johnny comes around with a plan, an idea to become un-lost, it’s hard not to listen.”

“What plan?”

“Nope. Not yet.”

“Okay. I went down there, to the lake, and I couldn’t believe it, a homeless man was just sitting there, using her fishing rod, trying to cast it in the lake. I was there alone, just me and him.
He played dumb, so I thought. I wrapped the fishing line around his neck to choke him, then slowly bent his thumb backwards till he talked.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. It wasn’t till his thumb snapped that I realized he’d been unconscious for I don’t even know how long. You.”

“I promised myself that Austin was just a stop along the way to the real beginning of my life, and that I wouldn’t be taking anyone with me. But Johnny beat me to the punch.”

“And he was going to be the beginning of life?”

“Like I said, he had a plan. But even decent men do unforgivable things.”

Suddenly Lane is next to them. Clef breaks his gaze with Debbie. He looks over at where Lane and Irving were. Irving’s gone, walking, already a block down the street.

“Where’s your man going?”

“Oh, him?” Lane says. “That motherfucker can’t have more than twenty dollars in his pocket for a minute without trying to double it shooting pool and throwing darts. A real investment guru, that one. Not even Movie God can help em all, you know?”

“What did he say?”

“Well,” and it’s a humorless look that comes over Lane’s face, his whole body. It’s a look that shows his whole act right now is exactly that. “If I were you,” he says to Clef, but also to Debbie in a way, “I’d ask myself real hard how important all this is. What you need from this. If it’s too important to walk away. All I can tell you is that apparently Johnny Boy did indeed owe Mr. Baker a large sum of money. More than either he or Floyd Ridenhour could hope to have, or make, without, well, I’d say it’s a little more than funny that if only a suitcase full of something
that could’ve easily been turned into that amount of money hadn’t been stolen from Johnny
Boy’s place last night, they might’ve eventually been in the red. But then again, maybe they
didn’t have that kind of time.”

“Lane, I don’t feel like that was news to you just now,” Clef says.

“Maybe not. But Floyd’s body was just found.”

“What?”

“Under the interstate bridge. Just a little bit ago. Fresh. A couple teenagers saw him, ran
to Fleet Street to call the police. Someone fucked his face up pretty bad. So, like I said, I’d ask
yourself what you need from this, and if you need it bad enough. And if you don’t, just walk
away.”

Which is exactly what Lane does, as he says, “Like my man just did. He realized he’d
rather just enjoy shooting some pool at the Red Seven Club, more so than try and keeping
fucking with all this.” And Lane’s gone.

Clef breaks the silence first. “Debbie, what was John Wesley’s plan?”

“I don’t know. But we probably should’ve asked Floyd, seeing as how he was at Johnny’s
before he came over last night.”
In room 111, Roman Jones and Eddie Ketch toss the room, going through the few things Ragland Debbie keeps there.

Looking under the mattress, under the bed. Behind the dress hanging in the skinny closet.

The dresser drawers don’t open, they’re fake.

Behind the dresser. In the bathroom.

Eddie takes the top of the toilet off. Just standing water and plumbing components.

Jones walks into the bathroom. “Nothing,” he says.

“Maybe we’re giving him too much credit,” Eddie says, holding his chin, tonguing his chipped tooth.

“I don’t know.”

Jones picks up the picture of Debbie’s mother on the sink counter. “Jog out and follow Floyd, quick. Make sure he ain’t trying to wander off. You could use the exercise anyways.”

Eddie hops out of the tight bathroom space and he’s out the door.

Jones sets the picture back in the makeup case.
Walking under the highway overpass, Floyd looks back over each shoulder and clocks the street side-to-side. He looks everywhere but straight ahead. His mistake. Floyd may have just shown he doesn’t go down easy, but an oak baseball bat in the hands of Palafox Delbarra isn’t ever swung lightly either.

Most of the blood wraps around the barrel of the bat as soon as it strikes Floyd’s face. Some of the blood hangs in the air for a moment, then follows Floyd to the ground.

Then more blood flows and flows from his head.

The blood catches in the cracks of the concrete, crabbing out at harsh angles in different directions and collecting around the boots of Palafox standing over him.

Palafox cocks the toe of his boot in the air, sets his heel on Floyd’s throat, then leans his weight, all of it, onto his foot.

Floyd’s windpipe makes a harsh and hollow sound when it’s crushed. And then that’s that for the Floyd Ridenhour. Fisheyes staring up from the bloody concrete.
The silhouette of Palafox, full of soft grey light, is reflected in Floyd’s eyes. Palafox walks off. If you look close enough you can see the reflection of his bloody footprints behind him, leading down the street, away, gone.
Like it often goes, the room is dark till the door opens and the outside light dissects the black with a widening sliver of yellow-white and the inside light turns on and someone’s in the room, waiting.

Ragland Debbie opens the door to her room, turns on the light and Roman Jones is sitting on the corner of the bed, shotgun in hand.

Debbie stands still. She looks behind her. Can she back out of the room faster than this guy can shotgun her from five feet away?

She plays it a different way, probably having already figured out who this guy is.

Debbie tosses her purse on the small table by the door, walks into the room, to the bathroom sink.

Jones clocks her the whole way.

She sits on the counter. She pulls one of her legs up, unzips her boot and slowly slides her leg, compressed with a tight black stocking, out of the boot.

Roman Jones watches.

Debbie drops her boot on the floor.
“You in the wrong room?” she says.

Jones smiles.

Debbie performs the same act with her other boot, drops it on the floor.

“You know who I am, darling?” Jones says.

Debbie slides off the counter. She walks over, stands in front of him. She stares at his gold chains, at his scars. Stares at the fornication tatts on his neck. She looks at the gun.

Then she reaches down to the hem of her dress and slowly begins to lift it.

The dress moves up Debbie’s legs, past the tops of her stockings, black lace.

The dress runs up the smooth, pale skin on her thighs, up to the first sight of her dark red panties.

Debbie holds the dress here for a second.

Then she lifts it quickly above her hips. She three-sixties a tight circle in front of Jones, says, “See, no weapons. You can lose the gun.” And she drops her dress back down.

