ABSTRACT

My thesis is called *One Day Your Ship Will Come In* and consists of several pieces of fiction. The setting of most of these pieces is deliberately vague for aesthetic reasons, but any reader inclined to investigate can deduce that they are set in the small-town South. That said, the "Southern-ness" of these stories is restrained; you won't see anything about "Carolina accents as sweet as Karo syrup," but you will see plenty of guns and pickup trucks. The characters in these stories all just want things to get better, one day, but they don't know how to get there, so they do things like buy lottery tickets. My artistic influences are eclectic, to say the least. Not-so-subtle allusions to Chekhov, Hemingway, and other artists are in there, and some of the fictions have dramatically different styles than others——some are straightforward traditional narratives and others self-consciously postmodern. I think I have achieved a degree of unity among these pieces, however, by working through multiple revisions to strip out excess prose and establish a consistent tone.

ONE DAY YOUR SHIP WILL COME IN

Stories by Jason Glenn Brown

ONE DAY YOUR SHIP WILL COME IN

by

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SELF-STARTER

Adjunct English Instructor between jobs is seeking English tutoring positions for any grade and skill level, including Composition, Reading, Grammar, and ESL. Hoping to complement income through the holiday season and into the new year. I am currently waitressing at Ruby Tuesday, so my availability will vary on a day-to-day basis, but I am willing to work something out to fit your schedule. Hourly rate per session is negotiable too.

Thanks in advance.

BOBBIE

Bobbie sat on the stoop, painting her toenails. It had been a productive day so far. She'd washed and dried her hair, shaved her legs, laid around in a towel watching a *Real World* marathon and gnawing on leftover chicken cold out of the refrigerator—— you watch what you eat, girl, her mother would have told her, had she been there. You eating that junk-food all the time you going to wind up looking all fat like your mama. I used to have a figure like that, too. Give it a few years and pop yourself out some kids and have to work for a living. Bobbie would have said whatever, Mama, and let her mind float to someplace else, a fabulous big city like Raleigh or Wilmington, and known with utter certainty that the bodies of her grandmother, mother, and older sister would not be inherited by her. But she didn't have to listen to any of that today, because her mother was at work and Bobbie skipped class so she could be right here on this stoop, painting her toenails in the sun.

Bobbie had a theory that her cousin Star got pregnant to try and get on that MTV show, *Sixteen and Pregnant*. She was telling her friend Dana about her theory when You need a real man, interrupted Dana, who claimed she was fucking the baseball coach. Bobbie figured Dana was right since she wasn't satisfied with Garrett, who was sort of a loser but easy to manage, and

wondered why most of the girls in her circle wanted James Whitfield, who was on the volunteer fire department but reminded Bobbie of Jabba the Hutt, brand-new Dodge Ram or not. When she finished painting her toenails, she picked up her cell phone and stuck out her legs and took a picture of her feet, which she thought was a little disgusting, really, but you had to have one on your Facebook. Then she checked her horoscope and while she was looking at it she thought about how she was not even compatible with Garrett, and Dana was right: she needed to find a real man.

A GENERIC STORY

Raymond sat on the edge of the bed in his room, tying his generic shoes. They reminded him of something his grandpa would wear. Old people and poor kids wore generic shoes. When Raymond tried to explain this to his parents, his father told him he could wear Nike shoes to school when he got old enough to go out and get a job and buy them, and besides, there was no sense in paying so much for something you were just going to wear out in a year. Raymond finished tying the generic shoes and sat there on the bed, looking at them. Then he heard the rumble of imminent doom coming through his bedroom window.

"Get it in gear," his father called. "Time to go!"

"OK, I'm coming." He picked up his bookbag and entered the living room, where his father sat on a dilapidated easy chair, lacing battered work boots, and his mother was curled up in a ball on the couch, staring blankly at the weatherman. The television was loud. Raymond heard the squealing brakes outside.

"TGIF," the weatherman ejaculated, "but it sure is going to be a wet one. Cool all day today with showers throughout our viewing area. Highs in the mid to upper forties——"

Outside, the diesel engine rattled and the driver blew the horn.

Raymond hurried out the front door and slogged across the yard. The red and yellow lights flashed against the leaden sky. When Raymond reached the side of the road the glass doors screeched open. He stepped through them and they clapped shut behind him.

"Almost left you, boy," the driver said.

"Sorry," Raymond said. "Running late, I guess."

"Siddown."

The bus hove off and jerked as Raymond moved down the aisle to find a seat. He nearly fell into a blonde-haired girl who curled her lip at him, showing perfect white teeth.

"Creep," she said.

"Sorry," he said. He stood there a moment. "How about this rain," he said weakly. "TGIF?"

"Go away," she said, and turned and looked out the window.

Raymond made his way to the back seat. He stared out the window on the way to school, looking at the black pines that rose up from the far edges of the fields like streaks of ink bleeding into the sky.

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Because of the rain, the coach had all the boys run laps around the gym, then let the class break up into groups to play basketball. Raymond kept to himself, bouncing one of the worn, dirty balls and sometimes shooting at a side basket, wishing

P.E. was over. Halfway through the period, Raymond closed his eyes and just guessed where to aim. He opened his eyes in time to see the ball fall right through the basket, swishing noise and all. Raymond imagined the girls, who always spent P.E. sitting on the bleachers giggling and whispering in their cliques, spellbound by his display of athleticism, but when he turned he saw they were watching the other boys play real basketball.

After a while, the coach blew his whistle. Come on men, he bellowed, let's move, and directed the boys to the locker room to change back into regular clothes.

The locker room, a damp, smelly pit, was crowded with cursing, shoving boys. When Raymond sat on the bench to pull his generic shoes back on, he saw a wallet lying on the floor, right there at his feet. The wallet was made of a mesh material like a backpack and was colored in black and gray camouflage. It looked like it was secured by velcro and swelled enough that Raymond could tell it wasn't empty. Money. How much money, he wondered. Whose money. He pretended to concentrate on the job of tying his shoes while he cast furtive glances around the room to see if anybody was paying attention to him. Nobody was.

Raymond took his open bookbag and put it between his feet. He rolled his t-shirt and gym shorts together and laid the bundle down on top of the wallet. He moved the things around

inside the bookbag to look like he was making room for the gym clothes. Probably just some rich guy's money. Whoever'd lose a wallet full of money in the locker room didn't need it in the first place. Raymond could find something worthwhile to do with the money, something better than let it mildew in the corner of the locker room at school. He looked around again. The other boys were starting to leave. The coach hollered for them to move their butts.

Raymond took the bundle in his hands and made sure to scoop the wallet up within it. He shoved the gym clothes and the wallet down into his bookbag. Raymond threw the bookbag over his shoulder and walked out, his eyes down, looking at the floor. When he left the clammy, acrid locker room and stepped back into the warm air of the gym, he raised his head and breathed in the smells of floor wax and ancient dust. Through the high windows at the top of the gym he could see clear blue, and realized the rain had stopped. Bright light shone through the double doors at the far side of the gym and Raymond walked through them trying to hold back a smile.

*****

The school bus boomed on down the road, trailing sooty vapors. Birds sang in the trees and the sun warmed Raymond's face. The waterlogged grass sucked at his generic shoes when he crossed the yard. He climbed the steps and went inside.

