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I was riding high. I could see the legs of other drivers, the inside of their cars as I passed them. The legs of women. The windshield was close to me and expansive in vision. The first few miles were like driving a spaceship. It was beautiful. I had to pick up my plates and buy new tags. The DMV in Boulder City was closer than Vegas, and the lines were shorter. I set the clock above the dashboard.

The building wasn't busy. In the line next to me stood an ugly man. He stared at me. He had this face behind these thick bifocals, which enlarged his eyes to dull brown moons. When I looked back at him he squinted and studied my face. He stepped aside from the line, sat down and watched me. I paid for the plates. I sat at one of the tables and applied the tags to the plates. I figured he was some type of prostitute.

I looked out at the van. Dark green. My favorite color. It was glorious. I watched the guy pull on his jacket as I stood. An Army jacket. It was hot outside. He said something to me when I left the building. I ignored him. Outside, I could hear him coming up behind me. I gripped the plates in my hand like a discus, ready to spin and cut him.

“Excuse me.”

I kept walking. It didn't bother him. He was used to it. He was used to being treated like this. He knew he was worthless but he accepted it, the way someone accepts being born without a limb. He called my name. I turned around. He was right in front of me. Then I read the last name above his sleeve on the front of his jacket. He was smiling ear to ear. Something was wrong about it. It was an eager smile, an erection seconds before being mounted.

"That's your name, right?"

"Right."

He threw his head back and wailed. I stepped off a couple of feet. He clapped his hands together and threw his arms open.

"It's me, man! Arthur!"

I stared at him. He spread his arms.

"Hey, man. Give me a hug!"

He ran up and hugged me. He smelled like Brylcreem and sweat. I was frozen. He let go.

"Don'tcha remember, man? Grampa? Me? The whole family?"

I got it. He was the son of my father's old man. I remembered them coming down for a visit when I was nine years old. My mother never let anyone stay in contact with that side of the family because she and my father said they were crazy, and I'd forgotten them. I remembered why the name Boulder City was so familiar. They lived in Boulder City. I shook my head.

"Art. Shit, man. I'm sorry. How are you? How's everybody?"

He shook my hand hungrily.

"Good, man! Real good!"

My brain scanned itself for memory of these people. There they were, every detail. It came together. Their vacation to our house in Phoenix, our swimming pool, my grandfather's new wife he'd met in a nuthouse, her long armpit hairs my brother and I laughed about. The two of them at our table drinking pot after pot of coffee and chain-smoking. The collective insanity of their clan, the three mutated, screwed up kids and the incestuous feel they exchanged. There they were, one fucked up group. One ugly family. Ugly from the insanity.

I tailed him. When I glanced at him through his mirror he was smiling at me, and his mirror was full of large teeth. At a stop sign he let cars go out of turn to make sure I was right behind him. I could have made a sharp left and lost him a few times, but I didn't.

I followed him down a dead end street where he parked. The houses were poor and in shambles. Every yard had a broken down car in front. I stepped out of the van and looked around. He was smiling right in front of me.

"This is our cul-de-sac."

I stared from house to house. The clotheslines, the dead autos, the stained clothing drying dead in the hot wind shameless and ugly, the people on their

front porches smoking, sweating. I stared at the mailboxes and something came out of me involuntarily.

“Culture sac.”

He laughed and clapped his hands.

“Culture sac! Ha! That’s a great one!”

We walked onto the front yard toward the door. He stopped and turned. He grabbed my shoulders. He was out of breath.

“Alright. I’ll go inside. You climb the tree and when I bring them out, you jump down and yell, SURPRISE!”

“No.”

I wiped his mouth spray from my cheek. He sucked his lips and wet them again.

“Okay. Okay. I got it. You hide behind the side of the house and surprise everyone.”

I stared at him until the silence broke him. He stepped off.

“Okay, okay. Just wait here.”

I waited. An old lady came out of her house across the street and pointed at me. She yelled.

“ARE YOU SATAN?”

“Yes.” I said.

She ran back inside.

Art walked out of the house and leaned against their car. He folded his arms and waited.

The door opened. There he was. Fat, greasy, and in his boxer shorts. He stared at me. There was a long silence. Then his wife was out there. She wore a nightgown, the same one from my memory.

The old man smiled.

“JEFFERY! MY GRANDSON!”

He walked out and hugged me. He stank. His wife smiled at me and went back inside. I told him it was good to see him again. He looked at my wheels.

“Hey, man! You drivin’ that?”

I laughed. “I just drove it off the lot. Art spotted me down at the DMV. I forgot you lived here.”

He walked over to the Dodge. He opened the door and sat behind the wheel.

“Good God! This is a great van!”

I didn’t know why he was so into it. Something was on the back burner of the collective consciousness of these people. They all shared the same brain, his brain. He jumped out and closed the door.

“Got your plates, huh?”

“I did. Do you have a Phillips screwdriver?”

“Hell, yes! Arthur! Get your nephew a screwdriver! Right now!”

“Yes, Dad!”

Art ran inside. The old man turned to me and beamed.

“See that, Jeffery? That’s LOYALTY!”

“Have you guys always lived here?”

“Do you know what LOYALTY is, Jeffery?”

“What are you talking about?”

He had no power over me. I wasn’t afraid to leave. He didn’t like it. It scared him. He was insane. I told him I had to make time.

“Like hell. Come on in! You can talk to your old grampa for awhile.”

He put his arm on my shoulder as we walked.

“I haven’t seen you for years and years. I’m sorry about your mother. She was a good woman.”

My mother always said he was a control freak. She hated him.

Their house was small and hot, and it smelled like body odor. I sat across from him at the table. He looked at his wife.

“Remember Jeffery?”

She coughed up a phlegm ball and swallowed it.

“Yeah. I remember. Hi, Jeffery.”

“Hi there.”

He glanced out to the van.

“You got insurance for that thing?”

“No.”

I’d never had insurance, wasn’t even aware of it. I thought it was a weird question. He asked me what it was that I was doing with my life. I told him I had left Phoenix and traded my car for the van on impulse after I’d crossed the dam, that I was driving the freeways without aim. He sneered. He said that Art had just returned from Panama, and his daughter was also in the army. When I asked about his oldest son, he said he was pumping gas for awhile then he quit and started living in the desert.

“A place away from it all, huh?”

“No, goddamn it! I mean literally living in the desert. He’s a bum!”

“Oh.”

His wife coughed up another one and swallowed it. Art ran in with the Phillips.

“You okay, Mom? Jeff, here’s what you need.”

The old man stared out the window.

“Jeffery, why don’t you go out and put on your plates. Arthur, help him.”

I took the screwdriver and told Art I could handle it. Before I made it out the door I heard the old man tell him to make sure they got their screwdriver back. I didn’t bother with it. I could put the plates on and toss the screwdriver on the front lawn from the driver’s seat. I screwed the plate on the front. I wanted to see if the cassette player worked. I dug a cassette from my backpack and walked around to the front of the van. I went for the key but it was gone. I didn’t

remember pulling it from the ignition. I felt my pockets. Nothing. I knew I didn't have it on me when I went inside. I walked to the front door.

"Did I leave my key in there?"

He held it up.

"Yeah. Got the plates on?"

"Not yet. I wanted to see if the tape player works."

I walked in to get the key. He told me I could have it when I returned the screwdriver. He was insane. I walked back out thinking about him taking the key. I walked to the rear of the Dodge and fought a rusty screw. The head was stripped. Art walked out and leaned against his car, arms folded, and watched me. It was strange, the whole mood of these people had shifted to hostile. I didn't even know them.

I beat the bolt and worked it loose. As I was tightening down the plate I noticed the number: NIL 741. I thought it had character. I heard a car pull up behind me and stop. Someone stepped out, and I heard the unmistakable jingling of loose objects and hard shoes. I stood and turned, face to face with a cop. He opened his mouth.

"How are you doing, sir?"

"I'm fine."

"Do you have your driver's license?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it."

"What did I do?"