Jones smiles. “All right, sweetheart.”

He puts the shotgun on the bed behind him, stands up between her and the gun, and her and the door.

The not-at-all-a-fair-fight size difference between him and her is now clear for both of them to see.

Debbie eyes the gun on the bed, looks at Jones.

“Nah,” she says. “I’m already bored. Must’ve been the big gun in your hands that got me so excited. Sorry, dude.” She turns and walks back to the sink.
She bends over to pick up her boots. In the mirror above her curled back, Roman Jones is on the move.

Debbie stands up, boots in hand, and Jones is right there behind her.

He grabs her by the hair and with alarming ease he tosses her to the side.

Debbie flies into the bathroom, slamming through the door, crashing into the shower, tearing the curtain down with her. Her boots follow her into the tub. She does her best to spin around, to not go into all this face first, but the side of her head slams into the tiled wall and her right eye immediately splits open, just above her cheek bone, blood already running down her face.

Jones steps up next to the shower, sighs.

Debbie adjusts onto her ass, sits there, legs curled over the side of the tub. She’s out of breath, her chest heaving, and she’s wincing in pain, eyes closed tight.

Then she starts trying to blink blood out of her eye.

Jones crouches down. “Floyd swore that a suitcase, the contents of which being more than enough to settle John Wesley’s debt with Mr. Baker, my boss, was in this room. But when he let us in, he couldn’t find it.”

Jones grabs a washrag up off the ground. “Then he swore that you would know where it is.” He hands the washrag to Debbie. “Or that you would know where John Wesley is and that he would know. And I really can’t imagine that even a constant cum-stream like Floyd Ridenhour would have the balls to lie to me twice.” Jones reaches in, caresses her cheek. “So. Where is this magical suitcase, Ragland Debbie?”

“I don’t know.”
“In real life, just like in the movies, they always say ‘I don’t know’ on the first go-round. And then—” Jones grabs Debbie under the jaw, squeezing her chin, and lifts her up.

Debbie moans, her feet flailing, scrambling, trying to get under her. Jones holds her just low enough that she can’t stand.

He holds her there for a second, then drops her.

She lets out a small cry.

Then Debbie immediately takes a deep breath and calms herself.

“I know who you are,” she says. “But I don’t know where the suitcase is. Floyd brought it over last night. It was here when I left earlier. But I swear, I don’t know where it is now.”

Jones crouches back down. “Okay. If you say you don’t know, I believe you.”

Debbie slips up for a fraction of a second, cuts her eyes over to the boot next to her, its long, skinny, shank of a heel.

Jones sighs, rolls his eyes. He slides the boot away, says, “Don’t, really.”

Debbie closes her eyes, like she knows what’s coming and Jones jumps at her, grabs her by the throat, pushes her down and holds her there. Debbie’s choking, kicking her legs. Roman

Jones says, “But you do need to tell me where Johnny Boy is.”
Johnny Boy’s sitting in BDG’s kitchen.

BDG walks in. “Need something to keep you busy?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Hear that drip? Kitchen sink has a leak. Why don’t you go to fixing that. Day’ll be over before you know it.”

“Okay,” is all John Wesley says.

BDG hands him a wrench. “I’ll be impressed if you can do it with one good arm.”

“You ain’t going to help me?”

“As one of the lesser knowns from old Honest Abe goes,” BDG says, “‘Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another.’ Must be true then, right?”

BDG walks out of the kitchen.

Under the sink, “Whatever the hell that means,” John Wesley says to himself.

He loosens the wrench with his thumb, widening it, then fumbles it onto the piping.

Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another.
3

SINGING THE BALLAD OF CHARLIE STANTON

(THAT SHAKESPEHERIAN RAG)
Debbie and John Wesley lying in John Wesley’s bed the morning before.

Debbie is wearing a thin cotton nighty, white with black and yellow butterflies hugging her body, no panties.

“I hate falling asleep,” Debbie says, “that sensation, in the morning, of not being able to remember exactly, like the exact moment of, you know, now.”

“What are you going on about?”

“Hahaha, stop. I’m talking about when you’re lying down to fall asleep and you can try and think about it, and concentrate, but then suddenly you’re going to be awake, hours later, not having noticed when you fell asleep.”

“But you can dream. You’re aware of that.”

“Yeah, but even dreams have no beginning or end, you’re just suddenly dreaming till you’re not. I hate that not knowing exactly, exactly when the switch happens. Like, what if that’s what dying’s like? What if it’s like that, like you’re alive and then you’re not, and the last few seconds are just lost to you.”

“Well, you’d be dead. So what would it matter? What would you care?”
“I don’t know. What if that’s hell, spending an eternity trying to remember the last thing you did, or the last thought you had before you died, but can’t? Or maybe it’s a series of dreams, with no beginning or end, and just you going through infinite doors trying to find the exit. Never being able to catch that exact moment it all changed.”

“That’s why you feel falling asleep might be like dying?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because of the one time I saw something die.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” John Wesley says and pinches her hip bone. Debbie screeches, kicks her legs up to get away. “You better stop.”

“Or what, you’ll keep talking about dying in your sleep.” John Wesley smiles at her. It’s a deep smile, like he is loving every second of her story.

“It was one of the last times I saw my dad, after he stopped showing up regularly, but before he stopped showing up at all, he took me hunting. We went dove hunting. I remember all he brought was a twelve-gauge shotgun, some birdshot and this dirty cloth potato sack for the birds. I’d never gone hunting, but I loved shooting the guns. So he told me to try and shoot the first one.”

“Were you any good?”

“I hit the third dove I shot at.”

“How old were you?”

