

I MIGHT BE WRONG and AS IF IT WAS MADE OF GLASS

by

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These two stories of exceptional length feature narrators whose idiosyncratic moral dilemmas are indicative of larger social ills. Instead of the traditional epiphany so prevalent in 20th Century short stories, the characters and readers undergo a series of successive revelations.

I MIGHT BE WRONG and AS IF IT WAS MADE OF GLASS

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by

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For Nell, and for Zach, and for Uncle Al

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I MIGHT BE WRONG

Bill and I are in a band and we're God-awful. We're only thirteen, and Rick is a year older, but still, we're terrible. I've been playing guitar for four years, Bill for three, and Rick and Jeffy have been together as a rhythm section for a while now. That doesn't change the fact that we were kicked out of our first and only gig—a *retirement* home, for Christ's sake—before we could get through the second song in the setlist, a cover of "Satisfaction." But here on this mid-July Friday, as we walk home from baseball practice, Bill tells me he's got two foolproof ideas for making our band better: One is going down to the intersection of two abandoned tobacco trails in the woods out behind his house with our guitars, just like how Robert Johnson went down to the crossroads and sold his soul to the devil to play guitar. The other idea is to smoke a lot of weed.

We've got our bats slung over our shoulders. Bill's twirling his cap around his finger. I'm looking at the sidewalk, kicking a rock a few feet ahead of me.

"Rick and Jeffy said they could each kick in \$15," Bill says. "You and I kick in \$15, we're set. We'll have plenty."

"Not sure about that," I say. To be honest, I'm not sure about any of it, but I don't tell him that. Thing is, we've been practicing together for ten months and we're still as uneven as we were when we started. Jeffy can't walk a bass line to save his life and Rick always speeds up no matter what track we play. Me? I've spent more allowances on replacing snapped G-strings than I want to admit. And don't get me *started* on Bill's singing.

“What’s not to be sure about? Tell me, Murph. You think Keith Richards got the riff for ‘Satisfaction’ when he was sitting on the crapper? Shit no. He was high.” Bill can go on like this.

“What do the Beatles, the Stones, and Zeppelin have in common?”

I think for a moment before answering.

“They’re British?” I say.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

Sometimes I think Bill will be awfully disappointed when we don’t turn out to be The Who, that we won’t even be The Stooges. I doubt I’m the only one who was half persuaded to join the band because Bill’s sister Kat is a seventeen-year-old stone cold fox and he promised all practices would be at his house. Rick, Jeffy, and I are enjoying spending summer vacation seeing Kat prance around the house in shorts and a spaghetti strap top.

“I don’t know,” I say. “They’re *talented?*”

“Goddamnit, Murph,” Bill says. “They did a shit ton of drugs, is what. Come on.”

And the whole Robert Johnson bit? He’s been on about it for *months*. Every weekend he’s sure to tell us the whole story: In the early 1920’s in the backwoods of Mississippi, a young black man named Robert Johnson had the itch to be the best bluesman around. For a while he hung with some of the Delta kings—Son House, Ike Zimmerman—though he wasn’t too good at playing guitar. So someone tells him to go to Dockery’s plantation at midnight. And there, in the hot, moist Mississippi night, with bullfrogs croaking and dragonflies buzzing, would be the crossroads. He goes there, Robert Johnson does, and he meets a large black man (and here Bill adds that this man’s face can’t be seen) who takes his guitar, tunes it, and hands it back. “From

there,” Bill says, “he became a master in less than a year.” All this because the young bluesman supposedly sold his soul to the devil, even though to the three of us it sounds like he got his guitar fixed because he was too dumb to figure it out himself. Bill says no, that it was the devil who took that guitar. “And that’s why we got the blues like we got the blues today.”

The first time Bill played ‘Down By the Crossroads,’ each of us cringed at his strained voice and stringy guitar.

“He sure *sounds* like the devil,” Jeffy said.

“And that guitar don’t sound too good, neither,” Rick added.

“It’s all about *perspective*,” Bill told us. “Got to imagine it like you haven’t heard none of the rest of it.”

Bill tells me the whole story again—maybe the millionth time I’ve heard it—and at some point I realize we’re not in stride and that Bill stopped walking a few seconds ago.

“So are you in?” Bill asks. I shove my hand in my pocket and shrug.

“I guess.”

“No ‘I guess.’ You’re in.”

“It just seems stupid, Bill.”

“How?”

“I mean, where are we going to get weed from?”

“I got a guy.”

“Who?”

“Craig Percy.”

“That kid’s an idiot,” I say. “He wouldn’t know pot from basil.”

“Would *you*?”

I wouldn't.

His parents will be out for the night drinking with their friends. It'll be just the four of us and Kat in the house. I agree to throw in some cash and Bill smiles. When we get to my street, Bill says to meet at his place Saturday night for a jam session.

Rick told me he once went on a date with a chick that looked a lot like Kat—jet black hair with bangs, green eyes, swan neck, and this ass you couldn't believe. I asked him what, at our age, you did on a date.

"You know. You hug and stuff," he said.

"*Hug?*"

"So you can feel, you know. Press up on their titties."

"Press up on their titties."

We were riding our bikes to the pool and arrived at a stop sign. When he looked over and saw the face I was giving him, he frowned and said, "You don't know *shit* about girls, Murph."

Which is true. But neither does he. And that night Jeffy and I are hanging out at his place in the backyard, lying on the cool grass staring at the stars, brighter tonight than usual because the power's gone out for whatever reason. He tells me he's worried because we have our second gig in a few weeks and he says the bassist never gets any chicks. The guitarist always does the best, and the drummer does okay because he's usually crazy and some chicks like crazy. And the singer is the charismatic one, so of course he can get girls in the sack. But the bassist? No one gives a shit about him.

"That's not true," I say. "The bassist is the mysterious one. Chicks dig that."

"But I'm not mysterious," he says.

"No," I say. "You're not."

Jeffy ruffles in the grass and flops over on his belly. He asks if I think the band will ever be any good. Probably not, is what I tell him. But who knows? Did everything click the first time The Who played together? And he points out that it probably did and that this isn't our first time jamming. It's almost been a year.

"Well, I guess that's why Bill wants to try something different," I say.

"You ever been down to those crossroads?" Jeffy asks. I get the feeling he's looking at me. I prop myself up on my elbows and shrug.

"No, guess not," I say.

"Weird stuff goes on there," he says, real serious.

"Yeah, well, Bill thinks he'll run into the devil out there."

Jeffy shakes his head and rolls over on his back again. He folds his hands under his head. Sweat stains shade the whole of his armpit. An owl hoots at the edge of the forest.