"Your license, please."

"I didn't do anything."

"Your license."

He grinned at me, nothing friendly about it. I stared at him.

"Why are you doing this?"

He stalled. I looked over at Art. He stared at his shoes. The cop answered.

"It's just routine. Strange vehicle in the neighborhood. Just checking you out. Please cooperate."

He ran my license. Then he asked about the van. I told him I'd just driven it off the lot. I showed him the forms.

"I see, well it's all in order. What about insurance?"

"No insurance. I figured I had a little time."

"You figured wrong. I won't, well I can't cite you because this is not a moving violation. You will not drive this van another mile uninsured. Tomorrow have your grandfather take you to get insurance. Do you have money for insurance?"

"Yes. How did you know he was my grandfather?"

He paused there, and he was slimy and beautiful, if just for that one moment in his whole rotted life. But he answered.

"Have a good day, sir."

Then he was gone. Art heard the whole thing. He was already inside. I walked in and grabbed my key off the table. The old man yelled at me.

“Now wait a goddamned minute! I did not call the police, Jeffery!”

It occurred to me to flip the table over onto him. The hag coughed up another one.

“Now look, your grandmother’s all upset. Come back and have some coffee with your family.”

I stepped to the edge of the table.

“You people are fucking insane. Secondly, whatever that is, she’s not my grandmother.”

Art started to swell on me. He stood up. I shook my head at him. The old man told me if that cop saw me driving without insurance he would lock me up. That was the new law. Then he told me the insurance offices were closed until the next day, so I would have to stay the night. I told him I would call Roll’s mom and have her pick me up and I’d stay at their place. He buckled. I had two friends in Las Vegas, so he didn’t quite have me. But he said it was a bad area where he lived and someone could slash my tires, and I knew what he meant. He asked me to sit with them. I told him he was a disgusting human being.

He pointed to the chair.

“SIT DOWN!”

I did. His wife was on her third pack of cigarettes. I cleared my throat. Art sat next to me. He was smiling again. I thought about how quickly life changes gears. The old man lit up.

“I want to tell you a story, Jeffery.”

Art set a cup of burnt coffee down in front of me. I slid it to the edge of the table. The old man began his story.

“Have you ever wondered why your mother never wanted you to visit us?”

“Not anymore.”

“My daughter, Allison, was a beautiful young woman. Once she even modeled for a Sears catalogue. She was never completely normal. She had a few failed marriages. Then it was fella to fella. One night at a party she met a man, it was in Chicago, I think. Anyway, she fell in love with this man. That night he began courting her regularly. In a few more weeks, they bedded down. Well, to make a long story quicker, he got her pregnant and left her. It was the crushing blow. Wouldn’t even talk to her, even when he found out she was with child. She couldn’t take it anymore. She lived on the streets and whored herself for money, for a blanket in the park with a bum, for drugs, mostly drugs, for shelter, for company, for anything.”

He shook his head and stared at the ashtray sorrowfully.

“She was so out of her mind she convinced herself that the baby she was carrying was either the devil’s child or an alien child or some horseshit like that, but if she aborted it, she’d burn in Hell.”

Art smiled at me. I looked back to the old man.

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

He took a long drag.

“Because. That baby was you.”

I looked at the phone on the table. He put out his cigarette. I looked at him.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Hear me out. Haven’t you ever wondered why you looked nothing like your brothers or sisters or, and this is said respectively, your own mother?”

Of course I had. My mother was beautiful. As for the rest of my family not looking like me, I’d pawned it off on luck, for myself and my mother. I had always thought that something was off, maybe more than luck.

He kept talking.

“Now listen. I know this ain’t easy to hear. Your father, my son, married Johanna in Illinois, met her at a bar. A bad place to meet someone.”

I asked where he met his wife, since I already knew. The table froze.

“In a coffee shop. Allison happened upon your father a few months after she went insane. Your mother had already given birth to five children, your family, when she met him. Her husband before committed suicide by handgun at their table one night while he was drunk. See, Sonny couldn’t have a child of his own and he wanted one. They took Allison in at their home in Peoria and kept her going until she had you. That was her price for being fed and sheltered for eight or nine months. From there she whored around the country. There were two other kids she let go before you, between marriages. We know of one, a girl. Well, a woman now. Her name’s Denise. But it was the last one, the man in Chicago that broke her. So, after years passed Allison showed up here at my door. We took her in, fed her, even got her a job down at a pizza shop doing dishes. We bought her new teeth and cleaned up her act. Then she started complaining about not being able to bring a man here and having relations with him. I told her she was under my roof and I had rules. Live by them or there’s the door. She left. She’s still here in the state, in Las Vegas. We know where she is. She’s on the street. She’s beyond help.”

He asked me if I was clear on all of it. I knew he was right. I believed him because he was right. Looking back, I’d felt it my whole life.

“That’s why you weren’t allowed to spend time here. Johanna was too afraid you’d find out.”

The old man smiled. I stared at him.

“And you were just dying to tell me.”

“We thought you should know.”

He lit up, dialed the phone. There was an answer, he said to hang on, your brother just sat down, then set the receiver on the table. He nodded at me.

“That’s for you.”

I answered slowly. It was a woman’s voice.

“Jeffery?”

“Yes.”

“I’m your sister!”

“So I hear.”

She laughed. There was a strange and immediate bond with the voice. It was warm and familiar. We made some jokes toward the awkwardness. They stared at me from around the table, they glared at me. She said he had been in touch with her for a couple of years. They'd mailed her pictures. She was trying to be tactful in asking me if they weren't insane, if I was close to them or if I cared about them.

I said hell no, and her laugh was wild.

"Me, either."

"Had you worried, huh sis?"

"Yes. Thank god!"

"Yes."

She asked were they at least on the up and up. I said no. She picked up on everything.

"Are there ears all around you right now?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a photographic memory like I do?"

"Yes."

"Good. This is my phone number..."

"Got it."

"Call me back tonight?"

"Impossible."

"Tomorrow night?"

"No matter what."

The old man grew uncomfortable. He grumbled loudly that he wanted to talk to her. She laughed.

"Christ, he sounds like an asshole right now."

"True colors."

"Give me back to him. And Jeffery, I'm going to say this and I hope you don't think I'm a flake, but I love you."

"Right back at you."

I held the phone out to the old man. He snatched it away. In my eyes he saw that he'd lost whatever game he'd been playing. I listened to him talking to her.

"What's that? Oh. Well, he's about six one, brown hair down past his shoulders, needs to get it cut, especially the front, you know in my day only girls had long bangs, anyway, he is tan and kinda skinny—what's that? Well sure, whenever he's here I'll have him call you. Your what? No, I think we should feel him out before we give him your address or last name, you know, keep the blood solid. What was that? Sure, I can hold on."

A moment passed. The whole table heard the sound. It was loud, like a blow horn. The noise jerked the old man's head back. He slammed the phone down on the hooks and cupped his ear.

"SONOFABITCH! I'M DEAF! I'M DEAF!"

The old hag coughed up another one. Art ran to his father's side, almost in tears, "DAD! ARE YOU GONNA BE ALRIGHT?"

"GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME!"

Art returned to his mother. The old man held his ear and looked at me.

"Loyalty," I said.

He went to the bathroom.

They had a bad schedule. Up around the clock, smoking and drinking coffee. Art didn't drink coffee or smoke. He just sat there with them. At three in the morning I was still thinking about my sister. I was on the hide-a-bed in the living room. The old man called to me from the table.

"Jeffery, we're going to the El Dorado for coffee."

"You're fucking kidding me."

"WATCH YOUR GODDAMN FILTHY LANGUAGE AROUND YOUR GRANDMOTHER!"

"I'm not going anywhere."

Art jumped up and ran to my bed, his fists clenched.

"Oh yes you are!"

He was shirtless. I looked at his stomach.

"You're fat, Art. A lot of good the army did you."

He looked to his parents. The old hag finally spoke.

"He is not. He's handsome."

She put her arms out.

"Come here, honey."