“Ten. And I remember the bird dropping out of the sky. And I didn’t really think much of it at first. It dropped by this tree, a big cottonwood tree with some tall grass around it. So it took us a
little while to find the dove. Then I saw it, one of its dark eyes looking up at me, still alive. My
dad said we needed to put it out of its misery, and asked if I wanted to do it. I shook my head
‘no.’ So he bent down, grabbed the dove by the throat. The bird was dangling helplessly between
the big knuckles on my dad’s first two fingers. One of its wings unfolded and the feathers spread
out, trembled for a second. Then the wing closed back against its bloody body. My dad lifted his
hand about waist-high, then jerked his arm down hard. I heard the neck snap. ‘And that’s that for
our friend here,’ my dad said. ‘No more suffering.’ Then he tossed the dead bird into the sack and
we walked out from under the cottonwood tree. And at the dinner table that night, cutting the
bird up on my plate, I couldn’t help but think about what I’d seen, when everything turned to
nothing for the bird. It was alive and then it wasn’t. It was experiencing life and then there was
nothing. I remember trying to understand this, you know, I tried to cut the seconds down in my
memory to the exact moment of change, but I couldn’t. So I tried to tell myself I hadn’t actually
seen it, that the bird was already dead when we got to it. That it’s life was long gone before we
picked it up out of the tall grass. But I had to say it over and over. Every bite. Dreams are a scam.
Because like nightmares, they don’t end.”

“Wet dreams do.”


“Wet dreams end.”

“Oh my god.”

“And pretty wonderfully.”

“Have those often?”

“No. I’m not fifteen. But, well, actually—”
“When was your last wet dream?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

“When was your first wet dream?”

“That’s what I was going to say, that I remember my first wet dream being terrifying.”

“What was it?”

“This guy named Robbie—”

“It was with a guy?”

“No. This was real life,” John Wesley says and pinches Debbie again. “This guy Robbie, I hated him. He was the last boyfriend my mom had before she died. He came to the house one afternoon. He was living with us, sort of. And he came over. He had a flower with a glass tube. He was the first guy in town I can remember to come up with it. It’s where I learned how to use the tubes. Anyways, I had a crush on a girl at school named Julianne. Robbie always threw the flowers out, just kept the pipes, so I asked him for the flower. And I remember he said, ‘What you want a pink flower for, fairy boy?’ And you know, I told him it wasn’t for me. That it was for a girl. And he started giving me shit, saying like, ‘Oh, got your first girlfriend, huh? Huh? Yeah, bout time.’ Then he said he was beginning to think I was growing up to be a gravy boat. That’s what he called me.”

Debbie starts running her fingers through John Wesley’s hair, possibly to soothe the young John she’s imagining now, possibly to be close to this John here, now.

“And, yeah, I tried to respond, but at twelve years old I was easily tangled up, and all I could say was, ‘Uh, uh,’ Then I remember he asked me, he said, ‘You calling up the tongue operator to dial “oh” on the girl’s pink telephone yet?’”
“Oh my god.”

“Yeah, he was always asking me things like that, or when I took showers, he’d ask if I was wining and dining myself in the bathroom. Shit like that. But it was funny, because this day, it was like he was trying to get me to talk to Julianne, but in his shitty way, and he said, ‘Flowers are nice, but you gonna have to go down. You spend an afternoon with your face between her legs, her hands on your head, let her run her fingers all through your hair, she’ll be yours for sure. She’ll love you.’ And I ain’t never forgot that.”

Debbie, aware of her hands on John Wesley’s head, exaggerates a moan. Smiles.

“But he gave me the flower anyway. And I went back to watching movies and he sat there and got high. And I had my first wet dream that night.”

“With Julianne?”

“Yeah. My face was in her lap. And I was staring between her legs. And I’d never seen, I mean, it was a place I’d only ever seen in flashes before on TV. I wasn’t really sure what I was looking at or what to do while I was there, and so I just sat with my face between her legs, her hands on my head, and I just stared. And she moaned and moaned with this like, like a voice from somewhere else, you know. It was really intense. Then I woke up convinced I’d pissed the bed.”

“Hahaha. Why was that terrifying?”

“Because, I’d never come before. I didn’t know what the fuck it was. I didn’t know what the hell’d happened. So I just started using my sheets to wipe off my legs, and I remember having this feeling like I suddenly knew something about the world I didn’t want to know, or that I even
thought was possible, if that makes sense. Like I wanted to undo what’d happened, but knew I couldn’t.”

“So what did you do.”

“Shit, once I finally realized what’d happened I made it happen again. If I couldn’t undo it, I was just going to keep doing it.”

Debbie starts to move her hands down John Wesley’s chest. “What about Julianne?”

“That morning I put the flower in my backpack and walked to school. I saw Julianne in class.
She had on these short jean shorts. I remember staring at the soft looking skin on her shaved legs. I hadn’t ever really noticed that girls at school were even starting to shave their legs before then, you know. And, but the funny thing is, I felt the urge to go up to her and apologize for dreaming of her in that way. And I wondered all day what she would think of what had happened. But I never said anything. I just sat and stared at her from across the room. Then we walked home together after school the way we usually did, but it wasn’t the usual way we walked home together at all. I was like suddenly conscious of every word out of my mouth, and, you know, all worried what she’d think of everything I said. So I didn’t say anything.”

“Did you give her the flower?”

“Nope. It was already smushed between some books by then, and it just stayed in my bag. I never gave it to her.”

“And she’ll never know.”

“Nope.”

“Oh, I wish I didn’t have to go to work.”

“Let’s leave,” John Wesley says.
“I have to go to work.”

“No, not like right now. I mean let’s leave. Let’s leave here. Let’s move away.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Let’s move anywhere you want to go.”

“You’re fucking crazy. We’re friends and all, but we just started sleeping together.”

“I ain’t looking for an easy roll, Debbie.”

“You ain’t come across one.”

“I mean it. I’m looking for a clutch-girl.”

“I told you, that’s the only kind of girl you’ll get with me.”

“Then I got it. I got what I need. You. Let’s just fucking split.”

“I have a job. And where the hell would we go?”

“You can do that job anywhere. You can do any job. Fuck this place. Fuck all this place.
I’m serious, let’s go.”

“Where, Johnny?”

“Anywhere. Anywhere you want, we want. Let’s just get in the car and start driving in
any direction we want.”

“Neither of us even have a car.”

“So.”