"Wouldn't be surprised," Jeffy says. "Rick and I been down there a few times. Once we saw a few high school kids drinking and smooching and whatever. All these girls with their shirts off dancing around a bonfire." He pauses and purses his lips. "We were watching until I stepped on something." He sits up. "We never run so fast as we run that night."

We laugh for a bit, but it's clear Jeffy's a little concerned.

"But this other time. Well, Rick says that Craig Percy says he saw these three hunters out there, and they'd killed a bear or something—"

"Like hell there are bears in *this* forest," I say.

"Well, whatever. So Craig Percy says they killed this thing but couldn't agree on who shot it first. And one of the hunters says it don't matter who shot him first, it's who got off the

shot that brought him down. And they keep arguing like this, and they've been drinking. And Rick says Craig Percy says those hunters got so wound up about this bear they shot each *other*."

"Craig Percy's full of shit," I say.

"Even if he's full of shit," Jeffy says. "There's just a lot of weird stuff goes on down there."

"High school kids getting drunk isn't weird, Jeffy."

"What they were doing looked pretty weird. I seen kissing or whatever on TV but I never seen people use their mouths like *that*."

"Like what?"

Jeffy doesn't say anything.

"You know," I say, "I heard if eight people are in the same room and they got their shoes off, it's an orgy."

"Ah, what good are you."

Nothing much, I don't think. Because when I go home and lay in bed thinking about Kat I get this terrible feeling that if I ever *did* have her I wouldn't know what to do with her.

On Saturday we meet at Bill's with backpacks full of things we might need: matches and lighter fluid for a fire, comic books, hot dogs, even a few nudie mags. Bill has some rolling papers and the fat sack of marijuana he got from Craig Percy.

The tobacco trail we're on—a dirt path blanketed with crunchy leaves, wide enough for a single horse to travel either way—leads toward an abandoned farm if you go one way and a busy highway if you go the other. When we were younger our parents told us never to stray off the

path of the trails (they'd prefer we not go on the trails at all), mostly because these woods are so dense and vast that it's plenty easy to get lost in only a few steps.

Out here it's dark. If you tilt your head back you're looking at two black silhouette tree borders on either side, a strip in between of purple-blue twilight dotted with stars. Out here there are stories of children disappearing, shotgun-toting farmers hopped up on moonshine, wily mountain lions though there's not a hill in sight. Ghosts in every corner. Psychos in hockey masks and overalls.

All of us are sporting dirt- and sweat-filled t-shirts, shorts or blue jeans, sneakers ruined by the creek at Rick's place. "I gotta a rock in my *shoe*," Jeffy complains, as usual. There's no rock. His pinky toe is just weirdly large. Rick's wearing a bandana he hasn't tied correctly, and it looks like he has lopsided horns on the sides of his head. Bill and I tote our acoustic guitars.

"I once seen a soldier out here," Rick says. He's lying and we know it. Whenever we go camping, or fishing, or play ball in a park we've never played in before, Rick's got some dumbass story of what he saw there. "I was out here with my B.B. gun--"

"But you ain't got no B.B. gun."

"Shut up, Jeffy. So I'm out here wandering around, shooting at squirrels and whatnot." Rick spits and hikes his backpack. "And this guy all dressed in camo pops up. I mean he got his face painted and everything, and he's pointing his gun at me and asking if the war is over."

"What?" Bill asks. You can hear the disbelief in the way it slides out his mouth.

"Yeah," Rick says. "Happens, you know? Guys don't know the war is over, get left behind."

"*What* war?" Bill asks.

"Nam or something."

“Well, Nam is in Nam, not Acworth, Georgia. You fucking idiot.”

The crossroads is a clearing larger than either of its paths. It's because we're not the first ones to think about coming down here since the trails haven't been used since the '70's or something like that. People go for walks on the trails during the day, or ride their bikes. At night? Well, things go on. I never bought any of the rumors, like the one about the crazy naked guy who lived in the woods and came out every now and then with a pair of cleavers to chop up anyone on the trail he could find. But things like the high school kids coming out here? I believe that.

We put our things down and get a fire started. There's not much in the clearing except for a few empty plastic buckets, a rusted bike frame, an ash pit from fires others have started. We sit in a circle around the fire trading comic books and magazines, and Bill tries rolling a joint. We start talking about girls and before we can stop him, Rick is telling us about his sex dreams, and he's *real* proud of the sex dreams he's had, if you can imagine. He tells us all the chicks he's subconsciously porked.

“Rhett Thompson. Abby Brookheart. Lisa Marquise. And Kat. Oh, my God. Kitty Kat Ressetar,” he says, smiling like an idiot to himself. “Kat's the best one. She knows what she's doing.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bill says, hunched over a book he's using as a base for breaking up the pieces of pot. “Every Goddamn day I have to hear this. Look, dumbass. Kat will never have sex with you.”

“How you know that?” Rick asks all indignant like.

“I've asked her.”

“What she say?”

“She says, ‘Who the fuck is Rick?’”

I've had sex dreams too, you know. And a few of them have been with Kat. Usually they're nothing to speak of. Everything's blurry, it all happens out of my control, and even in the best ones where I can catch a glimpse of what I *think* her tits might look like, the ones where we're going at it and it's like I can actually *feel* it happening, I always wake up before I come. Then I'm in bed pitching a tent and more often than not I have to piss like a bitch.

It's quarter to midnight. Once Bill finishes and lights it up, it takes a good ten minutes for us to pass it around, none of us really sure how to hold it or breathe the stuff in or how to keep bits from falling out at either end.

"I don't know if I'm doing this right," Jeffy coughs.

"Yeah, I don't feel different," Rick says.

Bill frowns and looks at the butt of what's left. He tosses it in the fire. "I don't feel different, either," he says, and puts the bag of weed back in his bookbag.

I don't feel different, either, though I start thinking that there has to be something to it. I'd seen Kat high a few times. One time while we were hanging out at Bill's, Jeffy and I got the idea of trying to watch the scrambled porn channel on Bill's TV while he was helping his dad in the garage. I remember sitting there on the edge of his parents' bed, watching as the purple-green-black lines shifted upward and cut and darted across the screen. We sat there going "There's a tit. There's a tit. There's another one," but it wasn't that great since the nipples were misshapen due to the signal and colored swamp-thing green. Kat came in without realizing we were there, her eyes red and an oaky scent following her. She didn't have a shirt on, just this sky blue bra with white dots on it and some shorts, and she went straight to the closet and rifled through her mother's clothes. When she looked over and saw what we were watching on TV and

that now we were watching *her* all slack-jawed and stupid, she scoffed, threw something on, and left. After a minute, Jeffy said, “Jesus.” I heard myself say, “Jesus Christ.”