Raymond's mother sat at the kitchen table, wrapped up in a book of crosswords.

"School OK?"

"Great," Raymond said, thinking of the prize he'd liberated.

"That's good, Shug," his mother said.

"Something smells good."

"Meatloaf. It'll be done by the time your daddy gets home."

"Can't wait," Raymond said. He went to his room.

Raymond shut the door to his room and kicked off his generic shoes. He unzipped the bookbag and dumped the contents on the bed. He shoved the books and papers out of the way and unrolled the gym clothes. He picked up the wallet and turned it over in his hands. The mesh material felt rough. It was fastened by velcro, like he guessed when he first saw it on the locker room floor. When he pulled the wallet apart the velcro made a ripping sound that tickled Raymond's head. He drew out a sheaf of crisp bills and laid them on the bedspread.

Raymond examined the interior of the wallet. It had a clear plastic window for a driver's license, but nothing was there. Raymond fanned the bills out and counted them. He stacked them back together and counted them again, placing them in short rows, one by one, on the bedspread, and then counted them a third time as they lay there arranged like tiles. Raymond

couldn't think of any one thing to spend it all on. He considered the problem, and when his eyes came to rest on the slick lumps lying by his bedroom door, he knew where to start. He had more than enough money for the most expensive pair of new Nikes there was, with plenty left over to spend as he wished. The best part, he thought, was that his father wouldn't be able to talk about spending so much on something that was just going to wear out in a year, because Raymond would buy them with his own money.

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"You ain't the only one who's somebody now," Raymond said to the blonde girl on the bus with perfect white teeth. "Look at these," he said, flashing his new shoes long enough for her to get a good look before he sauntered away. When he plopped down in his seat at the back of the bus he saw that she had turned to watch him. When the girl realized she'd been caught, she blushed, and quickly turned away from Raymond's confident gaze. He threw one arm over the back of his seat and stuck his legs out in the aisle, but not too far. He didn't want people to think he was showing off. Every time the bus stopped and another kid got on, they noticed.

"What's up, Ray? Where'd you get them awesome Nikes?"

"What, these old things? I guess they're all right," Raymond said.

That whole day at school, Raymond walked the halls with his shoulders back and his head up high. His stride was long and deliberate, and when he passed the other kids in the hall they all turned to look. Those who always ignored him tried to catch up and talk to him as he walked by, but he just dismissed them with an insouciant wave of his hand, and left them clamoring in his wake. Raymond's teachers took notice of his newfound confidence, and called him to the front of the class to write answers on the board; he took to public speaking like a fish to water and gave his lowly classmates dazzling lectures in Language Arts and State History.

When the time came for P.E., Raymond discovered a reservoir of strength and speed he never previously knew he possessed, and with the aid of the grippy soles on his lightweight new Nike shoes, he ran such a fast lap the coach told him he could take the rest of the period off, but the other boys would have to keep on going until they learned to run like real men. Raymond was about to take a siesta on the bleachers when the head cheerleader approached him nervously and wanted to know if he'd watch her and some of the other girls try out their new routine. "I reckon so," Raymond said. "Let's see what you got." When he grew tired of their amateurish moves, he brought out a boombox. He put on "Get Down Tonight" by K.C. and the Sunshine Band, and moonwalked across the basketball court. He performed splits and

backflips, and as everyone gathered around to cheer him on, shouting *Ray-mond, Ray-mond!* his mother opened the door and stuck her head in his room.

"Raymond, honey, meatloaf's ready." She saw the bills arranged in neat rows on the bedspread. "Oh, goodness," she said. "What's all this?"

*****

He stood before his father, who sat on the dilapidated easy chair, battered work boots still clinging to his feet. Raymond handed over the wallet and the stack of money. His father didn't say anything while he counted. He counted again, and raised his bushy eyebrows, and gently put the stack of bills back in the wallet and closed it. He brandished the wallet at Raymond.

"Boy, you best not have stole this wallet."

"I didn't," Raymond said. "I found it in the locker room."

"Found it? Don't nobody leave a wallet with this kind of money in it just laying around."

"No, really, I did. It was just laying there in the floor."

"Didn't you think to ask nobody if they'd lost their wallet?"

"Everybody was already gone."

"You didn't tell the teacher you found somebody's wallet in the locker room?"

"But *I* found it. Somebody else left it there and I found it. It was just going to mildew in there, anyways."

Raymond stood there in front of his father with his hands stuck in his pockets and his head down.

"Okay. So you found a wallet in the locker room at school. Maybe if it was just five or ten bucks in it, that might be different. But whoever lost this is definitely going to miss it. You understand?"

"Yeah."

"Some other boy's liable to be getting his tail tore up right now for losing all that money. Did you think about that?"

"No."

"I didn't think so." Raymond's father rested the wallet on his knee. "I'm going to hang on to this over the weekend. Monday morning, we're going to ride out to that schoolhouse and you're going to turn in this wallet. You don't think so right now, but one day you'll look back and see this was the right thing to do."

Raymond didn't say anything.

"Just one thing," his father said. "What on earth did you think you'd do with all that money?"

"I don't know," Raymond said. "Buy some new shoes."

"You just got some new shoes when school started."

"I thought maybe I'd get some Nike shoes."

His father snorted and said, "Nike shoes? Ain't no sense in spending that kind of money on something you're just going to wear out in a year. Ain't no sense in that at all."

WILL WORK FOR FOOD

The woman’s standing there in front of an old van that’s been converted to carry a wheelchair. You know——the kind with the high roof and the elevator on the side. It’s hard to pin down her age. She could be forty. Maybe she’s sixty. Her face is brown and weathered, lines cut deep into her forehead and around her mouth. She’s got mousy hair, shorn off around her ears, and Larry King glasses like you see your mom or your aunt wearing in pictures from the 1980s. Her breasts sag against an oversized Tasmanian Devil t-shirt that ripples in the wind above her white tennis shoes. Her jaw is set hard against the leering eyes of onlookers, and she grips a white posterboard sign with both hands:

FAMILY OF 4 WILL WORK FOR FOOD

Imagine a clan of downtrodden folk with grimly set mouths and mousy hair climbing out of that van and marching, except one, who rolls along in a wheelchair, to work . . . on what? Raking someone's leaves?

CHEKHOV'S PIZZA

I'm almost done with the show-quality green peppers. Kathy, the owner, wants the green peppers cut in perfect slices so thin you can see through them, nice and perfect and all the same, like she's going to serve them to the Queen of England instead of a bunch of cheap hood rats. The big oven gushes heat. I take my hat off and wipe the sweat from my head and Kathy comes up behind me and says, "Put your hat back on! The health inspector is due any time now!" She goes in the back to get more pans. Sure, I think, the health inspector has been due any time now for the last six months. I slap the hat back on my head.

The phone rings. I put down the knife and pick up the phone. When the customer's address flashes up on the computer screen, I think No shit, a white person and get my hopes up for a tip.

"Chekhov's," I say. "Pick-up or delivery?"

"I just have a question," a woman says on the other end.

"Okay."

"I have a flyer here that came in the mail. It's got this coupon that says you can get free stuffed mushrooms with any delivery order."