“See, you’re crazy. You’re out of your—”

John Wesley kisses her. “I have money. I’ll buy a car. I’ll pick you up after work and
we’ll drive until we’re out of gas and we’ll start a new life there.”
“New life? You’re ridiculous. I’ll tell you what, Johnny Boy. You show up tonight with a car—one that’s not stolen—and I’ll go with you.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. You show up with a—”

“Just pack your stuff up and I’ll figure something out.”

“You don’t even know my real name. You’ve never asked me my real name.”

“If I show up with a car tonight, you get in and tell me your real name and we’ll leave together.”

Debbie puts a hand on John Wesley’s ribcage, fingers laced between his ribs and her other hand on her own hip. “Plenty happening,” she says.

Then she rolls up onto her knees, slides a leg over John Wesley and sits on his chest, his arms pinned by her knees. She bends down to kiss him. She kisses his lips over and over. She starts to rock back and forth on his chest, just a little, then more and more, his chest hair getting wet. She keeps rocking.

“I want you to be able to smell me all day,” she says.
Debbie is standing in her room now, face bruised and bloody, dress torn, breathing heavy. Roman Jones is standing behind her, the shotgun back in his hands now. He hands Debbie her boots. She sits to put them back on. Jones sits down on the corner of the bed to wait.

Debbie walks to the small table by the door, her purse sitting on top, next to Eddie’s hammer. She picks her purse up. Jones has the shotgun pointed at her back.

It’s all starting to look like a reversion to when Debbie first walked in the room. Only the bruises on her face to show the passing of what has happened.

Debbie says okay, that she’ll take Jones to where John Wesley is, that she just needs to find out the address.

She picks up the hotel phone, dials information. She asks for the number for APD.

Jones cocks the shotgun, holds it pointed at her.
John Wesley standing in his bedroom, shirtless, his chest hair still wet, shiny.

His phone rings. “Yeah, hey… Uh, I don’t know… Why?… Laurie, I don’t know if it’s a good idea… Yeah, it’s all still here… I don’t—… Dammit, like a few dresses, some movies. I don’t know. T-shirts. Maybe even some underwear…” He opens a drawer. “Yeah, you have that yellow bra here… No, not tonight… Well I don’t really care.”

John Wesley walks out into the living room. Holding the phone with one hand, he’s trying to button his jeans with the other.

“Because—” He looks at the suitcase on the ground. He listens for five seconds, ten.

“Yeah, yeah, you know what, okay… Yeah, just come by… Tonight. Like, ten o’clock… Sure… I’ll be here… Look, I’m sorry for—… Okay. Yeah. I’ll see you tonight.”

John Wesley puts the phone down. He stands and stares at the suitcase. He does a micro-pantomime, thinking it through.

He picks his phone back up, dials.

He walks over to the front door. He turns his hand into a gun while he waits, points it at the couch.
The muffled sound of the phone ringing against his ear.

Someone on the other line picks up.

“Hey, Floyd there?… Let me talk to him.”
In an alleyway downtown, corner of Red River and Seventh Street, behind the Red Seven Club, Clef goes in through the back door, hangs in a corner.

The Red Seven Club is a triptych sort of place——one part bar, one part pool hall, one part dance club——half a dozen or so blocks from Fleet Street. The place is near full and amped up. Loud music, loud talk.

Across the room, Irving LeDell and a couple other guys are throwing darts.

Clef grabs a corner at the bar. Down the bar there’s scattered talk about girls and cigarettes and plans——always plans, everyone trying. Clef orders a beer, clocks the room.

People are dancing, some solo, some together, some with a we-just-met distance between them, some ass to crotch.

After a few minutes, Irving, dart in hand, downs a beer, puts the dart behind his ear and walks off to the bathroom.

Clef follows.
John Wesley and Floyd sitting in John Wesley’s living room. Cutting up the product on the coffee table. Suitcase next to them. Floyd getting high.

“There’s more, all in all, more than thirty thousand dollars worth here,” John Wesley says. “Even if we cut it down a sixth of the price, I can pay Jones the ten I owe him, and we’ll still have fifteen left over.”

“What’s that in halves, like—”

“No. Hell no. I’m taking the bullet. We split it ten for me, five for you.”

“I’ll take the bullet then.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Neither does this plan, man, I gotta—”

“Look,” John Wesley says, pointing at the suitcase. “I didn’t front CC any money for this. So if it gets stolen, I’m in the clear for at least a day or so. And I can send him on a chase, after someone else.”

“Are you kidding me, man? He’ll never fucking go for it. He’ll never believe you.”

“Laurie’s going to be here in a few minutes. She coming to get her stuff. Think about it. She’s the witness. She’ll be in the other room. When she is, you’ll come in, shoot, run off with
the suitcase. She’ll come out of the room, see me. It’ll look like I’ve been robbed. And if CC’s suspicious, she’ll be able to say she was here and knows I was shot.”

“Then what do I do with the case?”

“Just take it to Debbie’s place.”

“She know?”

“No. But that’s where I’ll go after. Then I’ve got Movie God Lane ready.”

“Lane can’t move this much.”

“No. Not on his own. But he can find someone who can. And so he’s going to get a cut of product for himself if and when he finds someone else to move the rest. Then you take the cash to Roman Jones at Fleet Street tomorrow.”

“Whoa, wait. Why me?”

“Because, if anyone we know, or the DeIbarras know, see me there, with Roman Jones, it’ll look suspicious. So you’ll go. And then you’re free to do whatever the fuck you want. But me and Debbie are gone gone gone.”

“Awe suki suki now,” Floyd says, mouth wide, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

John Wesley says, “But you gotta go.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. But here.” John Wesley hands him the .38 snub-nosed pistol he keeps in his boot.

Checks, six bullets. “You’re going to shoot me twice.”

“I’ve never shot a gun once before in my life. Now I gotta shoot my friend twice. This is some shit.”

“Twice will seem more real.”
“How about three? If two is more real, then three—”

“Twice.”

“Ha.”

“Just hang out around the corner. When Laurie gets here—”

“What’s up with her anyway?”