We stay for a while. Midnight comes and goes. We’re staring at each other through the flames, the heat working its way around our eyes, the smoke moving with the wind. There is nothing to hear tonight. Nothing is coming to meet us. There’s an odd lilt to the wind, almost like it’s saying something. I might be wrong, but it sounds like a siren, a long, unending siren that’s calling us deeper into the forest.

“So when’s this Robert Johnson guy coming?” Jeffy asks.

“We ain’t meeting Robert Johnson,” Bill growls. “We’re meeting the devil.”

“Well I don’t think the devil’s showing up tonight, Bill,” Rick says.

We wait a bit more until a few of us yawn. Bill pouts, puts out the fire, and we pack our things. On the way back, I wonder aloud what we should do next.

“We try again,” Bill says.

As we move along the trail, the batteries from our flashlights tired, I get into the habit of looking over my shoulder. I don’t hear anything, and I don’t even get the feeling my eyes are tricking me into seeing something in the brush. Still, there’s an uneasiness creeping on my skin. Eyes are watching. Somewhere, someone is glaring at us and keeping quiet.

At school in the days after, Rick and Jeffy and I talk about how Bill wants to go back to the crossroads and try again. He says maybe we need less light, that the fire was too much, that we need to feel it rather than see it, whatever that means.

“Like the devil’s afraid of fire or some shit,” Rick says. We’re on the side of an empty trailer-classroom throwing rocks at the cars the douchebags drive. “There’s nothing *but* fire in hell.”

“You said *buttfire*,” Jeffy laughs.

“I don’t want to waste another Saturday night sitting out in the woods doing nothing. I could have a hot date,” Rick says, and slings a piece of cinderblock at a Corvette. “Damn,” he says, nearly hitting the sideview mirror.

“I don’t mind trying again,” I say. “I kinda dig it. Roughin’ it out in the woods?”

“It’d be better if we got high,” Rick says, “but Bill can’t wrap a joint for *shit*.” He winds up for a shot.

“Can you?” I ask. Rick disengages and drops the rock at his feet.

“No,” he says. “But you know who *can*?”

The lunch bell rings and we head inside. I don’t say anything, but I’m sure he’s talking about Kat. Sometimes when I’m at Bill’s I’ll see Kat in the kitchen or passing through a room, her eyes camera-picture red and relaxed. I didn’t know what was up until Bill explained it to me. It’s probably one of the main reasons I even agreed to smoke, just because I knew *she* did it.

The week goes by without event. I see Kat a few times in the hall at school but she’s always around her friends, and even when I happen upon her out by the dumpster behind the auditorium smoking with some guy, she barely acknowledges me even though it’s impossible she can’t notice I’m there.

“That’s called playing hard to get,” Rick says one day on the bus ride home. “Chicks don’t pay you any attention because they want it to drive you *crazy*.” Bill turns around in his seat and starts talking with his hands.

“Listen, you idiots,” Bill says. “Kat is not interested in either of you. And she will never, ever want to fuck you.” Jeffy, sitting next to Bill, perks up. “Oh, Jeffy, do I really have to say it? *Definitely* not you.” He digs a piece of paper out of his pocket. It’s the setlist for our Friday evening jam session. “So let’s try ‘Gloria’ and *then* ‘Satisfaction.’ If we’re feeling it, we can try ‘Have Love, Will Travel.’”

“We’re *never* feeling it,” Jeffy says, his mouth hidden behind the seat. Bill glares down at him.

“Hey,” Rick says. “Kat smokes. Maybe *she* knows how to wrap a joint.”

“I know how to wrap a joint,” Bill says.

“No, you don’t.”

“Shut up, Rick.”

The bus comes to a halt and we all thrust forward and hit the seats in front of us. Rick and Jeffy stand up and throw their backpacks on.

“Hey, Bill. Just *consider* asking Kat to do it. No use in wasting all that dope,” Rick says. “And I sure as hell don’t want that idiot Craig tagging along and doing it for us.”

“All right, all right, Goddamnit. I’ll ask her,” Bill says, and the two of them head out. “I swear,” Bill says, watching Rick from the windows, “even though there’s no chance of it, I’d kill him if he ever touched Kat.”

I swallow hard.

“Because you guys’re *friends*?” I ask. Bill looks at me, half-amused.

“More than that, he’s a Goddamn *idiot*,” Bill says, and he turns around and plops back in his seat.

Friday night. At Bill's house, we're setting up our gear in the den in front of the stereo system. We pushed the couch to the kitchen entrance and put the coffee table next to the bookshelf. Rick's got new cymbals he says he polished with shoe wax before he came over. Jeffy wipes the neck of his P-bass. Bill does a mic check while tuning his acoustic guitar. I'm fiddling with the G-string, making sure it's not too taut. Rolling papers and a fat nugget of marijuana in a sandwich bag lay on a pile of records.

Bill rolls the joint, licks the edge of the paper and tries to close it. The whole thing's a mess, this poorly-wrapped blunt that's got pieces of green falling out at either end. Kat comes in and sees Bill fumbling with it and laughs.

"Oh, my *God*," she says. "You have no idea what you're doing, do you?"

"Keep your bitch hole *shut*, woman. I'm trying to get high."

"Let *me* do it," she says, and bumps Bill over on the couch. She hunches over the glass coffee table and nimbly assorts pieces along the center of the paper with her slender fingers. Her nails are painted dark purple, and as she's leaning over I catch a glimpse of her matching underwear in the gap of her shirt and jeans and oh my *God* I'm sure I'm in love.

When Kat finishes rolling the blunt—taut, tight—she lights the end and takes a healthy puff. Bill tries to take it and she bats his hand away, takes another drag.

"Damn it, woman. Don't smoke the whole thing," Bill says. Kat smiles and hands it to him.

"You're *so* not ready for this, Bill," she says.

Bill frowns and inhales. Instantly he's coughing like a pitcher of tabasco sauce went down the wrong tube. His eyes go blood red and there's slobber all over his hand. Kat laughs wildly and Rick and Jeffy and I look at each other wondering who's going to go next.

Bill, still coughing, holds the blunt in front of me as he collects saliva in his other hand. I look at Kat, who's biting her bottom lip, and I take it and hold it at my mouth. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, try to stomach the smoke. And I'm coughing like a bitch. Kat's laughing again and Rick and Jeffy join in, too.

"He like a little girl," Jeffy howls. I get up and hold it in front of him trying to stifle my gagging.

It gets passed around twice before it's done. The four of us are coughing like madmen and Kat's sitting on the couch, enjoying the scene.

"Oh, you boys," she teases. "Well, everyone has a first time."

Bill gets up and pulls the guitar and bass out of their cases and hands them to me and Jeffy.

"Come on," Bill says, and directs Rick to the drumset. "Come on."