"That's right, ma'am."

"Good," the woman says. "Do you mind telling me what variety of mushrooms those are? As in what kind?"

I want to assure her that we only use free-range, organic mushrooms; that we have a special arrangement with Yoshimitsu Kamikaze, the world-renowned shiitake master, who sends them to us each day, direct from Japan, in the air mail.

"They're, you know——mushrooms."

"Okay," she says.

"Okay."

"Uhhhhhhhhh——"

"Hello?"

"Gimme a second!"

Ten or fifteen seconds pass.

"Oh. Yeah. What size pizzas do you all have?"

"Excuse me?"

"I SAID, WHAT SIZE PIZZAS DO YOU ALL HAVE."

I tell her we have three sizes: Big, Huge, and Gigantor. Then she has just one more question.

"Yes?"

"Can you tell me what movies are playing?"

*****

I'm outside for a quick smoke. Chekhov's Pizza is in a little strip mall with a four-screen movie theater, a few discount stores, a Chinese buffet, and next door to us is some

kind of community center for bums and drug addicts. If you think it has a funny name for a pizza place, that's because Kathy was a drama major or something like that in college and she liked the plays a guy named Chekhov wrote. I think really she's just got a Star Trek fetish, but she says she's never seen it.

"Hey daddy! Hey man!"

Here he comes, wishywashing over from next door. He's got no teeth and he's always begging someone for change or a cigarette. He freaks out the customers and Kathy's called the police about him more than once, but he's no danger to anyone or himself, they say, so they never do anything.

"Sell some pizza?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Some that good pizza," he says. "I'm going buy me one, get me some money."

"You've got to get a job first."

"Good pizza." His lips fall open and his naked gums stick out. His eyes are vacant and he looks like an ugly skeleton baby. "Can I have one?" He motions at the cigarette in my hand.

"I've just got one left." This is a lie.

"Let me get one, man." *Please?*

"Fine," I say, and take a few more deep drags. I flick the short out into the parking lot. He goes after it like a spaniel

and picks it up and holds it in both hands. He beams that gummy grin at me and takes the cigarette around the corner.

*****

When I go back inside I wash my hands, then wrap the peppers in clear plastic and take them into the walk-in. I hide there in the dark a minute and listen to the whirring metallic hum. Kathy opens the door and pokes her head inside.

"You've got a delivery coming up in a minute."

"Where to?"

"I don't know, that's your job."

I leave the cooler and go to the cut table and I look at the ticket. One large cheese pizza and a two-liter orange drink. I already have an idea about where I'll be headed. A two-liter *orange drank.* Below the address at the bottom are the words Not After Dark. Drive down to that part of town and there's no telling what you'll have to deal with. They'll call in an order right before dark and wait for you to drive over there, then decide it's time to go out to buy more weed or liquor, then call back and bitch about it when you didn't sit there and wait for them, and you've got to take it back out to them and they won't even pay for it. Or call you out to vacant lot and rob your ass. I heard a guy working for one of the big chains got stabbed twenty-seven times and they took the pizza and the money and

even the light-up sign off the top of his car. He had thirty bucks on him, something like that.

*****

I grind the gears coming out of the parking lot and merge into rush-hour traffic. I drive into the part of town where guys are always standing outside convenience stores in groups of five or six, leaning on shitty old cars with bright paint jobs and huge chrome wheels. I roll up my windows and lock my doors. I drive a few more blocks and turn into the rundown apartment complex. At the corner is a woman with bleached blonde hair tied back against her skull and streaming down her naked back in a long ponytail. Her roots are showing. She's wearing tight cutoff jean shorts and a loose tanktop. She sticks a thumb out as I turn the corner and I figure she's at work, too. I check the ticket for the apartment number.

I ride through, slowly, looking for the right apartment. The siding on the buildings needs powerwashing. The bushes out front are all yellowed and dying. Five or six kids on bikes ride by, staring at me and shouting. The springs creak when I roll over a speed bump. I stop in front of the apartment. Car's not there. Figures.

I walk up to the apartment. The screen door flaps in the breeze and the storm door hangs half open. I can see part of the

stairs and the banister coming down from the second floor. I ring the doorbell and don't hear anything. I knock.

No response.

I knock again, harder.

"Pizza," I say. "Pizza!"

I'm turning to leave when I hear a woman's voice somewhere inside.

I go back to the door. "You order a pizza?"

"It's mine," she says. I think she asks me to come up the stairs.

"What's that," I say.

"You can just come on up the stairs."

"Company policy says we can't go inside the customer's house," I lie. "Mind coming on out?"

"Okay," she says. "Just a minute."

"Thanks."

I wait by the door, listening to my truck idle. I'm trying to figure out what song is on the radio but can't quite make it out over the motor. The sun is falling behind the trees. I feel goofy, standing here in front of this rundown apartment, wearing this stupid hat, holding a Gigantor cheese pizza and a two-liter orange drank, waiting.

I hear a heavy, hollow thump.

Moments pass and there's another.

"Everything all right," I call out.

A thump. "Just fine."

A rough sliding sound. "Be right there."

The kids ride by on their bikes.

"Hey, white boy!"

"A-yo, give me some pizza!"

They laugh and ride on.

From within, a thump.

Slide.

Thump.

There's a hand coming down the banister. Then the arm, colored in patches. Milky pink and veiny, splotches of brown.

Slide.

Thump.

The arm disappears in shadow, but then the storm door squeals open on its hinges. The sound goes on and on. The woman steps into the light. She's small and bent in a yellow nightgown. Her face is directed vaguely at mine and her eyes look full of cloudy glass. The patchy skin covers one side of her neck, face, and head. There are only a few weak strands of hair clinging to that side of her head, and the skin is wrinkled heavily.

I open the screen door and prop it with my toe. I reach into the hot bag and take out her pizza. She holds a small leather purse. With effort she forces open the metal snap.

"How much do I owe," she says.

"Oh," I say, trying not to stare at her. "Let me see." I look at the ticket and tell her how much she owes.

She takes a crisp new bill from the purse, folded small and tight, and hands it to me. She takes the pizza box. I try to hand her the two-liter, but she has turned to lay the box at the bottom of the stairs. She slowly turns back and takes the two-liter with both hands. I unfold the bill and reach into my pockets to make change.

"You can keep that."

"Sorry," I say. This is what you handed me. I hold out the unfolded bill, but her eyes don't move.

"I know it," she says.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't mind. Don't nobody come around here much. Sure don't get pizza very often. You keep it."

"Thank you," I mumble, not really knowing what else to say. I shove the bill deep in my pocket and turn to go.

"Wait," she says. "Can you just twist this cap for me?"

"You mean open it?"

"Just loosen it. My hands don't work so good, not no more."

I take the bottle from her and twist the cap. The soda inside fizzes. "Do you want me to help you with this," I say. "Take it up the stairs or something?"

"I'll manage," she says. "Always do." She takes the bottle from me and steps back. I let the screen door close between us. She rests the soda on the stairs by the pizza. Have a blessed day, she says, and closes the storm door. The hinges make the squealing noise again. I hear the deadbolt slide into place.