“She’s leaving tomorrow. ‘Finally,’ she says. Good for her, I guess. But when she gets here, I’ll get you.”

“Yeah, then you get got,” Floyd says, pointing the .38 at John Wesley, “Like Biggie said, ‘You come at me, you better kill me.’ Pop pop.”

John Wesley ducks. “Jesus, Floyd, put it away before you fuck up and accidentally really shoot someone. And that wasn’t Biggie, it was Pac.”

“Yeah, whatever. All I know is next time I see you I get to shoot you.” And Floyd walks backwards out of the apartment, giving John Wesley exaggerated crazy-eyes. “Thug life forever.”
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Clef pushes through the bathroom door. Irving is standing at the troff-style urinal, head back, moving with a drunken sway.

Clef steps up behind him, waits.

Irving finishes up, turns around. A one-second staring contest and Irving blinks first.

In what looks like one motion, Clef grabs the dart from behind Irving’s ear and jabs it quickly into Irving’s face, then pulls it back out.

Round two of the staring contest begins and goes till a small spot of red appears on Irving’s cheek and the blood starts to flower out.

Clef jabs Irving again and then again, in the cheek again and then the side of his neck.

Finally Irving starts defending himself, throwing his arms up, snaking his head around, ducking down. He even throws a few haymakers Clef’s way, landing one or two, but Clef has the upper hand.

Clef tosses the dart to the ground. He lifts a knee up into Irving’s stomach when Irving bends over. Then he lands a quick punch to the side of Irving’s head, then another, then slams him back into the wall of the one stall in the room.
Then Clef pulls Irving around into the stall and it turns into a pinball machine.

Inside the stall now, Irving on the ground, all accordioned up, trying to cover himself, his face covered in blood. Clef has him by one of his wrists.

Clef grabs the stall door, which leaves about an eighth of an inch of space when it’s closed. He opens it. Then he holds Irving’s hand up so that his thumb is jammed right up against where the door would close. Clef sets the stall door against Irving’s thumb. He leans back against the other wall, lifts his leg, holds his boot a couple feet from the door, ready to kick it closed, says, “Lie to me and then see how well you fare in life with only one opposable thumb.”

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” is all that comes out at first.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“No, don’t. I’m just an old man. I’m just a fucked up old man. I don’t know nothing. Don’t do this.”

“Tell me you don’t know anything again, I dare you.”

“Don’t do this.”

“How’d you know about John Wesley owing money? How’d you already know Floyd was dead?”

“I was at Fleet Street, just before I went to Lane. Those teenage boys came in.”

“Why were you there?”

“I was meeting Roman Jones.”

“Why?” Even with Irving’s cooperation, Clef pushes the stall door into Irving’s thumb to start the pain.
“Because. I was supposed to meet him and Floyd. To get the product from Floyd and assure Jones I could get the money for it. For him and—”

“How’d you know this was all going down?”

“Lane sent me there. Said if I—”

“If you acted like you could move all of it, that he’d give you a cut?”

“Yeah. I just want to get high. Please.”

“So Lane was going to keep it all.”

“I don’t know. Please don’t take me for smarter than I am.”

Clef lets Irving go.

Irving accordions back up again, on the bathroom floor, holding his hand, sobbing.

Behind Red Seven, Clef walks down the alleyway, towards Fleet Street. Before he even gets to the end of the block, Palafox comes out of the shadows. Clef stops, turns back, but on the other side of the alley way, CC, Rocco and a couple other DeIbarras are there. He turns back to Palafox, who’s right on him now, bloody bat in hand.

Behind Clef, the DeIbarras are at his back now, successfully backdropping him as a human wall, nowhere to go but face the truth here.

Palafox pulls a knife from his pocket, flicks it open, says, “Just tell me.”

And without any dark pomp and circumstance, Clef, knowing when he’s been beat, says, “You’ve obviously, by the stains on your bat, already figured Floyd and John Wesley out. All I can tell you is that what of CC’s that was taken was meant to be used to pay off someone else,
and that anyone else involved had no idea what was going to go down last night with your sister.”

“A man can’t let himself live in a shitty world and act like he had nothing to do with it being shitty,” Palafox says. “Whether they knew or not doesn’t excuse them. So, what else can you tell me?”
The stacked headlights on Roman Jones’ black DeVille cut through pure darkness on Bowery Row.

Debbie sits in the seat next to him, her purse in her lap. She’s nervously playing with the zipper, opening it a couple inches, then zipping it back.

“Please stop that,” Jones says. “That sound.”

“Sorry.” Debbie stops with the zipper left open, all the way this time.

“How much farther?”

“The cop said it was just after when the road goes down to two lanes, a little bit further up.”

The DeVille moves through the dark, red back lights torching the road a red trail.


The car turns off of Bowery Row.

“There, that house,” Debbie says. “The cop said it was the only house out here. So it must be that one.”
Jones cuts the headlights and pulls the DeVille into a dirt driveway, around the side of the house.

He’s leaning forward, trying his best to see in the dark dark night.

Next to him, behind his line of sight, Debbie reaches in her purse.

Jones turns off the driveway a bit, between two large trees and stops the car. He pulls the gearshift up, putting the car in park, turns the car off, leaves the keys in the ignition.

He turns to Debbie.

She pulls her hand quickly out of her purse, holding the hammer from before.

It’s one moment of hesitation, just long enough for Jones to see the hammer and understand, then Debbie swings it as hard as she can right into Jones’ face.

On the first swing there’s the wet sound of bone cracking.

Debbie swings again, into his head, into his temple. She screams, swinging, the hammer her only hope here.

Jones jerks his head back and around, puts his hands up, but Debbie’s determined.

Blood on the hammer makes the handle slip, turn in her hands. But she still won’t stop.

The back of the hammer cuts so much of Jones’ skin.

Debbie’s face is covered in his blood now.

When she finally tires and collapses back in her seat, crying, the hammer is still firmly gripped in her white-knuckled, blood-stained hand.

She won’t let go, not yet.
Daryl Movie God Lane is on the move, hustling through downtown, looking for an out, but just like everyone else, it’s time.