We're able to calm down, coughing only when we take too deep a breath, and we plug in our instruments and strap up.

"What are you boys going to play for me?" Kat says. She's twirling her brown hair in her finger and eyeing me, Rick, and Jeffy. Bill rolls his eyes.

"Bitch, we're not playing *shit* for you," he says.

"You wouldn't be fucked up right now if it wasn't for me," Kat says. "You can play me one song."

"Come on, Bill," I say. "Let's do the Stones or something."

“All right, all right. We’ll do ‘Satisfaction.’ I’m ready. You ready?”

“Ready,” I say.

“Rick, you ready?”

“Ready, Freddie.”

“Jeffy?”

Jeffy’s got his bass guitar slung over his chest with his arms at his sides, staring at a lamp.

“*Jeffy*,” Bill says.

“Huh?”

“You ready?”

“My mouth dry.”

“Goddamnit, man. Get yourself a glass of water.”

I tune my guitar and strum a few times. My fingers feel weird but the distortion from the amp sounds amazing. I feel swimmy in the head and this weird massaging pressure in my eyes.

“Okay, let’s do this,” Bill says. “One, two, three, four—”

Rick lays down the beat and I play the riff real high on the neck of my dad’s old Strat.

We get a good groove going but Jeffy never joins in. Rick and I stop and Bill is pissed.

“What the fuck, Jeffy?”

“My *mouth* dry.”

“*Fuck* you, Jeffy. Goddamnit.”

Rick laughs the high-pitched laugh and nearly tumbles over the front of his drum set.

Kat’s laughing, too, and Jeffy’s staring at the lamp again.

“Let’s just go,” Bill says angrily, and we grab our things and head out.

Kat leads the way, and we follow the light from the tip of the blunt she's blazed up. It gets passed back in the procession, Jeffy and Rick bringing up the rear with Rick mumbling about what a waste of time this all is.

At the clearing Bill lights a kerosene lamp and puts it in the center of us instead of starting a fire. The blunt gets handed around, and the third time it comes to me I have to pass. Dark as it is, the world is spinning so much it's hard to tell if I'm moving or not.

"So why is it you come out here?" Kat asks. The light casts shadows on her face, hiding her eyes. She's sitting with her arms crossed on her knees, her tits in between with the top of her bra exposed by her off-kilter tank top.

"Bill wants to beat off the devil," Rick says. "Know what I mean?"

She turns to Rick and says, "Did you *really* just make a masturbation joke?" and returns her attention to Bill. That shuts up Rick for a while.

"Speaking of that," Jeffy says to me, and he takes a nudie mag out of his backpack and gets up.

"Are you serious?" I ask. "You're gonna do that here? In the woods? Now?"

Jeffy shrugs and rolls the magazine.

"When nature calls, you gotta answer, Murph." And he's off.

"Well, you saw how awful we are," Bill says to Kat. "If drugs don't work then I'll try dealing with the devil to play a Goddamn guitar or sing a Goddamn note." He stands up, throws his arms in the air, yells as loud as he can. "You hear me? *I'll sell my soul to play guitar!*"

A screech rings through the woods like nothing I've ever heard before. The four of us stand looking into the bank of trees, turning and peering down each path to see where it came from.

“What was *that*?” Kat says. She takes a few steps backwards and she’s standing right in front of me. I don’t dare move, though all I want to do is reach out and take her waist, turn her around to me. Her hair, as black as this night, is straight, falling down her back, the smell of coconut wafting my way.

Bill picks up the lantern and goes to the edge of the clearing. Rustling in the bushes, and Bill jumps back a bit.

“Who’s there?” he calls. No answer.

“The war is over!” Rick shouts into the brush.

“Shut up, Rick,” Bill says. “Whoever’s in there, come out!”

More rustling, closer this time. We all freeze. My heart pounds, and I can’t decide how long I want this game to go on. My hands shake, and slowly I lift them, thinking I’ll gently take Kat’s arm, let her know she’s safe.

Jeffy bursts through a patch of stickers with his pants around his ankles. He stumbles and falls a few feet from Bill.

“Jeffy!” he shouts. “What the hell?”

But Jeffy isn’t listening. He’s on his back kicking wildly and pulling himself away from the forest. Bill gets down on one knee and takes hold of Jeffy’s shoulder, trying to calm him.

Kat, Rick, and I watch silently.

“What happened?” Bill asks. “Was that *you* that made that noise?”

“Something’s in there!” Jeffy squeals. “There’s something in there, fellas!”

The rustling comes back and everyone watches. I can hear Kat breathing quickly, and I’m trying not to imagine her breath on *me*.

A raccoon pokes its head through the brush. We all let go a sigh of relief, and Bill smacks Jeffy on the back of the head and shoos the raccoon away.

“You *idiot*,” Bill says. “I thought he was coming this time.”

I think about that on the walk back. Everyone’s quiet. Everyone’s pissed. I catch up to Bill and keep my eyes glued to the leaves lit by the lantern.

“You don’t really think you’re gonna meet the devil, do you?” I ask Bill, expecting him to pick up on my tone. But he doesn’t. He stops walking, and after a moment, so does everyone else. And then the attention’s on me: Bill’s distrustful glare, Jeffy and Kat and Rick trying to work out what just happened. I feel my heart drop into my stomach.

“I’m gonna get what I want,” Bill says. “And I don’t care *who* gives it to me.” He takes a few steps before he swings the lantern and nearly clotheslines me. “And if you’re any kind of man,” he says, “you won’t stop ‘til you get what you want, either.”

Halfway back to the house it starts raining and everyone takes off running, but I trudge slowly, dragging my feet through the dirt as it turns to mud. I tell myself I won’t miss an opportunity like that again.

I tell myself that if I won’t be given what I want, I’ll *take* it.

Saturday at noon we have a baseball game. The four of us are sitting in the dugout, and Bill’s telling us we need to go back tonight. “One more time,” he says, smiling this weird smile that makes his straight teeth look crooked.

“We didn’t bring our guitars yesterday,” Bill says. “I don’t know what I was thinking. He didn’t show himself because we didn’t have no Goddamn *guitars*.”

Jeffy and I look at him like he's mad. But Rick? He's agreeing with the guy. Bill gets up to bat and Rick turns to us.

"Oh, boys. Oh, *boys!*" he says. "Tonight's gonna be a good night."

"Ain't no way I'm going back there."

"Shut up, Jeffy. So look," Rick says. "Kat's coming with us, and she's bringing a few of her *friends*." He rubs his hands together, and though I'm not sold on the idea, Jeffy's already done a 180.

"Her friends?" he asks quietly.

"Yup."

Jeffy's got his hands on the bench, eyes to the ground as he putters with his feet.