I stand there a moment and I get back in the truck and drive off. When I turn the corner again the blonde is gone. On the way back to the store, I have to stop at a railroad crossing and wait for a freight train to pass. As the rusty cars thunder by, covered in graffiti, my mind wanders and for some reason, I remember something from my childhood. At the edge of the playground, near a stand of pine trees, is a pink hatchling bird that's fallen out of the nest. It has no feathers, just wisps of gray clinging to wrinkled pink skin, bruised blue mounds for eyes, still fused shut, its delicate little bones showing beneath translucent skin. Ants are crawling on it, but it's alive, moving its flipperlike wings, struggling in the dirt. I scoop it up in my hands and brush off the ants and the dirt and take the bird to the teacher. She puts a napkin in a paper cup and sits the bird in there. She says her friend raises chickens

and will help it. But when I ask about it a few days later, the teacher tells me the bird is dead.

I drive back to the strip mall and when I park in front of Chekhov's, the toothless guy is standing there with his tongue hanging out, as if he's waiting on me. He grins at me. I cut off the engine and get out of the truck.

"Yo daddy, can I get one?" His hand is outstretched, reaching for me, before I even shut the truck door. Our fingers brush against each other when I hand him the pack.

EMILY BLOWS OFF HER FOOT

She was cute, had big green eyes and dirty-blonde pixie-cut hair, about eighteen or nineteen years old at the time. She said she could play Vivaldi on the violin, but I never heard her do it. Now, I guess she's about twenty five and getting around on crutches. What happened is she got drunk and blew off her left foot with her dad's shotgun. I know all about it because right after she did it, she left a message on my friend's girlfriend's cell phone, and my friend's girlfriend played it for us to laugh at, over and over. Hey. It's Emily. I'm fucking drunk. And you know what else? I *shot* myself. Right in my *foot*. I shot myself in my left foot——it hurts. Fuck. There's blood everywhere. *Pieces of foot*. All over my parents' bedroom. They're going to be so fucking mad (Emily laughs). They're going to freak! *Oh, my God*——beep.

THIS AMERICAN, HE WAS FROM TENNESSEE

An hour out of Barcelona on the train to Madrid, I thought again about Alicante and what might have been waiting for me there. The train, which had no cryptic initialism, was all right. It was nothing like the ICE in Germany, which flew swift and silent through the mountains and forested backcountry, the black trees and the snow, the people in the valleys sailing little boats on the lakes and bicycling along waterside paths. But at least it wasn't the thunderous noise of the TGV, where I found that rail passes guaranteed passage, but not a seat. I'd had to cram myself into the back of the engine car with two French hippies who were reading a battered copy of Langston Hughes's collected poems and hang on, looking out the shuddering Plexiglas door, while the train bore southward at two hundred miles an hour, all the way from Paris to the Spanish border. And it wasn't like the crowded madness of the Talgo running the Perpignan to Barcelona line, which was standing-room-only and jerked through rocky passes at tremendous speed, here and there skirting the outrageous blue Mediterranean, and all the time pressing the mass of riders into each other left, right, forward, and back, feeling like it might fly apart at any moment and smelling like sweat and Spanish beer. This train was about

as good as a British train, which is to say it was like taking a ride on Amtrak, if Amtrak were ever on time.

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My last night staying at the hostel in the narrow alley off the Plaza Real, I went out with a Canadian girl who'd been staying in the bunk across from mine. We'd glanced at each other, coming and going, for each of the three nights I was there. We walked that evening around the Barrio Gotico and I told her about the wedding I'd seen earlier that day. I had been exploring those same twisted streets in the shadows of the ancient buildings with their irregular windows and their clotheslines hanging high above, colorful garments like flags in the breeze, when the tight rows of apartments parted and I was in a little square, standing in the glorious warm Catalonian sunlight, and there was a beautiful white stone church, hundreds of years old, with spires and stained-glass windows.

"People were sitting around with sketchbooks, drawing it," I said.

"I think I know where you're talking about," she said. "But then, there are a lot of churches in Barcelona, and a lot of people sitting around with sketchpads."

"Then these two beautiful people burst through the front doors. The bride in this fancy white dress with a long train and the groom in his tux. They were both tall and blonde and looked

like movie stars, or royalty. They glowed, really glowed. There was a crowd of people behind them and a bunch of guys with big cameras gathering around the steps, taking pictures."

"Sounds like something from a movie."

"It was," I said. "Just like something from a movie.

She took me to a street vendor and we ate felafels. The balls of chick-pea dough browned in bubbling oil, and the vendor took them out with tongs and pressed them in hot pita bread.

"You want our homemade sauce," he said, pointing with the tongs at a jug of creamy pinkish stuff. "Secret ingredient is peanut butter. Is very good."

"Sure," I said. "Put some extra on there." The warmth of the pita and the crisp of the hot falafel and the cool of the greens, the tomatoes, and sauce ran together in my mouth.

We got a two-euro jug of wine and went down to the beach. The water flowed brown from the harbor during the day and colored the sand a dark khaki, but at night the place looked beautiful and the sound of the waves was soothing. She pressed her toes in the sand and told me about Switzerland. She was an *au pair* there for a family that lived on Lake Geneva. She was taking a month-long holiday before returning to Switzerland to start her third year working for them. She went back to Canada to visit her own family twice a year, the airfare paid by her employers. She loved the snowy mountains, the lake, and the

children she cared for. There were two girls, six and eight years old, and a boy who was eleven.

"But I love it when I can get away," she said, "and come to places like this and be around people who aren't super-rich. You know, just real people. That's my favorite thing about traveling."

"Makes sense to me," I told her.

"What about you?"

"I'm from Sevierville, Tennessee, and I've never been anywhere. I think that's the best answer."

"Tennessee," she said. "I guess that makes you one of those Southern gentlemen."

"I don't know. Maybe so. Me and a buddy of mine are here doing a study-abroad thing. We came from East Tennessee State on an exchange program with a school in Brighton."

"Ah, England."

"They've got this pier in Brighton, you wouldn't believe it. Rides and everything on it. Anyway, we wanted to visit Europe. Prague, then Munich and Berlin. Then to Paris, and we parted ways because he was going to meet his family. They'd always wanted to go to Paris, so they made a plan to meet there."

"You didn't like Paris? It's really beautiful."

"I did, but I wanted to check out Spain while I had some time and some money left. So I came to Barcelona after a couple of days there. I climbed up the Eiffel Tower and had a coffee and croissant in a little outdoor cafe, and that was good enough for me. We're going to meet back up in Madrid, and fly back to England from there."

She sighed. "Oh, Madrid's a dump," she said.

"Really? What's so bad about it?"

"Crowded, dirty, rude people. It's dreadful."

"That's what everybody told me about Paris. But I thought Paris was great."

"Maybe," she said. "When are you planning on going?"

"Tomorrow."

"That's too bad! You could be going to Alicante instead."

"Where's that?"

"Farther south, on the coast. I know some people staying there. They have a hot tub." She grinned at me. "Come on. It'll be fun. You'll love it," she said, "and my friends will think you're a riot."

"I don't know," I said. "I do have plans. I'd hate to leave a friend hanging." I wanted to say that he wouldn't blow me off to go to some resort with a mysterious girl, but I didn't, because it might not have been true. I wouldn't have blamed him.