He walked over to her and knelt. The guy was 26 years old.

I looked around the room. I was about to break. The couch was sickening. It smelled like I was lying in a giant armpit. One not unlike the hairs that were scratching her son's bare shoulders, her quietly singing to him in between the phlegm balls. I thought about my mother never wanting me to discover the truth, hiding me from these idiots. I loved her more than ever. The old man hissed from the table.

"Get up, Jeffery!"

"Sorry."

Art called from his mother's stink.

"Get up!"

It was a muffled, pathetic shriek. I knew if I left or tried to sleep in the van the cops would be on me in nothing flat. The old man would love to call them. These cockroaches were night owls. I'd have to outwait them. I told them to head out and let me sleep. The old man said he didn't trust me in his home. I couldn't believe where I was, the point in time. These people. I came from this, these roots. I wondered about my real grandmother, and I wondered if he'd killed her. Somehow I sensed it. He called out again.

"Well, Jeffery. We're sacrificing our evening for you. Hope you're happy."

I didn't say anything. I watched them from a hole in the blanket, from the stink of it. Art jumped up, electrified and stupid.

"Hey, Dad. I have handcuffs in my room. We can handcuff him to the couch while we go out. He's tired, anyway."

I talked from under the blanket.

"Art, you even touch me and you're history."

Everybody started yelling at me from the table. I pulled my shirt over my ears and went to sleep.

It was a few hours later. The sun was coming in the smoke-stained window, shedding its golden grace in penlights on that hellhole. The nutcases were both snoring from their room. I grabbed my key from the table. Art was sleeping in front of the front door. I rolled him over with my foot. He scratched his gut and fell back to sleep. Some soldier. I walked out and took my bike from the van along with the forms. I slammed the door and locked it. While I was pedaling up the sidewalk I heard the front door crash open. I looked back. Art in his underwear.

He yelled:

"I'M TELLIN' DAD! I'M TELLIN' DAD!"

I rode out into the street, up toward a shopping center. The whole situation was fucked.

I found an insurance office. I had an hour to kill. Next door, I had another key cut, and stuck it in my wallet. I rode around and checked out the town. Nothing. Back at the insurance place I sat in the air conditioning. I stank from the house. I was insured within 15 minutes. I paid the down payment and put the insurance card in my wallet. They would never see any more of my money. I rode back. I had the feeling of a man released from prison, from an asylum. I found a small café and ordered a coffee and an egg on a bagel. Bliss. It was hot outside and I was tired. I figured I would make Utah in awhile. I threw my bike in the van and locked it. I was afraid one of the nutcases might flatten a tire or break a window. The van was solid. There was something worse.

A man walked out of the house. He was well dressed.

He walked up to me and put his hand out. I didn't shake it.

"Hi, Jeff. Remember me?"

"No."

"Uncle Walt. Last time I saw you, you were only seven."

"Alright. I remember. How's Rhonda?"

"Hey. You do remember. She's home. We just had our second baby. A girl."

I looked at him. He grinned.

"Let me guess. You went out to get insurance so you can get out of here."

I nodded. He slapped me on the back.

I put my hand out and we shook.

“Congratulations on your second baby. And the first one.”

“Thanks. Well, Art’s sick. His mother’s in his room right now rubbing ice on his back.”

“Jesus.”

“Do you know why I came over, Jeffery?”

“I think so.”

“Prepare yourself.”

I stepped inside.

The old man was at the table smoking. She was sitting at the corner chair of the table, across from him. She glanced at me and took a slurp from her cup. She smoked with her legs crossed. It was my forehead, my facial structure, my features, the same shape and curves of my feet and body. There was my nose. She wore a long bed shirt and men's socks pulled over her calves. Her hair was scraggly. She had no teeth. I looked at her skull. My hairline. Walt looked at me. I sat on the couch. He told me he'd picked her up downtown in a park. The old man looked at his daughter and pointed to me.

"Allison. That's your son sitting right over there."

She glanced at me again and laughed bitterly. The old man frowned at her.

"Don't you even want to say hello to your own son?"

She had a hoarse grumble.

"Fuck him! I'm no good at this mothering shit!"

She was right, but I didn't care. I walked up to her, the same way a man would approach another man cut in half by a train, another man dying whom he didn't want to touch or know, but a man he wanted to look upon in order to check himself, to know he still had life. She looked up at me. There was nothing familiar outside of our blood. She gave me an irritated grunt.

"Okay, here, come here."

She pulled me down and kissed me on the cheek. She stank, a body odor so foul it was almost tropical. She told me she'd see me in Paradise someday. I stood up. I couldn't stop looking at her, while she grew hostile. She asked me

what I wanted from her. I drew back and spat in her face. The old man screamed. She wiped it off and drank her coffee. I spat in her hair. She jumped up and ran out the back door, behind where the old man sat and would sit for the rest of his days. Walt ran after her.

The old man yelled at me.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH! THAT IS NO WAY TO TREAT YOUR MOTHER!”

I picked up the coffee pot and cocked it back. I aimed for his head. He ducked, and it flew out the open door behind him. Walt tackled her in the yard. The old man begged me to leave. Not a sound came from Art’s room. I walked out of the nightmare and stepped into the Dodge. It started right up. On the passenger seat was the screwdriver where I’d left it to find the registration forms for the cop. I put it in the glove box. As I drove out I could see Walt holding her on the yellow grass in the rearview. I could tell any preacher exactly where Hell was, give him the physical address.

I drove south out of state and paid for a room in Kingman, because Utah didn’t feel right once I thought about it. I wanted to sleep in the van but I stank, a stink unbearable from the nuthouse, someone else’s smell. I got the room and unloaded my things. I didn’t want to call my sister until nightfall. I was better at night, more responsive and loose. I showered and changed clothes, found a soft pornography channel and masturbated. The release of that and the air conditioner blazing against my bed sent me into a long, clean sleep. I dreamed of nothing. I woke up with a hunger. I found the phone book and ordered in. Large, nothing hot, extra sausage and two sides of ranch and, if they wouldn’t mind, cut it in squares. I turned the television off.

I sat at the table and wrote in the journal. I wrote about Boulder City. I grew bored and read the bible I found with the phone books. Most of Revelation. The imagery, the masterful writing. The terror of those pages. The terror, too, was the people who believed it. I understood it for what it was, it was terror. I closed the book and flipped through the channels. It occurred to me the same newscaster lived everywhere. Then a knock on the door, a bright blonde with gapped front teeth, and a body. Her hair was fried and high above a tan brow. She fixed her stare on my chin. I rubbed it.

“Yes. Come in.”

She did. She said I had a nice bike. I nodded. She put the box down by the book.

“You read the bible?”

“First time.”

She giggled. It made her human. It made her younger. It was nice.

“I can’t understand all those big words in there.”

“It’s all bullshit.”

She giggled once more. I wanted to fuck that giggle.

“How much was it?”

“Oh. \$13.50.”

I handed her a twenty. She started leafing through her bills.

“The rest is for you.”

“Wow. You sure?”

“Yes.”

She sat on the table and tapped the delivery bag against her knees.

“What’s your name? I’m Julie.”

I told her. No, I wasn’t from here. I wasn’t on my way anywhere. No I didn’t go to school. I didn’t really do anything.

“A free spirit, huh?”

Something like that. Did she like her job? She did. No, she wasn’t married, she lived with her parents. She was once engaged, has one child, a boy, and is trying to move to Connecticut because she’d read they had the best elementary schools. Wasn’t she going to get in trouble for taking so long on this delivery?

“I hardly think so. My boss is a real moron. I’ll just tell him I had to get gas.”

I watched her fingers fan the pages of the bible. Blue nails, long slim fingers.

“You ever get a feeling off of another person?” she was still looking at the book, like she was talking into it, “you know, like a feeling that you should know that person from before but you just don’t know why you didn’t know that person before?”

“Sure.”

“You’re sleeping in here tonight, right?”

“Of course.”

She giggled.