"What do her friends look like?"

"I don't know," Rick says. "But I'll bet they're smokin'. Hot chicks move in packs."

They go on but I can't will myself to listen. All I can think of is Kat standing so close to me and how I'd do anything to get that close again. The game ends and we head out to the parking lot. Kat's there, leaning on her parents' car waiting to pick Bill up. He jumps in and doesn't acknowledge her. He throws his head back in the passenger seat and pulls his cap over his eyes.

I wave to Kat. She's wearing sunglasses. She smiles at me, beckons me to come to her, reeling me in with the motion of her index finger.

"Hi, Murph," she says.

"*Hi*, Kat," I say, trying not to spit.

"Ready for tonight?" she asks.

"*Ready?*" I say, and swallow hard.

“Well, you guys are going out to the crossroads again, yeah?” I nod. “I’m bringing some friends.” She pulls out a cigarette and lights it. “And Bill says you’ll be bringing your guitars out there?” I nod again. Bill lifts his cap, impatient. Then he notices me and Kat, and he probably notices the way she’s occasionally twirling a finger in her hair. “Well,” she says, exhaling, “it should be fun.”

She gets in the car, smiles at me through the windshield, waves goodbye and begins to drive.

I see Bill turned around in his seat, looking at me like I just lubed up his guitar and had a good time with it. He looks at me like he knows we’re going down to the crossroads and wishing for very different things.

I take a shower before heading over to Bill’s. He’s told us to show up a little after eleven. I come in and set down my guitar. Jeffy comes in behind me, and Rick says, “Finally, the little tigger is here!” He’s sitting behind his drum kit while Bill tunes a banjo.

“Hey, Bill. When’s *Kat* getting here?” Rick asks. He flicks the pedal of the bass drum in an Indian-style *thump* thump thump thump *thump* thump thump thump.

“I don’t know,” Bill says. He has that look he does every winter when the four of us build a snowman, and me, Jeffy, and Rick immediately start hurling snowballs at it. “It’s gonna melt anyway,” we’ll tell him. But he’ll say we’re destroying something before we’d gotten any enjoyment out of it. When we say that pelting the snowman *is* the enjoyable part, he shakes his head and goes home shuffling over the ice.

Kat comes in with two of her friends. They're talking and laughing and give us big smiles when they see us. One of them is Angie Baker, a sophomore with a round head and hips that have knocked over who knows how many lamps. The other is a chick I don't recognize; jet-black hair with bangs so long they cast a shadow over her eyes.

"Hi, boys," Kat says. We mumble hellos, staring at the three of them. "These are my friends," and she points to the blonde. "This is Angie." Angie waves and peers at Rick.

"I know you," she says, pointing to him. "Aren't you that kid who fell off the stage during *Hamlet*?"

Rick blushes and shifts on his stool. Jeffy laughs.

"Yeah, that was him!"

"It was *Othello*, actually," Rick says.

Kat points to her pale friend with the black hair.

"And this is Natalie."

Natalie smiles with her lips only, doesn't say hello, just raises her hand and waves it limply. It's hard to tell with her bangs but I think she's looking right at me.

"No one gives a shit who they are," Bill says. He leers at me for a moment. "What are you doing here anyway? Why don't you and your posse scram?"

"We were invited," Kat says. "Besides, I live here, too. Me and my friends can hang out here if we want."

Bill slaps his face and goes over to the porch door. He looks at his watch and tells us it's almost 11:30 and that we better get going if we want to be at the crossroads by midnight.

"We're coming, too," Kat says.

“No. No, you’re not,” Bill says. “You and your *Goddamn* friends have already turned my bandmates into retards who can’t help but think with their dicks.”

Kat nods towards the last blunt wrap and the remnants of the weed nugget.

“If you want to smoke more, you’ll have to let us come,” Kat says.

Bill shakes his fists in the air and trudges off. Rick goes to the kitchen for a few beers and I follow him. He leans over and rattles a few bottle, pulls out a few longnecks and hands them to me one by one.

“So Kat,” I say. “I think she’s got the hots for me.”

Rick takes the beers from my hands and squints.

“No, she doesn’t.”

“How do *you* know?”

“Trust me, I know.”

“You don’t know *shit* about girls, Rick,” I say, and leave him standing there with an armful of beer in the kitchen.

In the den, Bill’s come back with a banjo and hands it to me. He takes his acoustic guitar and stands by the back door.

“We ready?” Bill says.

“The hell am I doing with a banjo?” I ask.

“Well, you can’t play an electric guitar out in the woods.”

“And what the hell am *I* supposed to play?” Rick asks.

Bill closes his eyes and tries not to rage.

“Bring your *Goddamn* drumsticks and smack a log or something.”

“And me?” Jeffy asks.

“You can’t play anything *anyway*, Jeffy. Play your dick for all I care.”

We get to the crossroads and set everything up. Everyone takes a few hits of the blunt and the flask goes around once or twice. It’s so bitter I cough like I do when I smoke. And then we begin playing.

Bill and I somehow get a back and forth going between the guitar and banjo. For the first time in his life, Rick is playing a slick beat on a tree stump and an empty milk carton. Jeffy’s blowing on an empty jug he stumbled over on our way out, and it sounds closer to a bass line than anything he’s done on a guitar.

It’s good what we have—a mid-tempo blues tune where we’re all in sequence, stomping our feet in a rhythmic bah-bum, bah-bum. The girls light the second blunt and pass the flask around. Kat comes over to me and bends over, holding the blunt to my lips. I take a drag and keep playing, peek at her tits falling out of her shirt.

Then the three of them start dancing around the two upright flashlights like it’s some sort of fire. They’re laughing and falling over each other, taking heavy swigs from the flask and shaking their hips. I look up and Angie’s taking off her shirt. Jeffy leans over to me.

“Holy shit,” he whispers.

A moment later Natalie does the same. And Kat starts, but stops. It’s like they don’t even know we’re here. Bill’s too into his riff to take notice, and I hear him—staying in rhythm—switch over to the riff from “Satisfaction.” Me and Rick and Jeffy, well, we’re slobbering like dogs and it’s amazing we can still play. In fact, we start going faster. We strum harder and pound our feet with the beat, and the girls are laughing, dancing, passing the flask and hitting the blunt.

And then something like a clap of thunder booms through the forest. Everyone stops.

“What *was* that?” one of the girls says.

Bill stands and looks down one of the paths. We hear the noise again and we shudder. I look to Kat who's looking at her little brother.

"Was that a gun?" Rick asks.

"*Shhh!*" Bill commands.

The kerosene lamp goes out suddenly and it's pitch black. The girls scream. All I can see is the outline of bodies in the thin strip of moonlight.