On the walk back, we ducked into a little bar and ordered one-liter mugs of Estrella beer. While we drank and talked, a smoky-skinned man came up with a bundle of fresh-cut roses, singing a ballad in Spanish and peddling the flowers. The cafe was full of people, many men and women, Spanish and tourists, laughing, talking, drinking, smoking.

"One euro, one euro," the roses-man said, brandishing them, "for the beautiful lady."

I took a one euro coin from my pocket and bought a rose, while the man sang his song. I gave it to the Canadian girl and she smelled it and waved it about theatrically, and posed for a second with her eyes looking coyly away and the rose petals touching her lips. The man moved away to pester the men and women drinking at the other tables.

A little while later we were climbing into her bunk. We pulled the curtain shut and started to fumble with each other's clothes, whispering, trying not to make too much noise. I got behind her and kissed her shoulders and buried my face in her hair, which smelled like saltwater from the beach and cigarette smoke from the bar. I slid my hand between her legs.

"I can't tonight," she said.

"What do you mean," I said. Then I felt the string. "Oh." I wasn't sure what to do, so I pulled my fingers out of her underwear and played with her bellybutton. She turned and kissed

me and pushed me onto my back. Her mouth went down my neck, across my chest, down my abdomen. Neither of us had asked the other's name.

*****

I woke up in her bed the next morning and she was gone. It didn't look like any of her things were there, either. I pulled my jeans back up around my waist and dug through the blankets to find my shirt. I went into the lobby and had some coffee. She wasn't there. I took a shower and shaved in the communal bathroom. My towel smelled a little sour from drying with it and then cramming, damp, it in the backpack I had been living out of for sixteen days. I went back to the room, but she wasn't there. I climbed in bed and waited. I looked at my watch. I packed and got ready to go. While I rolled my clothes and stuffed them in the backpack, I found a scrap of paper near the end of the bed. An address in a woman's handwriting. It read:

Cami Vell Altea, 56

03581 L'Alfàs del Pi

Imogen

I held the paper in my fingers. I could change my plans, I thought. Let my buddy hang out in Madrid by himself. He would find a good time on his own, I was sure, and once I finally got back in touch with him in Brighton and told him the story, he would get a kick out of it, and press me for details. If he was

here right now, he would tell me to get on down there. I could taxi to the address, and then I'd only have to look around.

I balled up the paper and threw it away. I swung the backpack over my shoulder and checked out at the front desk, and walked the fifteen minutes to the train station. I had another coffee while I waited, and then I boarded the midday train to Madrid.

*****

I leaned into the glass, watching the brown countryside blur. The word *Imogen* stuck in my mind. I thought it must have been her name, but maybe not. It could have been some Spanish word, a part of the address. What kind of a name was Imogen, anyway? I decided that it must be her name, and that she wanted me to remember her even if I never saw her again. I wondered if she really expected me to go to Alicante and try to find her, and I wondered if she would remember me, nameless, and if she did, how she would do so. Maybe she would tell a friend about me one day, and say That Guy in Barcelona, or This American, He Was from Tennessee.

I tried to think about Madrid. I knew I wanted to walk down Gran Via at night, and see the lights and the buildings, or find an English girl and ride the length of it in a taxi. I hoped my friend had arrived and secured our room in the hostel. Neither of us had a cell phone, spoke Spanish, or had ever been to

Madrid, so it was a gamble that I would find him waiting there in the hostel bar, drinking a glass of Estrella beer like we planned. It occurred to me that it was almost as much a gamble as heading to Alicante, wherever that was, and finding Imogen, or That Au Pair from Canada With Curly Brown Hair, sunbathing by the blue Mediterranean.

There was a gentle rain in Madrid and it was night. Estacion de Atocha was very big and very crowded. There was a big garden in it, and the station gleamed everywhere with a muted richness, like all century-old train stations do. I just wanted to get outside and stretch my legs and take in the cool night air. I made my way through the crushing, breathing throng and up to the surface. I found myself next to a busy street, standing in the rain beneath a high Art Deco arch of glass and metal. I looked out at the lights of the city, the grand old buildings, blended together by light and rain, wavering, shimmering like an Impressionist painting. Olive-skinned, well-dressed couples walked by, the bright high heels of the women clicking the pavement, the men holding their umbrellas. I decided to find a taxi and try to get to the hostel. Maybe I could beat my buddy there and I would be the one waiting with a glass of Estrella, thinking about how I would tell him about my last night in Barcelona——if I told anyone about it at all.

SOMETHING HAPPENED

Pat stood by the road, looking down at the pond and imagining a cement mixer parked there in the yard, the big drum on the back rotating slowly and wet cement filling the pond. Then she thought you probably wouldn't fill in a pond with a cement truck, but it didn't matter, the pond would have to be filled anyway. They had it put there not long after they bought the house. Originally it wasn't so deep, but they had it redone after that first summer when a fleece of thick cattails spread from bank to bank and created a haven for water moccasins. An orange-tipped butterfly seesawed into her view and she watched it float down to the water and then careen away through the air.

Just as well, she thought, that the pond would have to be filled, since the fish were probably all going to die. A rainbow slick tinted the surface of the pond and the whole yard smelled like gasoline. Pat frowned and felt a stab of guilt for thinking of the fish, but they had been there for the last twenty years, lying dormant through the winters and always coming back into murky view when warm weather returned. The fat brown fish were due any time; right now, Pat thought, they should be rising from the mud, hungry for the smelly pellets in the blue jug on the shelf in the pantry. Pat thought she heard a telephone ringing in the grass by the edge of the pond.

*****

Pat woke in the night. Jim, she said, did you hear that? but he snored in bed beside her. She shook him and said Jim, wake up. I think something happened. What, he said, and rose up in bed. What's the matter? Didn't you hear that, Pat said, it was loud. I don't hear anything, he said. No, she said, not now, a minute ago. I thought I heard something. Be quiet, he said, I'm trying to listen. They listened. Silence. Do you think I should go look around, Jim said after a minute. No, she said, and drew the covers up around herself. Probably nothing. Pat rolled on her side and peered through the darkness at the digital clock on the dresser. 2:05. She didn't hear anything else except wind whistling through Jim's nostrils until the sirens came fifteen minutes later. They got out of bed and wrapped themselves in housecoats. The blue and red and yellow flashes broke up the gloom in their house. They opened the door and stepped onto the porch to greet noise, trucks, emergency vehicles, brilliant lights coloring the pines and reflecting off the pond, the racket of idling diesel engines and the voices of dispatchers bursting through radio static. Groups of neighbors stood by the pond or watched from the road. Sherriff's deputies and volunteer firemen rushed back and forth, ordering the onlookers to clear out of the way. A car lay upside down in the water at the far edge of the pond, illuminated by spotlights.

The men from the rescue squad were in the black, belly-deep water, trying to gain access to the car's interior. It didn't take the rescue squad long to secure a chain to the car, right it with a winch, and tear its twisted body open with portable hydraulic spreader-cutters.