“God. Of course. I’m stupid sometimes.”

I smiled. She asked if I would mind if she came by after work. She told me I was beautiful. I asked her what time she was off. Two in the morning. I told her I would leave the door unlocked.

I finished a few slices and lost my appetite. I had never heard a woman refer to a man as beautiful. It spun me, inflated me. It was wonderfully uncomfortable in my stomach. My good luck was maybe returning. I closed the box and dialed the area code and number my sister had given me while I was held over with the freaks. It was a collect call. A man accepted. She was downstairs drawing in her study. I asked him to let her finish and have her call me when she came back up. No problem.

I laid back and thought of Julie. I thought of her naked. She wasn’t my dream girl or anything. Yet there was something about her. This simple honesty. An honesty without need. I grew hard thinking of her. I was about to make my move when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?”

“Kingman, Arizona. Don’t ask.”

I had never been a phone person. We talked for over five hours. She and her husband lived in Wheaton, in a house twenty minutes west of Chicago, and they’d been married since they were teenagers. They both had seven years on me. She had a degree in graphic design. Doug was the drummer in a garage band that played bars across the suburbs. His steady job was at the airport, throwing luggage. She tried to find me for the last two years on her own. The old man wouldn’t give her any further information on me besides my first name. She said it drove her crazy. We talked about our incidental families, and about the strangeness. I told her I would drive out to see her. We hung up. I loosened the door and killed the lights. In the dark I thought about it. My whole life was gone. My father was really my uncle and now I had an extra sister. My mother was right for not telling me the truth. I was grateful for her. She would have never told me. She loved me too much. I was her favorite. I could have ended up so much worse, and I thought about her and cried. I cried at her strength, at the shit she put up with during her life. I fell into a steady calm world of darkened plants from another time, a different planet, sounds undefined by this dimension. I fell to sleep.

The door opened then closed and locked quietly. The bedding fluffed, and it sent shots of cold air against my back in the dark. She rubbed my shoulder. She smelled like food. I felt her hand run down my side. I heard each shoe fall to the floor casually. Her breath against my ear made me grow. I turned over and we kissed. She pulled her shirt up so our stomachs touched. I pulled her shirt off. As our tongues worked against each other her pants came down, then the rest. It was dark and hot under there.

She was on top. It was machinery moving exactly. It had never been that good. Then this banging hit from the other side of the door, a man’s fist. We stopped.

“I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE, BITCH! OPEN UP! OPEN UP THE DOOR! NOW!”

I saw her shadow look at the door.

“Shit.”

“Who is it?”

She whispered, “Tommy. Shit, shit, shit.”

“OPEN THE GODDAMN DOOR OR I’LL FUCKING BREAK IT IN!”

She put her head on my chest and sighed.

“Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“Not anymore. He’s a little psychotic.”

He was ramming the door. It started to crack. I sat up.

“Fast. Under the bed!”

She was under the bed. I threw her clothes and purse under there with her and jammed one of the blankets in front of them. I turned the light on and yelled.

“WHO THE FUCK IS IT?”

“JUST OPEN THE DOOR, ASSHOLE!”

I yelled back.

“ALRIGHT! CALM DOWN FIRST! I HAVE A GUN!”

“BULLSHIT!”

I latched the chain quietly.

“WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

“I KNOW SHE’S IN THERE, MAN!”

I told him I was alone.

“BULLSHIT! OPEN THE DOOR!”

He rammed again. It was one hit away from a total collapse. I opened the door and looked out over the chain. There he was. A big motherfucker with a weak chin. I told him I was alone. His crazy eyes peered in, then around the room. He was convinced. He wanted in that door. Where were the police? I told him I had to get dressed. Then I caught it, the pizza box on the table. Under the bed in one motion. She swore quietly and whispered something about her eye. I threw on my pants and unlatched the chain. He plowed the door into me, knocking me against the wall. He was huge and shirtless. He looked around, ran to the bathroom then ran out. He was at the next door then the next. I could hear sirens. Before I could close the door he was back in the room. He lit a smoke and pulled a can of beer from his pocket.

“Mind if I lay low in here, man? You seem cool.”

“I really need to get up early.”

He sat on the bed. We heard the cops roll by. They stopped and walked around, knocked on a few doors, knocked on mine. I brushed them off through the chain. He was in the bathroom. They went to the office then they left, slowly. The spotlight was everywhere. I watched it bounce off my journal and hit the television. It shook around the walls then stopped. He came out and sat on the bed next to me.

“Fuck, dude. I’m sorry. She was on foot. I followed her. Could have sworn this was the room.” He described her to me.

“Haven’t seen her.”

He started crying.

“I really loved her, dude. I guess I wasn’t good enough.”

“No one ever is, man.” I almost called him Tom.

He drank down the rest of his beer. He crushed the can and held it.

He sat down and patted me on the back.

“You’re a good guy.” he got up and flushed his cigarette down the toilet. He came back in.

“I really loved her, dude.”

He put his head in his hands and started bawling again.

“I mean, she meant the world to me, dude. What the fuck am I going to do now?... DUDE!”

I didn't know what to say. So much for my good luck returning.

“I woulda done anything for her, dude. I woulda killed for her and her kid.” he sobbed horribly, “I woulda married her!”

She stayed cool under there, didn't make a move. And she was under there, naked. But I sat next to him for the better part of an hour. It was war.

He was finally on the other side of the door. I imagined him walking home, his head turned to the street, his hands in his pockets. He would be awake until he heard her voice again. I tried not to think of him. If it wouldn't have been me on the bed it would have been somebody. It was only a matter of time for both of them.

She was smoking a cigarette next to me.

“I hope he's okay,” she said, like she'd really put some thought into it. I didn't respond. She said she had to get going, that her son was a real handful and her mother worked mornings. She told me she lived in the neighborhood across the street. I watched her fish for her clothes. She was dressed, and she looked younger than what she had. She lit another smoke and laid a kiss across my cheek. I watched the door close and stretched out. Then I heard the screaming. I heard him yelling at her, calling her a cunt. I heard him tell her that he was coming back for me. From the corner of the curtain I watched them out there. I wasn't afraid to fight him but I knew he would take me because he was right. I started getting ready for it. She took off running, and he looked to the room and stalled. He was on her heels in no time. Then they were gone. I coasted my bike out and opened the van, threw it in with the rest of my things and got the hell out of there. I found a rest stop about 45 miles up the freeway, pulled over and slept.

The Sun found a slit in the curtains and sent two yellow arrows directly into my forehead. I opened my eyes. My chest was heavy. I was sweating. I was lying in an oven. I unlatched the backdoors and crawled out. Out there it was hot. The men were walking shirtless next to their wives and kids. It was refreshing to me, almost cold. My skin rose then fell back across my bones. My eyes were burning with sweat. I looked around the desert.

I drove into Flagstaff and ordered a soda. I thought about her. I thought about her selfishness. That big flank of meat could have killed me, and he would have. All she saw was new skin, vanity. I wondered why I hadn't told the cops that he was in the bathroom. I decided cops were worse than women.

The mountains of Flagstaff were clean and cool. I parked at an overlook and waited off my fever. On the couch in back I fell asleep with the windows opened. I woke up to see the sunset. It was brighter than usual, and colder, because it

was a sunrise. I'd slept for nearly a day. I drove back to the same place and read the map. Albuquerque looked decent. A young and vicious college girl came into the diner and sat in a booth across from mine. She smiled. I got up and left.

I stopped inside of New Mexico. The town was small and dirty. At a gas station I found a drinking fountain that turned out a copper arc. I bought a small bottle of water and a coffee.