And *something* emerges from the forest.

Before I know it we're all running the opposite way, the girls screaming, the guys panting and saying "Oh my God oh my God oh my *God*," and I'm just moving forward. I've left my banjo and don't consider for a second to go back and get it.

Somehow the trail runs out. This isn't the way we came. But we don't stop and turn back. We plow through the brush, get separated. After another minute I peel off and go behind a tree and keel over, trying to catch my breath. Voices shout. Feet scamper. The world spins in front of me.

A figure stands near me, and I can tell from her hair it's Kat. She sees me, says nothing, and comes to stand next to me, arms folded and shivering. She's breathing hard and half crying.

We hear the slow, methodical snap of twigs underfoot, and we duck behind a large tree.

"Who *is* that?" Kat whispers, her tears running off her face onto my sleeve. She's listening for whoever it is, but I'm not. I see her standing so close to me, her with a torn shirt, with no protection. Crying silently. Wishing to be anywhere but here. "What do they *want*?"

And I wonder what kind of deal I've brokered to be here. I wonder if this is really what I asked for, if I'm the kind of guy who's going to *do* something.

I take hold of her arms and make her face me.

“Murph,” she whispers, pleading. “What are you *doing?*”

The footsteps get closer, and no way to tell from which way they’re coming. Kat’s desperately searching my face, trying to figure out what I’ll do next. There’s no one around, no one except for this thing that’s come for us.

I see Bill a ways off snaking around trees, and he’s moving like he’s trying to *find* what’s been after us instead of get away from it. And I think maybe that’s what I’ve been doing, too.

Closer now. Every small stir in the air makes me think it’s right behind me, but I don’t look.

Bill thrashes wildly through the bushes, moving towards us. I think, What did we *do*, Bill? What were we *thinking* in all this? The one time I asked him whatever happened to Robert Johnson he told me no one really knew, but that there were rumors he’d been poisoned. That he’d been flirting with the wife of some juke joint owner a little too much and wolfed down a tainted glass of whiskey and died a very young age.

I’m looking into Kat’s face and I see Bill off in the distance, and he stops in his tracks and gapes at whatever’s in front of him. And I’m sure we’re both seeing that old ghost with his slide guitar, reaching out to us, saying “*Come here, come over. Come, come, come—*”

AS IF IT WAS MADE OF GLASS

Here's the kind of father *I've* been: At age eight my daughter's most prized possession was a ceramic turtle. It was a completely unremarkable item—unpainted, lazily sculpted, pointless. Nevertheless, my daughter—Chelsea's her name—loved it more than any stuffed animal or doll we ever gave her. I took to noticing for about a week how tired she looked, and when I said something she said her bed was squeaking constantly and keeping her up at night. Trying to be the noble handyman, I crawled under her bed to see if the pins holding the frame together needed tightening. At one point my leg kicked in reflex as I'm trying to adjust the bar, and I hit the nightstand and sent the turtle hurtling to the floor. Naturally it hit my toolbox rather than the carpet and broke into several pieces. When I came out from under the bed Chelsea was already in the doorway, her little mouth trembling, tears welling in her eyes at the sight of her turtle all over her floor. From then on she developed a way of looking at me that signaled suspicion, fear, and pity. The bed didn't squeak anymore after that, though it hardly mattered. The girl didn't sleep for weeks. Whatever I called trying to help she called adding fuel to the fire. She had this flailing thing she'd do with her arms anytime I'd do so much as hint toward the answer of a math problem on her homework.

“I'm engulfed in flames,” she'd say, her hands flapping in front of her face.

“I'm just trying to help,” I'd tell her back.

“It burns, it burns.”

She didn't think I could help her. You see, I'm an independent consultant, mostly for big pharma but also for other industries, sometimes investment firms, sometimes manufacturers.

Largely my job consists of figuring out how companies can make the biggest profits with the least amount of overhead and the fewest number of employees.

“You *fire* people,” Chelsea said when I explained it to her. “That’s what you do.”

“It’s not that simple,” I said.

“It’s not that simple,” she said.

When a company based out of New York finds out that moving the operations from the Buffalo branch to some industrial town in Ireland is beneficial, that not only do the Irish have plenty of qualified people but that they’ll work for peanuts *and* that the tax breaks are remarkable, well, it makes my job easy. Chelsea, with her political ideals and general naïveté, considered what I did to be pretty homely. It’s not that she was wrong; what she couldn’t understand is that it’s going to happen one way or another. If I’m not the one advising technocrats in Tallahassee to close up shop in Chattanooga because it’s a city on its way out, someone else will. And if a company doesn’t have enough sense or willpower to move a factory in Arizona ninety miles to cross the border, eventually a wise competitor will hop the fence without blinking twice. This isn’t revelatory. This is business 101.

It was my old friend Ted, a bald-headed hermit-like fellow with a sharp nose like a beak, who called me and told me that a girl who looked an awful lot like Chelsea was at a cottage on the beach front in Kitty Hawk partying like an animal for several days. The first time he called I told him he was crazy; it was early January and Chelsea had gone back to Boston after spending Christmas with her mother to do her final semester at MIT. The second time he called I dialed Chelsea’s cell phone a few times and left increasingly panicked voicemails. The third time he called the first thing he said was “I know you think she’s in Boston, but I’m telling you she’s leaning over a porch in Kitty Hawk about to throw a beer bottle at a car across the street.”

“Why don’t you *do* something about it?” my ex-wife Laura said when I called her to let her know what Ted had told me. I’d already left my office in Richmond and was driving straight to the Outer Banks, hadn’t even gone home to get clothes. I told Laura, Chelsea’s mother, as much, and she said, “Well, I wouldn’t pat myself on the back about it. That’s what you’re *supposed* to do.”

Mostly she was referring to how, when we were still married, my job required a decent amount of travel. It means I’ve missed things fathers aren’t supposed to miss. A few birthdays, a Halloween or two. My ex-wife, when we were married at the time, excoriated me for flying off to London to close a deal even though I had known full well for *months* that I’d be missing Chelsea’s third grade play. I countered that Chelsea didn’t really have a part—she was an apple tree that showed up in a few scenes—and when she wound up getting sick the night before and had to be replaced by some other kid, I told my wife on the phone as I lay in bed at four in the morning that everything worked out after all. It wasn’t the first time she hung up on me.

Why don’t I do something about it. Before she hung up this time, she told me to bring Chelsea back to MIT safe and sound, and I told her I’d do my best. In the silence that followed we were both struck by how ambiguous I’d made “I’ll do my best” sound.