*****

Pat looked around. The phone had quit ringing. Pat stepped over the tracks the emergency vehicles left in the ground, picked her way around broken glass, fast food wrappers, a hubcap, a shoe. They had promised to clean up all this debris. Great black scars went from the pond to the road where the wrecker pulled the car free of the mud and drove off with it. Pat looked out at the pond and saw something floating in the water. A headrest. A curl of black. Weather-stripping from around the windows, torn away when the rescue squad opened the car like a can of Spam. Questions ran in circles in Pat's brain. Why did this happen, what am I supposed to learn from this? The car was gone and the bodies were gone, the rescue trucks and the gawking neighbors were gone. What does this all mean, Pat was asking herself, when she saw the cell phone lying in the grass. Just as she bent to pick it up, it started ringing again.

GRANMA NAN

Julian was at Granma Nan's. She picked him up from his house on the outskirts of Morehead City and drove him in her delightfully loud blue Pontiac Firebird all the way up to Kinston——this after working all week in a stinking factory that made her always smell like latex and chemicals. She sat Julian at the kitchen bar with a hot dog and a comic book, and reached into the fridge and pulled out a red and white can of Budweiser. She cracked it open.

Granma Nan. That's a beer.

Yeah.

Why you drinking that?

Because it makes me feel good.

But Granma Nan! Beer is bad for you.

Granma Nan sighed heavily and went to the sink and poured the beer out. Then she sat back down at the kitchen bar and lit a Misty Menthol Ultra-Light 100.

DE RIGUEUR

Kendra said something about her and Pearl being out of town next week, so she was bringing Pearl over to spend the weekend here with me. But there was plenty of time before they got here, so I was sitting on the couch, smoking a joint, watching a marathon of *The Rockford Files* on TV. I wondered if Rockford really was about to shoot down an airplane with a .357 Magnum just like the one on my dresser. Rockford——a P.I. with Elvis hair and sideburns——lives in a trailer on the beach, drives a bad-ass Pontiac Firebird, has pretty women hanging around all the time, and——wait a minute——yeah. Rockford can shoot down an airplane with a .357 Magnum. Go look that shit up if you don't believe me.

*****

She ran through the door wearing big candy-apple red sunglasses and feathers in her hair. I picked her up under her arms and swung her around in a circle. When I put her down she gave me a wet kiss on my cheek. She looked around and saw the mess in the kitchen.

"Hey, Gibson! What you been doing, painting?" Pearl called us by our first names. Kendra's idea, but I was fine with it. Why not?

"Just a little bit," I said.

"Gibson," Kendra said.

"Hey, Kendra," I said. "Come on in."

Pearl went straight to the TV in the living room and started messing with the channels. Kendra came in and I pulled a half-pound bag of M&M's out of the kitchen drawer.

"Look what I've got," I said.

"M&M's," Pearl said, her eyes wide. I took her the bag and she ripped it open. She poured us each a handful and we ate them. The coating of M&M's, by the way, is made out of crushed-up bugs, so they are definitely not vegetarian. I learned that on a program on National Public Radio, which I listen to in my truck since hearing the art teacher at the community college talk about it. They've got some interesting stuff on there. I guess Kendra don't know that about the crushed-up bugs, and it makes me laugh.

"That's enough," Kendra said when we each filled our palms a second time. "She hasn't even had dinner yet."

"No dinner yet? She been keeping you busy, Pearl?"

"Yep!"

"What you guys been up to?"

"Well," she said, "Me and Kendra——"

"*Kendra and I.*"

"——Kendra and *I* just got done *dumpster*-diving."

"Dumpster-what?"

Pearl told me all about how her and Kendra went to dumpsters and collected expired rolls, candy, drinks, whatever else had been thrown out. And plenty of neat stuff had been thrown out. They found things like a perfectly-good lamp, missing only the bulb and the shade, an astronomy textbook, and, Pearl said, "These *sweet* shades. Here, you try them." She took them off and handed them to me. I put them on. Pearl laughed and went back to messing with the TV. She settled on some cartoons and sat down Indian-style on the carpet.

"Listen, Gibson," Kendra said. "We need to talk about something."

"Okay, lay it on me."

She crossed her arms and jerked her head at Pearl.

"All right," I said. "Pearl, you just sit in here and watch TV a minute."

"Okay."

Kendra and I went in the kitchen. She stood by the fridge and I leaned back against the sink. We kept our voices down, rasping at each other under our breaths so Pearl couldn't hear us, like we usually did when we had these discussions. Kendra didn't listen to anything I had to say.

"Fuck's sake," I said. "Digging around in someone else's trash?"

"She needs to learn self-sufficiency. To live outside this despotic society's norms."

"Jesus," I said. "You get that out of a book or something? She's just a kid."

"Out of a *book* or something," she said, and stuck her tongue out at me——Kendra hasn't been quite the same since she took that women's studies class. Kendra's always been taking some class. She's always planned on going to New York City or somewhere to be a psychiatrist, or an art critic, or a burlesque dancer, or something. Kendra must have taken about every class the community college has. She's a waitress at this trendy, edgy place downtown, the kind where people read at, and fills in sometimes at the bookstore around the corner.

"Gibson," she said, like she was talking to a kid or a dummy. Kendra squinted and crinkled her nose. "Gibson——Have you been smoking?"

"What? No, you know I quit smoking."

"Not cigarettes." She sniffed. "Gibson, I can smell it."

"You're crazy. You're being——a dummy."

"Whatever," she said. "Listen——"

Pearl stomped in wearing my cowboy boots. They went up to her knees and flopped around when she walked. "Hey! I need my sunglasses back." I handed them to her and she stuck them on her

face. She went back into the living room, and belted out a song along with the TV.

"——just get her something *healthful* to eat and make sure she gets to bed before too late. Okay?"

"No problem," I said. "So what's this big thing we have to talk about?"

"Right," Kendra said. She reached in her bag and drew out a folder with some papers in it. "Stuff for you to sign."

I took the folder. "What is this," I said.

"Consent form."

"Consent? You going to get her a tattoo? Pierce her nose?"

"Be serious, Gibson. We already talked about this. Like, weeks ago."

But I hadn't really paid much attention then, because Kendra's always had these pipe dreams that never amounted to much. Usually about one a week. The details of the conversation came back to me.

"Wait, what——you're really moving?"

*****

When they still hadn't arrived by the time Rockford shot down his plane, I figured they must have got tied up with something and wouldn't show for a while yet. I opened a can of Budweiser and studied over the canvas I was working on. It was painted mostly blue and laid out on the kitchen floor. After a

while, I poured some Bud on it and threw some cadmium red on there and pressed my foot down in the middle. Then, a knock at the door. When I went to the door I made two purple footprints on the linoleum. It was a chubby guy there with a stack of magazines under one arm. When I saw him I thought, Unbutton your collar, you're going to choke!

"My name's Tripp," he said. "We go door to door like this and spread the word of Jesus Christ. We just want to leave you with a copy of our magazine, it's the most widely-circulated magazine in the world, forty-two million copies a month——"

"Okay."

"——to be a companion to your own copy of the Bible. We know most people have a Bible——"

"I sure do." I lay my .357 on it, I thought. A Ruger GP100 with custom walnut grips.

"——anyhow, this month's issue, it's about where to look in the Bible to find all the answers. All the answers are in there, my friend."