The city took forever. I didn't like the look it had. I found a byway going south, and I drove through the Southwest, the impossible mesas, the red plateaus painted far back atop a beautiful brown, deadly, lazy scheme. For the first time in weeks I felt peace. I drove on, listening to an old country station, the songs taking me back to the coffee table of my childhood, to my father drinking coffee and smoking, talking to my mother before the Sun came out and he had to leave to roof houses. I was six or seven years old. My mother would sometimes stand behind him in her bathrobe and pop the heat blisters across his back. I remembered his tattoos. He'd done time. The ink was deep green. He explained to me then it was India ink, the kind they had in prison. One on his forearm was an unfinished dagger, another was my mother's name across his knuckles. I never thought he'd come to blows with me the way he did when I was seventeen, or that I'd knock him on his back at nineteen, but then I never thought I would be nineteen and driving aimlessly across the desert, my mother in her coffin, my father completely wasted, a junkie dying away to dust on the streets of west Phoenix.

I drove on for a few hours, cutting through back roads and access roads. For the sheer hell of it, I turned around and took the same roads north, going further up state. I had no plan. I was flying in youth, totally free. A mile outside of Farmington the van died. I jumped out and checked the oil. It was fine. I tried to start it again. It kicked over, made it a few more blocks then started smoking. It rattled and bucked into a gas station on the outskirts. The sun was fading early. I parked on the side of the station and popped the hood. I was as much a mechanic as I was a jet pilot.

An old Navajo walked out of the station eating an orange. I nodded to him and smiled. He said nothing. He stood next to me under the hood.

"What is it?" his voice was angered, aggravated and aggravating.

"I don't know."

"What happened?"

I told him. He walked away slowly and came back with another. He got behind the wheel and cranked it. His buddy stayed under the hood. I walked inside the station and bought a drink.

They were standing over the engine, laughing. His buddy had one tooth in his head. I asked the first one what was wrong with it. He wiped his hands down his shirt and shook his head, smiling.

“It’s very bad.”

I stared at his friend. He nodded and smiled. I looked at his tooth.

“How bad?”

The other one answered. He was the boss.

“Head gasket’s blown. Much money.”

“How much money?”

“We’ll do it for nine hundred.”

I only had six hundred on me. I told him.

“Nope. Fix it here or we tow it to the junkyard.”

I had the extra key in my wallet.

“Alright. Fix it here.”

I asked him how long it would take. One solid day. I took my bike out and rode into town, into that place.

The car lots there were useless. They either had nothing I could afford or anything I would trust. I rode back. They had the van on the lift in the garage. I found the boss again.

“Listen. I really only have six hundred dollars. Can’t we do something here, I mean, we’re both people.”

He scowled.

“You’re not my people. Nine hundred dollars. That’s a good deal. Somewhere else you’d pay twice as much.”

“Well, I don’t have it.”

He looked me up and down.

“Where do you live?”

I shook my head. He smiled.

“Maybe you can work here for the money.”

“Where?”

He laughed.

“I’ll make the call. Job’s hard. Very hard. Maybe you’ll quit.”

I asked him what it was. He uttered one word: digging. He told me I could sleep in the van until I paid it off, but he would charge me a little extra for rent. I thought quickly about catching a bus, but there was nowhere I wanted to go. I couldn’t hitch a ride out with my bike and my things. Arizona was not an option. I told him to make the call.

I slept in the van that night in the garage. It was still dark when one of the Indians banged on the door.

“Get up! Time for work!”

I had the sheet of paper with directions and set out on my bike. It was a four mile ride through the dusty roads and paths. I saw the site. A long, long line of

Indians on their knees with narrow shovels trenching into the ground, a truck going slowly in reverse with a giant spool of cable they laid carefully into the trench. They were shirtless and moving quickly, and the foremen screamed at them. They were an endless line ripping a tear in the desert, the line of dark red backs and elbows moving like a long machine. I was my soul after death and I was standing at the gates of Hell.

I found the lead foreman and told him who I was.

He yelled.

“YOU’RE LATE!”

I tried to explain. He threw a shovel in my hands.

“Three feet deep and two wide. NOW!”

I squeezed in between two big Indians. The foreman ran up and nudged me with his boot.

“NO! You bring up the FRONT!”

He walked me up to the front of the line. It was a long walk. The Navajos peered at me with my shovel, and they jeered me. At the front of the line the foreman pushed me to the lead. I’d had it with him. I turned and held my shovel to swing at him. He jumped back and pulled out a long blade. I yelled at him.

“FUCK YOU!”

The line burst into laughter. The foreman laughed with them.

“Just dig, white boy. You’ll quit before an hour.”

He put the knife back in his boot and walked away. I dropped to one knee and saw the ditch. I would work the day then sneak out with the van before the Indians came back to the shop. I began digging. The other workers laughed. Their laughter made me angry. I dug furiously for an hour. I made sure to stay in front of them, to beat them with a widening gap. One of them yelled at me to slow down. I heard his friend.

“Don’t worry. He’ll get tired.”

I thought of all the things that sickened me. I found a reservoir of hatred inside my arms. I dug on. Three or so hours passed. It was time for everyone to drink.

It was a long wait for the water ladle. There was a huge steel trough and we all lined up to drink from that ladle. When my turn came I took two or three gulps then another foreman grabbed it.

“That’s too much, white boy.”

Everybody laughed. They still had ten minutes. They found corners of shade by the trailer and sat. I walked back to the ditch and kept at it. They yelled at me to take a break. The foremen told them to keep quiet, that they were disgusted that a white boy was making them look so bad. I kept digging. I was yards out from them. They had to cut their break short. They were moving as fast as they could, but I had plenty of hatred in me. At one point a foreman blew his whistle and we stopped. He ran over with his tape measure and stuck it in their part of the ditch.

“Too damn shallow!”

A big worker stood up and looked at me. He ran his finger under his throat. I asked him if he was tired, and the line howled. I kept going, faster and faster, delirious from the heat. My skin was burnt.

After the next hour everybody hated me. I didn't care. I would never see them again. We worked until dusk. At the trailer where I had my bike chained the tires were knifed, and they were watching me. I paid them no mind, picked up my bike and carried it on my shoulder up over the hill where they couldn't see. Then I set it down and collapsed. I watched the hot and dead sky turn circles over my body, and I remembered the pier in California, meeting Greg, my genius painter buddy from Vegas, and Roll, another genius painter who had just moved to Vegas from Florida, and they were in town by the pier, and we rode our bikes all day, practicing new tricks in front of the ocean. I remembered back further, to jumping on a Greyhound bus from Phoenix to Venice Beach, with three hundred dollars in my pocket, the first time I'd left home. I liked it there, and I lied about my age to get my first construction job I had found in the paper while drinking coffee in front of the ocean with my first girlfriend. She was seven years older than I was, with plenty of neurosis. Her name was Kim and she lived by the beach there in Venice. In six months she became the enemy, and I escaped her one morning while she was asleep. On the hot dirt, I thought forward from her, to a beach house where I had been a renter, living with an after-hours alcoholic and her lazy eye and her husband, Cliff, who was a psychologist and latently homosexual, which occurred to me on the hot dirt was the reason he always had a pipe in his mouth. I remembered leaving there, and my laundry getting stolen from the dryers in San Diego, and I remembered going to jail in Tijuana and being beaten over and over. But mostly I remembered nothing, and it was supposed to be dusk but the sky wouldn't budge. I heard the rumbling of tires coming behind me. I picked up my bike and kept going. They blew by, yelling, hooting, flipping me the bird, leaving me in a cloud of dust. I set it down and walked it. A mile before the station the two mechanics pulled up in an old car. The boss nodded at me.

“We fixed your van.”

I stared ahead and nodded. I felt him look at his buddy and smile, then look back to me, “See you in the morning.”

I nodded ahead. They wouldn't see me in the morning. They wouldn't see me again.

The van wasn't in the garage windows. I walked around back and dug the key from my wallet. I threw my bike in the side door and sat behind the wheel. I could see the last traces of sunlight crashing into the desert. Then it was dark. I turned the key. It purred. They had done a good job. I crawled in back and laid on the couch. The van had no wheels, they had it set upon jacks.