Plenty of people would be willing to say all that made me a shitty father if not just a shitty person. They don’t know half of it. Just because I haven’t been perfect doesn’t mean I’ve been criminal. I taught Chelsea how to ride a bike twice since after learning the first time she never practiced and forgot. I’m the one who dribbled the soccer ball with her in the back yard when she was in high school, even on nights when I got home late and wanted nothing else but a stiff drink. And so what if my job was seedy? *Someone* had to do it and make a decent dollar, and really, it was the companies that were to blame. They didn’t need to make the profits they

were making, but they did it anyway. That job is the reason we could afford to send her to MIT. Were it not for that, she would have needed massive loans, and I've seen these poor kids getting out of college with huge debts with no jobs in sight, and I sure as hell wasn't going to let a bunch of predatory bankers throw cash at my daughter just to come collecting payments with interest that doubled whatever paycheck she was getting. Despite what she thought, I sacrificed a lot for her. Part of me thought *too* much.

Ted was in the lobby of the police station when I arrived. He stood up when he saw me, came over and put his hands on my shoulders with his head cocked and beak-nose pointed.

“I would say I told you so,” he began, “but Chelsea’s kind of doing that for me.” He said the bottle Chelsea threw hit a windshield and set the car alarm off. No one called the police, it seemed; it was more a wrong place, wrong time kind of deal. When they pulled up to the cottage, their blue lights flashing, plenty of kids flipped their shit and either ran in or ran off. They’d seen Chelsea throw the bottle. She was a bit drunk, even at such an early hour, and she resisted arrest until one of the officers leaned with a hint of force, and she complied. Ted visited her at the police station but couldn’t bail her out. He didn’t have the money. Chelsea didn’t use her phone call.

After I’d seen her mug shot—an unflattering picture of a pale, thin-lipped girl who hadn’t slept in weeks—the guard led me to an eight by ten cell where Chelsea sat by her lonesome. She was hugging her knees, her long brown hair up in a bun with crooked strands sticking out like snapped violin strings. Dark rungs hung under her eyes. She wore a pair of oversized plaid

pajama pants and a white bathrobe that came down to her knees and looked like it had been patted with soot. The guard rattled the key on the iron bars and Chelsea lazily lifted her head.

“You smash a windshield, too?” she asked.

“Hi, Chelsea.”

In her last year or so of high school, and definitely throughout college, Chelsea had developed a fairly selective rebellious streak. She quit tennis in favor of cello, learned French just to answer our questions in a language we wouldn’t understand, let us catch her smoking pot a few times. She once got brought home when she was eighteen for swimming in the neighbor’s pool after midnight, completely nude, though there wasn’t even anyone there with her. But getting arrested? I never thought she’d go that far.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“That’s what you’re asking *me*?”

When I told her Ted had called me and said she wasn’t in school, she asked if he’d mentioned what she was doing, with the drinking and all, I said yes, and she asked why I hadn’t said *that* instead. I stuttered in response and she jumped on it, told me “Now we’re getting somewhere,” like I’d just proved her point.

“What about you?” I asked. “What are *you* doing here?” Chelsea looked at me with genuine curiosity, and she sat there like I should have already known.

I bailed her out and we went to the car. When I closed my door I stuffed the paperwork I had to sign in the visor and a photo fell onto my lap.

“If I think for a second that you’re driving to Boston, I’ll jump out of this car,” Chelsea said. I leered at her.

“We’re spending the night at Ted’s.”

“Okay then,” she said. “Because I swear I’ll jump out of this car. Don’t think I won’t.”

The picture was of Chelsea when she was sixteen or thereabout. She had a paintbrush in one hand and a blank canvas in the other. In it she’s smiling, maybe even laughing. I’m not in the picture. I didn’t take it, either.

We were hardly out of the car before we started yelling at each other. We stood there arguing outside the front door until Ted came up from his car and unlocked it for us. Chelsea and I moved past him, her telling me I had no right and me telling her I had plenty of right for a lot of reasons. It only stopped when she went into a bedroom and slammed the door in my face. I wasn’t even sure that was the room Ted had set up for her but she sure as shit didn’t come out.

Ted offered me a beer and we sat at the kitchen table and discussed things. He told me about the past few days, how he’d been driving up to the docks to take his old piece of shit boat out to do some fishing while he had some time off work, and that for a few mornings in a row he noticed a large congregation of young people on one of the porches of a cottage on the beachfront. He didn’t think anything of it at first. College kids partied all the time. Who gave a shit if they partied in the morning in early January? One morning, though, a petite brunette caught his eye. She was sitting on the railing, her feet dangling above the driveway. Ted slowed down to observe, and that’s when he called me the first time. The next day it was the same thing. Finally, he pulled his car over, got out and shouted “Chelsea!” and when she was the only one of the lot to turn, he called again. She took a beer bottle by the neck and hurled it towards Ted, though it fell far too short and hit another car. I kept throwing out ideas of how I’ll reconcile with Chelsea and all he could say was “I can’t help you there.” And he couldn’t, because the lucky son of a bitch was too smart to have kids.

Then he looked me straight in the eye and he asked, “You ever think *you* might be her problem?” And I said sure, I had to fit into the equation somewhere, but I couldn’t be her sole grievance. I can’t be the only bad thing that ever happened to her in her life. She’d had boys who’d broken her heart, friends who’d spilled secrets. Hell, even her mother could be overly catty with her. And me? I was just trying to help. I never went out of my way to antagonize her.

“I think that’s what anyone would say,” Ted said.

“You think this is all *my* fault?” I said to him. “You want to put all this on *me*?” And that shut him up for a while.

I knew where Chelsea was coming from. I did. I blamed my old man for a lot of shit that wasn’t his fault. Not making the track team in high school. Flunking out of Dartmouth and taking refuge at NYU. And then after some time I realized how much of it was my own doing, and how yeah, my dad could’ve helped more than he did, but what did he know?

See, I’ve figured something out that most people won’t admit. Blaming yourself for your problems is crazy even if it’s right. Nobody else does it. Look around. Next time you’re in a restaurant, listen in on the booth next to yours. Some idiot is complaining about some stupid thing and he’s blaming everyone but himself. You’d be crazy to take responsibility for your problems. There’s a whole world out there, so why not find something to get angry about?

I was sitting there thinking about that and just to prove my point I said, “Hey, Ted. How’s that woman you were seeing?”

And he said, “Who, Gloria? Ah, haven’t heard from her in months.” And he went on to tell me everything that went wrong with her constantly criticizing him and complaining about where he lived and never mentioned once how for the last few years he’d been in between jobs

and that he sure as shit wasn't as trim as he used to be. Then he changed the subject, just to make it seem like he was taking the high road.