"Okay," I said. Tripp was looking at me funny. Or maybe I was looking at him funny. He gave me a copy of the magazine.

"Well," he said. "We'd be glad to stop by next time we're in the neighborhood and talk about the Gospel."

"All right. Sounds good."

"Have a good evening."

"God bless The Confederacy."

"What?"

"Nothing. Y'all have a nice night."

I closed the door and went back into the kitchen. *The Rockford Files* had gone off and something else had come on. I sat down in the kitchen floor and straddled the canvas with my legs. I took a sip of beer and leafed through that magazine the missionary left me, and thought, I've got it. I ought to take Pearl shooting this weekend. She's never been shooting, and besides, Kendra would hate it when she found out. While I sat there on the linoleum like that, with one sole covered in dry paint, Kendra and Pearl showed up.

*****

We adults stood in the kitchen, hissing quietly at each other, with Pearl in the next room singing along to the TV.

"Yes, Gibson," Kendra said. "To Portland."

"Like, in Oregon?"

"Yes, like in Oregon. My friend is opening a coffee shop there. He needs someone to manage——"

"Who is this *he?*"

"Chris," Kendra said. "From the restaurant."

"Well, Hell's bells. I don't have to sign this," I said, raising my voice a little. Then quietly, "You can't take her all the way across the country, stay with some man——"

"It's not like that."

"She needs to be close to home."

"Home," Kendra said. "What home?" She gestured around with her hands. "Here, with her laid-off dad? Jesus, Gibson. I know you're trying, or I want to think you are——"

"Kendra. Something will come up. It's only been a few months. And besides," I said, "you can get a restaurant-manager job around here. Lord knows, you been doing that kind of work long enough."

"It's not just about that, Gibson. I don't want her growing up around here; all these bigots and rednecks and religious fanatics. I mean, do you?"

I leaned back against the sink and looked at her. She stood there with her arms crossed. She looked at Pearl, still there in the living room, watching some crazy kids' show on TV. The biggest thing to come to town lately was a chicken-processing plant, built where the old textile mill used to be.

"I don't guess it's so bad around here," I said.

Kendra threw up her arms. "Fine, Gibson. Just——think about it. Okay?"

I told her I'd think about it and stuck the papers in the kitchen drawer. Kendra kissed Pearl good-bye and told her she'd pick her up in a couple of days. I watched her back out into the road and drive away. The stickers and the clearcoat on her car

were peeling, and a little smoke came out of the muffler. A hubcap was missing. I kept looking out the window. An old woman lives across the road from me. Her yard is decorated with these concrete pedestal things that sort of look like bird-baths, but they have big clay flowerpots on top. Ferns and peonies and things spill out of them, green and white and pink and orange. Pearl came into the kitchen and tugged my arm.

"Gibson. What are we going to do now?"

"Just a minute," I said. I went into my bedroom and there on the dresser beside the lamp sat the gold-edged King James Bible. On top of that was the big blue-black revolver. I picked up the gun. The safety was on. When I turned, Pearl was standing there in the doorway, still wearing her sweet shades and my cowboy boots. She pushed the sunglasses up onto her head and looked at me.

"What are you doing?" She looked at the gun.

"Not much," I said. "Come with me."

"Okay."

We went out in the yard. I stood there, looking across the road at those clay flowerpots, thinking about how satisfying it would be to blow them all to hell.

"What are we doing," Pearl said.

"Ever been shooting?"

"Nope."

"You want to go?"

"I don't know. That sounds kind of redneck to me."

"Redneck? Hell, it's loads of fun. Just point and *bang!*"

"I guess," she said. "Can you go shooting in the dark? It's starting to get dark out."

I looked down at the little girl standing there in my yard, wearing my cowboy boots and her big red sunglasses, pointing out the obvious. It *was* getting dark. I looked across the road to the flowerpots again. Headlights sliced the gravel drive and the old woman's car heaved into view like a boat. I figured the shooting range was closed.

"It's probably better to go during the day," I said.

"Oh."

"I know," I said. "Let's paint! We can go shooting tomorrow."

"Okay!"

She followed me back inside. There was a bucket under the kitchen sink, full of tubes of paint. I told her to get it out while I put the gun away. Instead of laying it on the Bible, I locked it away in the gun cabinet next to the deer rifle and the .22 automatic. When I went back in the kitchen, she had kicked off my boots and was already sitting in the floor, her sunglasses pushed up into her hair. In one hand she had the

scrap of cardboard box I use for a palette, and with the other she held a brush and was painting something on the blue canvas.

"What you working on?"

"It's a daisy."

"Ok," I said, and sat down and took a brush and got some paint off the palette, and started painting a daisy too.

"Gibson," Pearl said, "what's that foot in the middle of the picture for?"

"That's what you call Abstract Expressionism," I said.

"Looks like a foot to me."

I tried to explain what I learned in the painting class I took as an elective when I went back to school after the plant closed. All I did was work on lots of textures and layers, and I wound up getting an A in the class. Since then, I've splattered paint all over my kitchen floor, working on a new project every few weeks. Well, Pearl wanted to do a footprint too. She did hers in phthalo green, "because feet smell like green." Then she wanted to do a handprint in titanium white, and made me do a handprint next to hers in Mars black.

"I thought Mars was supposed to be red," she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never been there. It's a little too far to drive."

"Is Portland too far to drive?" She had pulled her sunglasses back down over her eyes and was looking at the

painting we'd made. I was at a loss for words, so I held open my arms and she came over to me. She buried her face against my chest and I held her close, wrapped tight in my arms, thinking I'd never let her go again. I looked down at our handprints on the canvas, hers small and white and mine broad and black. The fingertips overlapped. I kissed her forehead and she put her tiny white palm in my big black one, and I realized I was the one who'd been crying when she said, "It'll be okay, Gibson. I'm sure they have an airport there."

*****

After we carefully signed our names in permanent alizarin crimson, I drove some nails into the wall in the living room and we hung the painting up so everyone who came over could see it. Then Pearl said she was hungry, so we got in my truck and headed into town to get cheeseburgers.

"That's not vegetarian," she said, "or even healthful."

"That's okay. You like cheeseburgers, don't you?"

"Yeah. I miss cheeseburgers, actually."

"Good. We can get milkshakes, too."

"And tomorrow we'll go shooting?"

"Tomorrow we'll go shooting."

"I don't know if Kendra's going to like that!"

"Well, Kendra's not always right," I said. "The fact is, knowing how to handle a gun is a key to self-sufficiency. Then

you'll be able to live outside this, uh——despotic society's norms. You might even say it's *de rigueur* these days for Southern women to know how to use a gun."

"What's day-rigoor mean?"

"It means——like, necessary. I heard it on the radio."

The moon was full and white over the highway. We had the windows rolled down and the cab was filled with a rush of cool air and the sound of the crickets. On the way back, I thought, we'd stop at Wal-Mart and pick up some targets and a box of ammo——for the .22, that is, not the .357. I was sure she'd wind up being a natural. Pearl played with the radio dial until she found a song she liked and began to sing along. I mumbled through the song with her the best I could, even though I didn't know all the words.