That night I slept on my stomach. I passed out right away, woke up about five hours later. I was stiff and sore. The flesh on my knees was raw. I didn't know when the Sun would appear. I found the road and walked. Every step I

took my pants would hit the exposed skin on my knees and stick to them. I walked, thinking if this was the way it would be then I would show them. I would show them all. I found a strong vigor within that thought. I moved on, tried like hell to ignore my body.

An old truck coasted past me then slowed to the shoulder. An old Indian with a white ponytail and a cowboy hat. He asked me if I wanted a ride. He lived right near the site. I asked him what time it was. He didn't know. He asked me what I was doing here. I told him. He shook his head.

"Good luck."

There was a pleasant calm to his voice, deep and casual. He lit a smoke and shook one loose for me.

"Don't smoke."

"Good for you. Don't start."

We drove by a billboard advertising the new Jeep Cherokee. He smiled.

"They totally obliterate the Indian Nation then name a fuckin' automobile after it."

I laughed. He looked over.

"You got any Native in you?"

"Who knows."

"Just a mutt, huh?"

"Yes."

He dropped me off.

I worked the day through. By the end of the week I was adjusted to the labor, and the workers gave up on hazing me. Once or twice my friend would see me walking and give me a lift in. We had weekends off if we chose them. I worked. I found out that I was making minimum wage, which at the time was \$3.35 an hour. Weekends were overtime. If I worked the maximum I would pull down around \$240 a week after taxes. The Indians charged me twenty dollars a week for rent. I survived on food from the station, mostly orange juice and fruit and candy bars. I bought a battery powered clock with an alarm at a drug store. In bed by nine, up at three. Walking to work took an hour.

Into my second week I was allowed to ride to and from the site with the boys in the pickups, and that gave me an extra 2 hours a day. My sister in Illinois offered to bail me out, but I couldn't take her money. I hated the work more and more, but I felt a bond with the desert, with the deadliness of it. At night I would write in my journal and fall to sleep with no trace of sound around me. I tried to take a weekend off, but I fell bored with everything and went back to the ditch.

Payday was once every month, paid to the day the checks were issued. I had started the job on the third day of the new pay period. I came to stand at peace with the Navajos, though we hated each other. I was a symbol of war and death

and dominance to them. To me they were just more assholes I had to see every day in order to make money. They were no different to me than anyone else. I wasn't responsible for their holocaust. I wasn't even alive. They dealt with me the way someone deals with a fly they cannot kill. I found a nice mindset out in the desert, with the job, the boys, the heat, the nothingness. It would do me no good to bitch about it or take pity on myself. There was no time for it. I was a vessel for that cable, for the phone company. I took it, I had no choice.

One day on the job, one of the Indians dug too carelessly and broke open one of the lower cables. They were fiber-optic lines from the phone company. I learned through another laborer's broken English and hand movements that if you shined a flashlight through one end of a five thousand foot section the light would come out of the other end. He had said it was expensive to repair, something like \$400,000 a minute or an hour or whatever he'd meant, for a specialist to come out. We were laying a different type of line next to the fiber-optic that was already in the ground. The guy hit it and cut it open with the shovel. He was called off the line. Work was halted for a few hours. I never saw him again. I remember it because he tried to point the finger at me. I was working in front of him. He was scared. He called the foreman over and nodded at me.

"White boy cut wire!"

I looked at the foreman and shook my head. I kept digging. The worker tried to come at me but I stopped him with my shovel, laid it hard across his shins. Another Indian stepped in and defended me to the boss, an Indian I'd never talked to. I didn't know why he did it. I guess I had earned a shred of respect out there. I was out of myself there, in a certain zone, a haze. Even nailing the Indian with my shovel was in careless slow motion. Everything that happened out there only drifted by with little or no importance, everything that happened was secondary to the ditch.

Payday came. I hadn't showered in just a few days under a month, saving washing off with the hose at the station. My check was pathetic compared to the work I had done. My rent was eighty dollars—that with the money I owed on the van would leave me with sixty extra. I would leave with a little under what I'd rolled in with. After everyone got their checks they had to go back to work. I walked off the site and into town to cash in.

Back at the station the boss opened the register. I told him to get the wheels on before I paid him.

"What? You don't trust us?"

I didn't say anything. He nodded at me.

"Half the money first."

"No."

"He'll put the wheels on. I'll watch you."

“Just put the fucking wheels on.”

He whistled to his worker. That’s how they called each other. That whistle. I was utterly sick of that whistle. Out back he removed the jacks one by one after the wheels were bolted down. They surrounded me. I dug into my pocket and pulled the money out. They eyed the roll.

I held my hand out.

“The keys. Now.”

The boss dropped the keys into my hand. I peeled off \$980 and handed it to him. He looked at me squarely and walked away. His worker followed him, and he watched the money over his shoulder. I fired up the Dodge and pulled out, feeling more indifferent than anything. I headed down the same back roads.

I stopped in Tucson. Downtown there was some sort of carnival. I was rugged and dark. I fit right in. For the first time in my life I wanted a beer. The compulsion came from nowhere, hit me from above. The first barmaid asked for ID, so I went next door. The place was dark and seedy. I sat in the back. It was a dismal bar. The barmaid didn’t sweat me about my age, and I ordered my first beer.

I stayed in the bar all night and wrote in my journal. After every glass the words got better. They grew into characters trading lines. I wrote my first pages of short story dialogue, my first poems. After a few more I couldn’t write. Only four men had entered the bar the whole night. After last call I floated to my van and fell asleep.

3

I awoke heavy and wet. My head was full. It wasn't like the small headaches I had gotten from the wine in the past. No, there was weight to this one. Every small noise was amplified grossly. I could remember the old woman bringing me beer constantly. I pissed next to one of my wheels, watching the sunrise. I could hear it rising, crackling. I found my shirt. At a gas station I bought some aspirin and washed them down. Up the highway at a Denny's I drank coffee and got ready to read the journal. It was nice and cool in there. I looked out and saw my van. My head was still pounding from the beer. I felt sick and remorseful for drinking as much as I'd drank, but I also felt a little proud.

I read the drunken pages. After I forced down breakfast I hit a bike shop and got my bike squared away with a tube and new tires. Thirty-five dollars, over ten hours of digging. I watched my hands as I flipped through the bills. They were darker, larger and hardened, carved throughout with veins and drying cuts. Another feeling of pride.

I drove from New Mexico back to Phoenix automatically, not even thinking about it. Another summer was over but late September was still murder. At my sister's, a large white van was parked on the side of her house. I walked in without knocking. She wasn't anywhere around and I didn't see the kids. One of my brothers sat at the table with his wife. My second oldest brother. I had flashes of him and his wife popping in and out of our lives once in awhile when

I was a boy. He was notorious in the family for burning everyone for money and consistently breaking his promises. I hadn't seen him for nearly four years, since the funeral, when he and his wife were living in a different van and running cons across the country. They stayed with us for a month, ran up some heavy bills, then he started a convenient fight with my father and they roared off to fuck somebody else for awhile. If you were around him long enough you could smell bridges burning behind his back.

He didn't get up when he saw me. He shook my hand from the table. His wife sat there and made bad jokes. I stepped outside with him while he lit up. Not a minute into his cigarette he asked me to trade him vans. I told him to forget it. He'd been in and out of jail a lot. He was talking about moving back to Peoria. He worked construction and roofing his whole life. If someone couldn't do anything for him they didn't exist. But I didn't quite hate him because I never quite knew him. They'd been sleeping in the van outside for the last two weeks. He said they were pulling out because he didn't like my sister's new boyfriend. It threw me off. He told me the guy's name was Jimbo and he'd driven down from Peoria, Illinois, to be with her. He told me the guy was an alcoholic. I smiled. Peoria did that to everybody, made them alcoholics. The phone rang. He told me to let it ring. I walked inside and answered. My sister calling from my father's new house. She wasn't expecting me to answer her phone. She asked me if I was alright. I asked her about the new house. She said he was remarried. He'd met some woman who had picked him up off the streets and brought him back to health, and he married her. I didn't say anything. She said that the nutcase from Boulder City called him the day I'd left and told him what a bastard I was, and it started a fight between them. I could tell by her voice that she was worried about me finding out the truth of my birth. Everyone in the family knew but me. I saw their van pulling out of the driveway.