Lane turns a corner and Palafox is standing there with his flick knife right between the Lane’s legs.

“Hello,” Palafox says.

“Fuck.”

“This blade is sharp enough to peel your skin off,” Palafox says, and moves the knife up so Lane can feel it against the seam of his pants. “First I’m going to flay your prized ballyrag sack down there, layer by layer, while you watch. Then I’m going to wipe you off the map for keeps. I’ll let you decide how long.”

“How long what?”

“How long you want to stand here first. But it’s going to happen.”

“Seems like there should be a vote here or something,” Lane says. “But like Bobby D sang, ‘Democracy don’t rule the world.’ So let’s have it then.”

“Now?”
“Yeah, I’m done,” Lane says. “And if I’m already a dead man, then who am I in the world of the living?”

Lane stands tall, steadies himself. “In another world I’m a Movie God right now, everywhere, all the time. God of the great American enterprise. Movie God Lane. Sun of the Earth. Son of the screen. I don’t need the sun I’m such a star, in another life, in another world. God stuffed this world with fire and set it spinning. That’s me, burning from the inside.”

“You’re the best smith of the mother tongue, Lane. As long as I’ve known you.”

“Which has been a long time.”

“I’m going to let you go into the next world with all your pieces,” Palafox says. “But your time in this world is up.”

“I’ve heard it said that we have so much sin born in us that it’s no wonder we’re attracted to such horror. This is an unreal city. Devastation’s the order of the day because it’ll always be more spectacular than creation. Build a world just to tear it down. I mean, in a matter of seconds, all of this—” Lane makes a sweeping gesture with his arms out to both sides, as if to say the whole of anything in the world imaginable is what he’s referring to. And with this grand gesture he gets a little carried away, takes his eyes off Palafox for one second, and at the end of this second——full of grand gesturing by Lane and swift movement by Palafox——Lane feels Palafox’s knife heavy in his gut, the six-inch blade near all the way in.

Lane’s head nods forward, his shoulders slump.

Then Palafox pushes in slowly the last bit of the knife, makes sure Lane watches.
And keeping Lane propped up so gravity will pull everything out and down in a smooth slopping, Palafox slides that sharp blade to the side and Lane’s intestines and so much of his insides come flowing.

And then that’s that for Daryl Movie God Lane.

Fade to black.
John Wesley is still under the sink, favoring his bandaged shoulder, keeping it off the ground.

BDG is on the phone, trying to get a hold of someone, whoever at the police station.

Debbie walks in.

“John” is all she says.

John Wesley jerks up, winces a little from the fast movement. “Debbie.”

He stands, slowly, walks to her.

She takes a step back. She’s turning her head side to side.

John Wesley sees all the blood. “Oh my god,” he says, still walking to her.

She’s still backing up.

He looks at the hammer, the blood, her streaked face. “Debbie what’s going on? What happened?”

“Don’t” is all she says, and she points the hammer at him.

BDG walks into the room, the phone left off the hook in the room behind him.

“Johnny,” he says, “What’s going on?” Then he looks at this bloodied and brazen girl in his kitchen, just standing by the door, hammer held out.
“Debbie,” John Wesley says again, trying.

“You got her killed,” Debbie says.

“It was an accident. She wasn’t supposed to—”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s gone. And it’s because of you.”

“She wasn’t supposed t—”

“What did you think would happen? What were you going to tell me? What the fuck were you going to say to me? When were you going to tell me that you killed a girl?”

“Debbie, I didn’t—”

“It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter that the gun was in Floyd’s hand. You put it there. And you put her in your room. And you told Floyd to shoot. And the bullet hit her. And you did it.”

“Johnny,” BDG says, “what’s she talking about?”

“I don’t know,” he says to BDG, but it could be to both of them.

“Yes you do. Yes you do. What exactly were you going to say to me when you picked me up?”

“I don’t know,” he says again.

“Johnny.”

“Tell him, Johnny. Tell BDG what you did.”

“Debbie.”

“Tell him.”

“I can’t.”

“Of course you can’t. What could you possible say?”
“Debbie,” BDG says. “What’s going on?”

“He killed Laurie. He asked her to come over. And he asked Floyd to shoot him. And he asked everyone to act like it was a robbery so he could steal whatever belonged to CC DeIbarra. And he lied to everyone. And he killed Laurie.”

“Johnny, is this—”

“He did it,” Debbie says.

And John Wesley just stands there. In front of the eyes of the two people in the world willing to love him. And all he can do is stand and wait.

Then, with Ragland Debbie standing there, watching, and with Clef Holland downtown, lost, and with Palafox DeIbarra driving down Bowery Row on the way to BDG’s, and with Officers Wheeler and McCorquodale driving that same road, reds and blues flashing, other drivers pulling out of the way, wondering where the marked car’s headed, where the conflict is, if they’ll see it on the news when they get home, if they’ll read about it in the papers the next morning, happy it’s not in their life but readying themselves to maybe learn some kind of life lesson if they do hear more about where these cops are headed till the lights are gone, and traffic resumes, and a late dinner is made, and most of them will probably forget about this because they’ve seen it before, because you get used to it, at least from that distance——with all this being true, BDG hits John Wesley.

BDG hits him in the face. And it’s that one of a kind sort of hit that has anger in it, sure, has resentment and maybe even a little bit of requital, but what it really is? It’s disappointment backed by self-condemnation.
It’s the way a parent feels when the kid has broken the parent’s heart and life’s out of lessons to be learned, and this is it, and the parent has given up, and it’s no longer comeuppance but rather an end of forbearance, and the parent is blaming themselves, but this is all there’s left to do.

And BDG hits Johnny. And he hits him again. And he sees both of Johnny’s eyes immediately start to black and bruise, and he sees Johnny’s lip split open.

But he doesn’t feel it when Johnny’s jaw breaks, or his nose. All BDG feels is love, but in the hardest way, with nothing but letdown and heartbreak left.

Debbie watches BDG hitting John Wesley and does nothing about it till it looks like BDG might kill him, and then she steps up, grabs BDG’s arm just enough to snap this and stop him.