ONE DAY YOUR SHIP WILL COME IN

Outside in the cool of the smoking area you look at the sky, sunless and gray. You can smell the stink of your own stale sweat as it dries on your skin. You smoke a cigarette and drink a Pepsi from the drink machine in the breakroom where the TV is always playing *Headline News* and they are always talking about Caylee Anthony or The New Great Depression with an occasional sidebar about a heroic family dog or someone, somewhere, who just won the lottery. A 275-pound woman declares through the half-inch gap between her blackened teeth:

The first thing I'm going to do's get me one a them Mercedes-Benzes. I always wanted me one a them cars, and now I'm going to have one.

You buy some lottery tickets on the way home. You've got four dollars, so you get four one-dollar tickets and you scratch them off in the car. Flakes of that slivery stuff float down to the place between the console and the driver's seat. They collect on the carpet with the hamburger bun crumbs. You scratch . . . nothing . . . nothing . . . a dollar . . . nothing. You take the dollar-winner back into the convenience store and buy another ticket.

JUST SLOW DOWN

Ariel walked in circles on the back patio, smoking a cigarette, taking long deep drags that burned her throat and left a foul taste in her mouth, then blowing the smoke out through her lips which made a loud whooshing sound, and with each whoosh she switched the cigarette from one hand to the other and crossed the free arm over her chest and cupped the other elbow in that hand and put the cigarette to her lips again and inhaled and then held the cigarette out away from her body and tapped it three times with her index finger to knock the ash off, and she thought that she really ought to slow down; cigarettes are meant to help a person relax, and the last thing she was doing was relaxing, but when she looked at the cigarette burning away between the chipped half-moons of red nail polish on her index and middle fingertips and saw that it was burned down almost to the filter she felt a new pang of frustration because she had once again wasted what should have been a brief respite from the pressures of her life by walking in fast circles, ellipses and figure-eights, not really circles, barefoot on the back patio only thinking about the pressures of her life, that and thinking about not thinking about the pressures of her life, which really weren't so severe at all, she thought, since she could think of others who would likely

gladly trade her the pressures of her life for theirs, people like her best and oldest friend Brandi, not that she thought Brandi regretted having children and would do away with them or anything, or even think about doing away with them, but surely Brandi, she imagined, would find little to complain about if she didn't have to feed, clothe, shelter, entertain, educate, discipline, and manage three children——Brandi who complained about none of this and joked over the phone about going out and riding some strange while her husband was in prison for illegal possession of a firearm and possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute——people like her cousin Jo and her aunt Debbie, whom she worked alongside at the pharmaceutical supplies plant the summer before she went away to college; Jo and Debbie who spent five hours and thirty minutes at the rate of nine dollars and change, before taxes, filling up clear plastic bags with little syringe stoppers made of smooth black rubber, making sure no foreign objects or defective pieces made their way into the clear plastic bags, tying off the clear plastic bags and stuffing them into cardboard boxes and taping shut the cardboard boxes and sending them down the line to the shipping department; Debbie who then spent thirty minutes in the breakroom eating cold vending-machine sandwiches, talking about what she would do if she won the lottery, congratulating the other middle-aged women on the marriages and conceptions of

their progeny; Jo, who sat outside on the metal tables in the smoking area, smoking, drinking Diet Pepsi and talking shit about the plant managers, because we could run this plant just as good as any of them fools in the front office, they ain't no smarter than we are, and who went back inside after half an hour and sat back down next to Debbie and resumed checking, packing, tying, taping, sending off boxes of rubber stoppers for five more hours and thirty more minutes, before driving home early in the morning smelling like latex condoms, Jo who dyed her hair fire-engine red and never had been farther away from her hometown, their hometown, than the beach sixty miles away, even though Jo had told everyone she knew when she was still a teenager, only a few years ago but a lifetime ago, that she would one day run off to New York City or Paris, France, and while she thought about her cousin Jo, who she hadn't spoken with in months or seen in almost four years, Ariel noticed a little black mark on her knee and reached down to brush it away with her hand, and when it didn't go anywhere she realized she had missed a spot shaving her legs and knew it would aggravate her all night, unless she went upstairs immediately and got her razor and nicked away the missed spot, which upon inspection was revealed to consist of three tiny brown hairs, not entire hairs, just three truncated little bits of hair, sticking up just high enough above the otherwise slick pale skin of her right knee to

be visible if you were paying close attention to her legs, just long enough to be felt by the fingertips, and she wondered if she had missed any other spots, since the shaving had been sort of a rush job anyway, not that she really had any reason to be in a hurry, other than it was almost dusk on a Saturday, and she was supposed to be meeting the girls in just a little while——as silly as it seemed to her, or clichéd, she did in fact belong to a small group of other young women with whom she would go out, usually on Saturday evenings, but occasionally on Thursdays or Fridays, for dinner and drinks and chatting; it all felt really frivolous, sometimes, she thought, and she referred to these other young women variously as the girls or my girls or sometimes my bitches, and that is what seemed cliché, that she referred to them by these names, that they were all lumped into a unit, an accessory, disposable, like the condoms with big colorful cartoonish daisies on the wrappers lying unused in the bottom of her purse, and if she packed up and moved far away they would be replaced by another group, as her place in their group would be filled by someone else——downtown, if she even went out that night at all, because she had the beginnings of a headache and really she wanted to just avoid all contact with other human beings, so help her God, and entertain elaborate suicidal ideations, but she just stood there on the small cement back patio, the grit of it sticking to the bottoms of her feet,

and she was thinking that maybe she did have some kind of horrific psychological disease, because Ariel knew she would pace and fret and she would burn, burn, unable to control the surge of energy within herself or direct the torrent of thoughts flooding her brain, the thunderstorm growing ever more violent until it peaked and ceased abruptly and she collapsed, inside and outside, even though she had been to a therapist who assured her that she was more-or-less normal, in which case, then, she thought, everyone must do this kind of stuff all the time, and she was only stuck in a rut, to keep applying familiar phrases to her situation, so she would immediately go inside and up the stairs to the bathroom, take her razor and apply it to the spot she missed and rinse the three stray bits of hair down the sink, that's what she would do, and that night she would go out with the girls and maybe get fiercely drunk and dance on a table, even though such a thing would be a little out of character, and wind up dusting off one of those daisy-wrapped condoms and work with a dark stranger toward some sort of a resolution; all these things, she might do them, you never know, and she took one last drag from the cigarette and spat the smoke out because it left a bad taste in her mouth, from the burning of the filter, and ground the butt out on the patio and walked over to the big green trash can and lifted the black lid and dropped the smoldering butt inside and let the lid fall shut with a hollow

sound and hoped that it wouldn't set the trash inside on fire; what if the ember from the butt set something inside the trash can on fire, a napkin or something, a fast-food wrapper, and the fire somehow spread to the wooden fence surrounding the small cement patio and eventually burned the entire apartment complex down——you've got to stop this, she thought to herself, Stop this fucking shit, she said to herself, and moved her lips and tongue and teeth silently making the words Stop This Fucking Shit without actually saying them, and then said aloud, to no one and anyone, Stop this fucking shit.

You keep doing this, she said, over and over again, it's like a vicious cycle——and Ariel felt foolish for actually saying that, a vicious cycle——you know right where this is going. Just slow down, she said, Try to just slow down.