"That's weird."

"What's weird?"

"Don and his shadow just took off without saying anything."

"He was supposed to leave me money on the table today. Do you see anything?"

I looked.

"I don't see anything."

"Surprise, surprise."

"Right."

"Well, I'll see him in a few more years and like an idiot I'll take him back in."

"Listen, I need to get cleaned up."

"Hang around for awhile."

I took a shower. In just under two months my father was remarried and my sister had a guy living with her. I stretched out on the couch, watched television and waited on my laundry. The phone rang. A recorded collect call from a

penitentiary. If I accepted I was not allowed to use third party calling and the call would be monitored. I accepted because it was my nephew. He asked me where his mother was. I asked him what the fuck he was doing in prison. He said he had gotten popped for petty theft twice then a cop pulled his friend over while he was with him, found a bench warrant and found a gun under the passenger seat.

“Was it your gun?”

“No. But it wasn’t his, either.”

“How long you in for?”

“Eight to sixteen months. Probably sixteen, though.”

“You little dumbass.”

“So where is she?”

We were cut off. I hung up. No sooner than I put it down it rang again. My third brother, the cowboy.

“Hey, dude. You’re back in town.”

I asked him what happened to Phoenix. He laughed.

“You leave an’ it goes all to hell.”

“Straight to Hell.”

He said he was doing better than ever. He landed a job sanding down the walls of new houses for the basecoat, and they had a nice place now. He told me that if I needed somewhere to stay I could stay there. I told him choose his words wisely, that I might take him up on them.

“That’s cool. No skin off my ass.”

I thanked him for the visual and hung up before he could retaliate. It was nice to have some light-heartedness to balance such a destroyed return.

I stayed the night with my sister and the girls. Her new guy was weird and quiet. He had a beer gut and a thick mustache. He was Peoria. He would leave her in three weeks.

I parked in the back. He was right. It was better than their old place. Jenny had lost some weight and scored a job at a day care where she could enroll their daughter for free. My place was the couch. I had given my sister a hundred bucks so I was down to just under four hundred. My brother and I agreed that I would pay one hundred dollars a month. I paid for the first month.

I spent the first week sleeping in until noon, driving to my sister’s to swim, then riding my bike at night in the parking lot of a grocery store, combining single tricks into long combinations. Then it was time to look for a goddamned job. I knew I couldn’t deliver pizzas in the van quick enough to make any real money, like I used to in my four-speed, and gas would be a fucker. I bought a Sunday paper and wrote down a few numbers from the coffee table while my

brother and his wife drank beer and listened to country music in the living room. A different Venice.

At six in the morning I was hired over the phone as a framer's assistant. The site was twenty minutes away. I bought a tool belt and some basic tools. Seven dollars an hour. My boss was nice enough. I knew more about framing than I'd led on, but the framers there only made a dollar more and they were always stressed out. Due to my experience, my boss's work was faster and cleaner than the rest. After the first week I was raised a dollar anyway, but I couldn't tell anybody. He sprang for lunch every day at the bar across the road and my job wasn't really hard. The hours went quickly and that's all that mattered to me.

When we didn't make the bar for lunch, Marty brought food from home. His wife was Greek and she made good food. After we ate Marty liked to sit around back and burn a joint with the Mexicans. Normally I just passed it, but one day I took a hit, then another, and then I was useless until it wore off. Marty just laughed.

"No more getting baked at work for your ass."

One Friday after work I followed Marty home to Mesa for dinner and drinks with his wife and her relatives who were in town from Greece. I had never been friends with a boss. I think Marty liked me because I was young and hardworking and mostly quiet. At first he found my humor kind of sadistic, but once he got used to my responses about things I think he understood them differently, or at least he learned to relate, or deal with it, if nothing else.

His house was beautiful. He'd built a bridge over a small stream in his front yard. He introduced me to his wife as his angry sidekick. She was stout and bushy, dark hair and a warm smile. When he introduced me as such she smiled and shook my hand.

"Great." She had a thick accent. I liked her. She grinned to her husband.

"Is a handsome boy."

I was embarrassed. Marty squeezed my arm.

"Watch your ass, pimp. She's taken."

She laughed and slapped his chest.

"Oh, shut up with you! Come, come! Almost ready!"

Marty put his arm around me, and we walked inside. There were four Greeks on the leather sofa. In front of them on the coffee table were wine glasses cheerfully filled around a long tray of olives and dressings. They were all women. One of them was young and violently attractive. They had thick eyebrows, and the other three were stout and bushy, like Marty's wife. They each stood and hugged me. The young one handed me a glass of wine. The Greeks were good people. They were loud. They saw no point in being another way.

They made room for me on the couch. I was next to the hot one. So foreign, so interesting. One of them spoke.

“Jeff, this is my beautiful daughter.”

The girl said something to her mother in Greek. The women laughed.

The girl’s mother spoke.

“Alexandra says you are a beautiful boy.”

The girl crossed her dark legs under her white cotton skirt, her bare foot barely touching my pant leg. I downed the glass. The room roared. Out back we sat under a huge umbrella and ate. Alexandra watched me eat. Never had I eaten more carefully. My glass was always full. Greek food was more bitter than American food. I liked it. The wine was a perfect balance. Two of the sisters cleared the table. When they came back they brought more bottles. The back yard was full of tall plants. It was modern and medicinal. Marty leaned back and lit a joint. The women watched him. He offered it to me. I politely declined. The women smiled. The phone rang and Marty’s wife answered. She yelled from the house in Greek and they all ran inside, laughing. Marty looked over his shoulder and handed me the joint. I took a hit. He finished it off then cracked open another beer. He took a long drink and sat back.

“Well, whatta you think there?”

“You have a fucking great life, Marty.”

He laughed.

“Think so?”

I stared out over the pool and the plants and thought out loud.

“Jesus.”

“It takes a lot.” he said.

We finished the joint and a bottle of red and went back inside. Alexandra was near me at all times, and when she got too close her mother would shake a finger at her. I didn’t know how the Greek culture worked with sex. I didn’t want to cross any lines. As passionate as they were with kindness, they could be worse in anger. There were heavy and drunk Greek women in the room. I didn’t want to step out of line and do something stupid around them concerning Alexandra. Everything that was said in the room was translated to her by her mother.

We sat in there and I listened to them talk. The language was a different color, guttural. Each word was spoken with force. It was intense for the stoned Americans. Marty finally told me I should stay over since I was drunk. He said I could sleep on the floor of their bedroom since the three sisters had the extra beds and Alexandra had the couch. I told him I had a bed in my van, and hoped it made it back to her. I asked to use the phone. Marty nodded to the kitchen.

On the machine I told my brother I wouldn't be in tonight, that I was too wasted to drive. I hung up. There she was, backing me up against the counter. She grabbed my shoulders. I started to say something about everybody being so close to the kitchen. She stopped me with broken and uncertain English.

"No time."

She pushed me down there. I pulled up the front of her skirt, and set it in her fingers. White laced over that dark hair and dark skin, a dark and soft and manicured tuft of hair that lifted the front of her panties just barely away from her sex. I pulled the cotton aside and started kissing it. She moaned quietly. I started with my tongue, her brown hips moved into my mouth and my brain spun there, drunken and shocked. The taste was actually sweet, the wet of her fragranced with her smell. She pulled me up and we kissed. Never in my life had I ever...

Marty cleared his throat from behind us. When we turned around he was shaking his finger at her, mocking her mother. She stuck her tongue out at him and walked out. He watched her ass go. He opened the fridge and pulled out a beer. I stood there looking at the ceiling, my arms akimbo. He shook his head.

"Fucking bastard."