And Johnny lies on the ground, bleeding, barely breathing, with no part of him moving but his rapidly beating heart, hanging on, pumping blood that’s just spilling out onto the floor, through his nose, through his mouth, through the cuts on his head, and getting lost inside, from his broken ribs, filling his chest and his punctured lung.

And once he’s done, from his one good eye, there’s no doubt that BDG is crying. There’s no doubt what this is and what’s been done.

The things that can’t be taken back. The things that can’t be undone.
BDG’s Crown Vic heading down Bowery Row, driving Ragland Debbie home. But where’s home now, right? I mean, goodbye Yellow Brick Road.

And of course Debbie wants something from BDG. Needs something, anything from him to help make sense of all this. She asks why and BDG just shakes his head. But he’ll try.

“Debbie, when I was young, just starting out as a Texas Ranger, there was a prison in East Texas called the Ellis Unit. The Ellis Unit had this boy named Charlie Stanton locked up, serving a ten-stretch for armed robbery. Held up a pawnshop near here. Couldn’t’ve been more than twenty years old when he went in. One night, back, years ago, a call comes in giving state law enforcement the heads-up that three inmates had escaped from Ellis. A couple minutes later, an update comes in saying one of the inmates was shot and killed running. Then the second of the three surrendered. But Charlie Stanton was gone.”

Debbie has a damp washrag in her hand and is trying her best to clean the blood off her arms.
“But even more than that,” BDG says, “the warden was asking for extra help to come in to help stand guard around the perimeter of the prison in the case of additional runners while they regained control inside the prison because the main electricity had been cut.”

“Did you go?”

“No. We were too far away. They were asking for local guys from the sheriff’s department, police and state highway patrol in the area, just to prevent full chaos. What’d happened was Charlie’d worked his way into maintenance, found a hole in security and’d figured out how to cut the electricity to the prison. Which is what he did, then cut his way out through the fence with the help of the other two guys. See, the other two guys were pawns to Stanton. They were chumps. Dumb enough to go along, not crazy enough to get gone for real. It takes a certain level of heart in a weird way to escape. You have to want it.”

Debbie undoes her seatbelt and scrubs at the blood on her neck and chest.

“The guy who got shot and killed, maybe he wanted it but just happened to be last through the fence. I don’t know. But the guy who surrendered, he didn’t have enough to run for. Didn’t have enough on the other side to make it worth chancing a bullet in the back of the head. But Stanton. He’d have run clear up to the Canadian border if he’d had to.”

“Why’d he run. What did he have?”

“That was the mystery. Still is in a way. Charlie Stanton was doing ten years. He’d already eaten seven of those years, and was up for parol in one more. No one had the slightest clue why he’d up and run. But even more still, why’d he organize such an elaborate escape. It’d be one thing to see an open window and jump out it walking by. Freedom constantly pulls on any person locked up. But why the plan?”
In BDG’s kitchen, the slow pulse of dripping water from the leaking pipe emits a steady cadence as the drops fall into a puddle under the sink. It echoes between the walls—the thrumming of the echo defining the hollow space in which it exists.

Between the clot of drying blood in his cracked nose and his can’t-be-moved broken jaw, John Wesley’s doing everything he can just to breathe. He probably wants to touch his face, feel how bad it all is, but his hands are cuffed to the table. And his face is so swollen, it’s hard to imagine he can see much, can see the red and blue flashing lights pulling into BDG’s driveway.

In the car, BDG still trying, always.

“So after it was clear that Charlie’s gotten fully away and gone, I’m still not involved in it in any way yet at that point. I’m just hearing the calls go out. But I remember not being able to sleep that night thinking about it all. Then two days later, a car reported stolen is found abandoned on highway seven. So it starts to look like Charlie Stanton might be making his way to Austin from the east. So now I do get a call from the warden. He requests help monitoring the highways with a list of newly reported stolen cars. Which is standard. But it also turns out that Stanton has an old girlfriend who lives in town, in a trailer in a park down on South Slaughter Road. Warden asks to have someone go watch her at her place, make sure Stanton ain’t about to show up there. Well, I get this strange feeling, and so I decide to go out there myself.”

Debbie pulls down the passenger-side visor, looking for a mirror. No mirror.
“I go over there. I see the car registered in her name parked outside her address, no other car. I drive around the park for a little while, don’t get the feeling he’s around, so I go to talk to her. I remember her name was Lizzy Rutheart. I could tell right away it seemed like Lizzy’d been waiting for someone like me to show up asking her about Charlie. But not in a worried suspicious way. More like the inevitability of it was a heavy heavy weight on her.”

Debbie wipes at her face.

“She’d heard of the escape on the news. But she said he hadn’t tried to contact her. And I believed her. There was a sadness to hear voice, her face. I had no doubt. Now being that her word had no bearing on whether or not Charlie Stanton was going to try and go to her for help, we decided to put a couple deputies on her house in shifts. Just to keep an eye on it.”

Debbie wipes at her hair, but by now the washrag is so blood-soaked that it’s doing no good.

“The next day, early in the morning Charlie holds up a pawnshop on the far east edge of town, on Riverside way out near the airport. So we all figure he’s making a run for the airport and call for it to be locked down. All flights, all entrances, everything. By now, enough time’s passed we don’t know if he might be in there, so we just started sweeping the entire place. And I’m on my way there when I hear on the radio what went down at the pawnshop. And I’m trying to listen when I also get a call. So on the radio, I’m catching fragments about how Charlie walked into the pawnshop and asked the shopkeeper to see a gun, a pistol. Specifically a .357 magnum that’s sitting in a case. Over the walkie-talkie, I’m getting a report of a call that came in about a suspicious man fitting the description of Charlie that went up on the TV. Someone in a trailer park on South Slaughter’d seen a man poking around a couple cars and a fishing boat. On
the radio I hear that by the time the pawnshop clerk realized why this guy in his store looked
familiar, Charlie had already pulled a single bullet from his pocket, .357 cartridge, slotted it into
the pistol and pointed it at the clerk’s head. Then he demanded a piece of jewelry out of another
case in the shop. And once he got it, he backed out of the store, set the gun on the ground and
left. That was all he took.”