Then he was gone. Back in the living room they were watching a movie. Alexandra sat close to her mother now, only glancing at me every so often, playing with my head. I thought, you nasty little fucking Greek goddess. I watched it with them. I saw Greek porn. After awhile everyone filed off to bed. Marty asked me if I was sure I didn't want the floor. They said we would have breakfast together in the morning. Alexandra shot me a look from her bed on the couch. A look that made my skin jump up from my bones.

I laid in the back of the van and got her out of my mind as quickly as possible. It didn't take long. I wiped off and stared at the Moon from the back window. It was high and white, white lace against a dark, exotic sky. At once I hated Alexandra's mother and wished she would die, if just for an hour.

The happy Greek must have died soon. The tapping of her fingernails sobered me. I opened the side door. She was barefoot, clutching a candle. She ducked in. I closed the curtains. Then we heard a quiet but steady knock on the side door. Alexandra put a finger to her lips. Each handle was then tried casually. She undressed through the knocking. I kept bouncing from the knocking to her breasts and stomach. It was torture. The knocking went on forever and ceased. Alexandra motioned to me like she was writing a note then she walked her fingers in the air. She had written her mother a note saying she took a walk. I hoped for both of us that the note would hold up. We heard the front door close quietly. She lit the candle.

She laid under me and I kissed her everywhere I could. Her body was flawless and smooth and sculpted, her breasts perfect, her ass going beyond

anything I had ever seen. That long dark hair all around her. After I could take no more I put it in. The tightest grip any man could ask for. If I hadn't already shot just minutes before she showed up, it would have been over long before I'd even worked her panties off. Her body in that light...

I was fucking a Greek myth, a constellation. She turned me over and put me in her mouth. There was nothing she couldn't do. The only thing she didn't like was my finger up her ass. She bit my lip and shook her head. I turned her over on her stomach and moved with various speeds, massaging her clit with my finger. She bucked and came a few times then I really let her have it. I held off for a long time, maybe half an hour or more. She began to run dry so I went as fast as I could and shot the streams across her back. A lot came out, more than ever.

Then something happened. I looked down at her body and got rock hard instantly, put it back in, went for five or six hard strokes, gripping her hips so tight that she gasped in pain. I gave her one more hard one then pulled out and shot all over her again.

I fell back on the bed. She moved her hair from her face and laid on top of me. I would grow hard, she would put me in and we would fuck until I was ready, when she would slide off and ejaculate me. We would kiss until I was hard again then repeat it. This happened all through the night and we fell asleep like that.

The Sun was out and she was still on top of me. We awoke and did it again. Then again. I was hung over and I couldn't take it anymore. I crawled to the driver's side and got out, looked around and began pissing by the rear wheel. My shoulders shook gratefully. The Sun was high and painful and I couldn't face it. Halfway through she was behind me. She kissed my neck, my ears. She held it while I pissed and she kissed me. Another first.

She was shaking me off. I opened my eyes and glanced over my shoulder to see big mother sitting on the front steps watching the whole thing. She had been awake all night, and she looked rough. Alexandra knew what fuck meant because she sighed before she said it and she kissed me on the ear once more and said goodbye, then walked toward the steps of the house, and she walked it grimly. Her mother stood and they yelled back and forth in Greek. The neighbors awoke and walked out. Her mom kept trying to run at me, but Alexandra was stopping her. Next I saw Marty out front in his underwear. And her mother would break loose for a second and get closer to me, and Alexandra would stop her with all the strength in her body. She turned her head to me from the struggle and yelled.

“GO! GO! GO!”

Marty kept waving me off. The other sisters came stumbling out of the house. I decided it was time to leave.

Back at the house my brother was watching a rodeo on the tube. Jenny and Layla must have been on the north side seeing her mother. My brother asked me where I had been all night.

“Greece.”

He asked me where the hell grease was. I curled up on the rest of the couch and passed out.

I wasn't sure if I still had a job on Monday. At the site Marty was drinking coffee on the tailgate of his work truck. He nodded and poured me a cup. I had a seat, and we watched the workers drive in with the sunrise.

“I guess I'm not welcome at your house anymore.”

He grinned into his cup.

“You got that right.”

“I'm sorry.”

He shook his head.

“Fuck man, not your fault. I tried to explain to Big Foot that she had no right to come after you like that. I mean here's her daughter, all over you all night, she corners you in the kitchen and lets you eat her little pussy—yeah, yeah, yeah, I was watching you fuckers. So what—anyway, she sneaks out and jumps in your van with you. I mean, I tried to tell her, which kid in his right mind would walk away from that? And on top of it all you were both drunk. But she wasn't having it, she wouldn't listen. Made for a real fucked up weekend at my place. Just glad they're gone.”

“I'll bet. Thanks for defending me.”

Though his wife was two towns away he whispered.

“So, how was she?”

I shook my head at the dirt.

“You wouldn't believe it, man. It was stellar.”

“I figured as much. Goddamn it.”

I worked the week away and that weekend I drove up to Flagstaff to ride the skate park. It was a good weekend. The ramps were smooth and apart from a few broken spokes and a cracked pedal I rode pretty well. I stayed the night with some other BMXers I had met there and in the morning we rode through town, then I left.

Monday morning I was leaving for work when the van started, let out this huge explosion then seized. It wouldn't even kick over. My brother was in the kitchen. I walked in and called Marty's car phone. My brother raised his coffee cup to me.

“You threw a rod.”

“Perfect.”

Marty answered. I told him I threw a rod.

“Shit. I really need you today.”

I told him I’d get there somehow. My brother couldn’t give me a lift because he was already late himself. The bus system in Phoenix was practically non-existent. I took my bike in from the back porch and strapped my tool belt around the bars. My brother laughed.

“You’re ridin’ all the way to Sun City?”

“Yes.”

I was coasting up the sidewalk when my brother pulled up next to me in his Bronco.

“Oh, hey dude. I almost forgot. Happy birthday.”

He peeled out around the corner. I was twenty years old.

Sun City is where all the old people live. Golf carts everywhere. It’s a big retirement community. No one under 55 can live there. We were only there for another month then we had a project in Deer Valley, just minutes from where my brother lived, so I could technically walk to work every morning. Marty couldn’t give me a ride into Sun City because it was simply too far out of the way for him. I rode to and from work for two weeks, when Marty was fired after a fight with the superintendent over some confusion with the building codes, and it put a two week gap before the next place. The Deer Valley project was a long one, like a year and a half contract. He told me he’d see me in two weeks. I was still a few hundred dollars up after rent, but now I had no wheels. A junk dealer came out and towed the van. I signed the title over and he gave me a fifty.

Depression set in. I wanted my own place. I was tired of living with people. I kept in touch with my sister from Illinois. Many letters were written and many calls were made. I borrowed my brother’s Bronco one day and drove to the bookstore, bought some poetry and ordered a few scarce books. I laid around for a week and read, or I sat in the park and I read some thick Nietzsche. He was good for depression.

I wasn’t a teenager anymore and I wasn’t an adult. I was in limbo. I went back to the journals again and updated everything. I wanted to look back on them when I was an old man, read them, relive my life when I could no longer live.

One day I sat in the park and read, and I stopped and thought about Alexandra, about how perfect she was. I didn’t miss her or anything. I imagined hunting her down in Greece, her surprise at seeing me again. I imagined more sex with her, and that was all. I imagined being with her would be like any other relationship after awhile. I missed my van more than I missed anyone. It

occurred to me that a lot of the attraction for Alexandra came with the fact that we didn't speak each other's language. The whole thing was so damned perfect, despite the way it had ended, and the fight with her mother almost made it better than perfect.

I was back in a void, back in Phoenix with no way out. I didn't have any friends, anywhere to really go. My brother always called me a loner. I never thought about it, yet I always felt better when I was alone. Nothing really fazes a man who likes to be alone. I imagined the strongest and most interesting people were loners. There is a line between a loner and a sociopath, a line similar to the insane and the unsane, a line between the dead and the ignorant. I thought that if a man was an unsane loner neither ignorant or dead then he was alright, though I hadn't seen such a man. I gave up my thoughts, put on my headphones and blasted Sabbath.