Debbie’s blonde hair is now streaked with red.

“I turned my car around, told the dispatcher to put the deputy by Lizzy’s place on the cars
and fishing boat reported to make sure Charlie wasn’t hiding in them, and then to have him meet
me at Lizzy Rutheart’s trailer.”

Close to downtown now, in the passing street lamps, Debbie’s hair almost looks pink.

“I enter the trailer with the deputy and Lizzy is hysterical. She’s screaming and crying
and trying to tell us something, but we can’t make out a word she’s screaming. But she’s pointing
to the back room. I manage to calm her down enough for her to inform us that her fiance keeps
his shotgun in the closet.”

Debbie puts the washrag in her lap.

“So we draw our pistols and square off at the entrance to the hallway. The deputy calls
this all in, makes sure to have someone come watch the back window. Then we take aim on the
bedroom door and call for Charlie to come out. We’re hollering for him. After a few seconds the
door opens just a crack, and we hear Charlie, he’s telling us he’s going to come out. I tell him on
the count of three, to come out slowly and hands first.”

She wipes at some of the blood on her dress.
“I’m worried about what’ll happen if he startles me, so I loosen my trigger finger just a bit. And I call out the count. I say one, two, and just before I get to three Charlie steps out. The deputy with me jumps and his gun goes off. The single shot hits Charlie in the throat, and he collapses.”

She sees how little it’s helping and stops.

“He bleeds out within seconds.”

She lets go of the washrag.

“Didn’t have a gun in his hands or anything. Just that piece of jewelry.”

She’s starts to cry.

“We found out later that Charlie had learned that Lizzy, who’d gotten tired of waiting for Charlie to get out, got engaged to her boyfriend, and Charlie just couldn’t take it. All those people died and had their lives wrecked and even Charlie died, all so he could steal a wedding ring and give it to a girl who was already engaged to another man. And I imagine, with how smart the guy was, that Charlie didn’t even fool himself into thinking the odds of staying out of prison were in his favor. I imagine he knew he was probably going to get caught and go back for life this time. But I also imagine that, to Charlie, without the hope of Lizzy, a life sentence was just a waste of time. That he could be as free as the state would ever let him, but without her to look forward to, nothing was worth living for. That’s true punishment. Or, at least it was to Charlie. I’ll never truly understand why Charlie did what he did. But I do understand that, to him, it was for love. It was for Lizzy. And I know it wouldn’t be the craziest thing a man’s ever done to be with a girl, even if it wasn’t really being with her at all.”
The car pulls into the Fleet Street parking lot.

BDG pulls around to room 111.

He stops the car. Inside it’s totally still.

BDG will sit as long as Debbie needs to.

She turns to him but says nothing.

“APD is going to come talk to you,” BDG says.

“I know.”

“Anything you might need, you can call me.”

“I know.”

“Debbie, I’m sorry this happened.”

“I know,” is all Debbie says.

Inside the the Fleet Street diner it looks like business as usual. Same as outside, nighttime busyness beginning.

Debbie opens the car door and steps out.

She walks around to BDG’s side of the car.

He cuts the headlights and rolls down the window.

Debbie leans in.

“Thank you,” is all she says now and walks away.
Does it even matter in the end what really happened?

Of course, you can tell yourself whatever stories you want, but Laurie Merielle Delbarra will never get to leave. Not everyone gets to choose what to do with the rope: swing or stand still, sink or swim from here?

Either way.

Ragland Debbie comes out of room 111. She’s wearing a new dress. Her hair is back to blonde and in a low ponytail.

In her hands she’s holding her small tin makeup case.

She walks away from the door without locking it.

She passes by Fleet Street diner without looking in.

She walks away, under the highway bridge without looking back.

In an downtown alleyway, under dark garbage bags next to a small wooden fence by a dumpster, Debbie fishes out the suitcase.

She sets it on the ground, unlatches and opens it.
Kneeling in front of the suitcase, Debbie pulls out the .38 snub-nosed pistol and flips open the cylinder. Four bullets.

She looks through the two empty chambers and sees the concrete ground through them.

It’s just a gun, it always was. But of course it means more. Of course there’s more than the ground to be seen through those empty chambers.

Debbie pulls the picture of her mother out of the tin makeup case.

On the back of the picture is written: “Over the field where April rain / Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain” H.M.

Debbie knows whether or not her mother wrote those words there, if it was her favorite American poem.

Or maybe she doesn’t.

Debbie looks back at the gun in her hand, at the two empty chambers. All the things those empty circles can remind us of. One a bloodied circle forever torn into the fabric of someone’s furniture. The other an empty hole in a wall. All the layers inside the wall you never knew were in there that you can suddenly see. What like a bullet can undeceive, right?

Under that Melville quotation on the back of Debbie’s picture, in different handwriting: “April is the cruellest month.”

It’s almost May now. Just a few more days.

Debbie closes the revolver’s cylinder, puts the gun back in the suitcase along with the picture of her mother.

She walks out of the alley onto Congress avenue, empty makeup case in one hand, suitcase in the other.
She cuts her way through downtown, near emptied now except for the people who have nowhere to go.

Debbie walks all the way to Lady Bird Lake, which cuts the southern edge of downtown. She stops in the middle of Congress Avenue Bridge, high above the water.

Under her the dark water is tinged the slightest blue by the near-dawn sky.

Debbie sets the suitcase worth thirty thousand dollars on the bridge’s railing in front of her. She holds it still with one hand, holds herself against the railing with the other.

She looks over.

The seconds go by, thousands of them, and bit by bit the water turns from black to blue and starts on with the yellows and reds.

With one hand holding the suitcase and one holding the rail, Ragland Debbie looks over the edge of the bridge. She can’t help but think about how different today will be depending on which hand lets go first.

How many things that can’t be undone do you think would be sitting at the bottom of that lake if someday, someone drained it?
Bibliography