We listened to the man on the radio talk about a storm working its way up the coast from Georgia. They were reporting hail the size of tennis balls breaking windows, cracking windshields, knocking out power and a few unlucky idiots out in the thick of it. It was Saturday, heading in the following day. I had to be back at work on Monday.

"Might want to call and let them know you need a few days off," Ted said. Which was his way of saying, "She's not going back easily."

What's good is that usually you come around. Usually you reach that point where there's no denying what's actually your fault, when the veil is lifted and you admit to yourself what you already knew. What's bad is what happens after, when you're looking at yourself in the mirror trying to figure out why that stupid fuck-up is looking at you the way he is.

By the time she was twelve I knew Chelsea was going to be a rare genius. Sure, every parent says that, but she'd already skipped a grade by then and her teachers were contemplating having her skip another. So around that time I'd finished a job in D.C. with a company riddled by financial and corruption problems. The team I headed barely eked out a way for the firm to survive, and the CEO (who'd kept his job and actually managed a small bonus) was so grateful he said he'd do me any favor he could. This guy, a Yale alum with select political connections, didn't quite get my request at first, but then he smiled and went along. I asked him to write a university letter of recommendation for Chelsea even though she wouldn't be applying for a few years. When he crossed the T's in his signature I asked if he'd be so kind as to leave it undated.

When I got home and gave it to Chelsea she asked what it was and I told her to put it in her desk drawer. “You’ll want to hold onto *that*,” I told her. And the day she dropped it in the manila envelope to send to MIT, I asked what she was going to study, what she wanted to *do* with her life. She shrugged and said she’d probably study marine biology, seeing as how she liked ocean creatures so much. I explained it was a bit more complicated than that, and she said “Why can’t you let me make it on my own?”

Saturday morning Chelsea and I were sitting at the kitchen table keeping quiet over our cups of coffee. Ted kept getting up and going to the bathroom, finally disappearing for a long stretch. I went looking for more sugar and couldn’t find it. I went to the bathroom and knocked lightly on the door.

“Yeah,” Ted said.

“Where’s the sugar?”

I heard shuffling, but no response.

“Ted?”

“Yeah.”

“Sugar?”

“Yeah. Just.” He let out a breath like he was struggling. “Just come in here.”

I stepped back from the door.

“What?” I asked.

“Come in.” A thud. “You *have* to see this.”

“Ted, Jesus. No.”

“Seriously.”

“Ted, I’m not coming in.”

“Really, you have to see this to believe it.”

Before I could protest any further the bathroom door swung open and Ted was standing in between the toilet and the bathtub.

“Check this out,” he said. I averted my eyes. “No,” Ted said forcefully. “*Look.*”

And there, in the shallow water in the basin of the tub, was a fully grown sea turtle.

An amazing creature, its shell like a sturdily-built antique all knife-scarred, his fins this blue grey like they’d been dyed by the ocean water. Its eyes were pitch black, like looking into the abyss and not being sure if it’s looking back at you.

“Well, Ted,” I finally said. “It’s a sea turtle.”

“Yeah.”

“In your bathtub.”

“Yeah.”

The turtle lifted one of its flippers and slid it along the slick siding of the tub. The flipper dropped back on the water with a quiet plunk.

“Why do you have a sea turtle in your bathtub?”

Ted explained how the night before, after Chelsea and I had gone to sleep, he’d taken a couple beers and gone out to sit on the beach even though it was only forty degrees. It was dark, and he nearly tripped over a huge rock that appeared mysteriously in the sand in front of his property. “Or at least what I *thought* was a rock,” Ted said. Turns out a sea turtle had come to shore and was sitting in the surf all by itself. When he went out early in the morning for a jog, it was still there in the same place. Hadn’t moved an inch.

“And so you put it in your bathtub,” I said.

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“*Not* put it in your bathtub.”

We marveled at the creature. It raised a fin tepidly, feeling the ceramic tiling. The fin fell back to the water with a little splash.

“How’d you even get it in here?” I asked.

“Put him in a wagon. A Radio Flyer.”

“A Radio Flyer.”

“Yeah.”

“You went out to the beach, put a live sea turtle in a Radio Flyer, and brought it to your bathtub.”

Ted folded his arms and frowned. He said, “I feel like you’re not appreciating the sea turtle.”

Chelsea appeared in the doorway behind us. She saw the sea turtle in the bathtub and completely forgot we were there. She moved between us and slowly got to her knees, leaning into the shower, her hand cautiously reaching out for the turtle.

“Where,” she stammered. “How?” And Ted told her. She cupped water in her hands and gently let it trickle through her fingers on to the turtle’s shell. “It’s not moving,” she said, and turned to Ted. “Were there any others?”

“No. Not out back, anyway,” Ted said.

“I’ve been reading about this,” Chelsea said. “Sea turtles are washing up on shores in Australia in *droves*.” She cupped water from the bath in her hands and let it trickle through her

fingers over the turtle's shell. "A lot of them are like this. Lethargic, lazy-eyed. Either that, or they wash up dead."

Which didn't explain what a sea turtle was doing on the coast of the Outer Banks, half the world away. But Chelsea offered that sea turtles know the channels of the oceans the way birds knew gulf streams, whatever that meant. Basically the turtles had an internal GPS to tell them where they were at any given moment. They'd lay eggs in the Caiman Islands, cruise off to India for a few months, maybe hit Iwo Jima or Indonesia, and come back to the same exact place where they laid those eggs. So it wasn't inconceivable that a turtle that had been hanging around New Zealand made his way to the Atlantic. Worse, she added, was that maybe whatever it was these turtles were suffering from was actually spreading.

All of which made me raise more questions. If it was possible that this turtle could spread a disease, didn't we have an obligation to *not* put it back in the ocean? Shouldn't we have a vet or someone from the aquarium, anyone who was qualified, come take this mess off our hands?

"Do you think we should call animal control?" I asked. "They'll know what to do with him more than we will."

"I studied this for three years, I think I'd know what to do," Chelsea said.

Or so she said. The situation with the turtle was a classic exercise in cost-benefit analysis. Ted and Chelsea were much more in line with the starfish-on-the-beach philosophy, that even though this kind of thing was happening up and down the coast halfway around the world and that it ultimately made no difference, it made a difference to *this* turtle. Me? I was thinking about things like, is this turtle worth saving? Do we know if *we* can get sick from it? How much time and energy was this turtle worth? Of course, I didn't say any of this to them. They'd see it as me being predictably heartless.

“Well,” Chelsea said, “we have to save this turtle.”

I laughed and both of them looked at me. It wasn't a joke.

“If he stays here for too long, he'll die,” Chelsea said. “If he's this lethargic we'll have to put him back in the ocean ourselves.”

“We don't have to do anything,” I said. “There are people we can call about this kind of thing, you know.”

“Come on, Jack,” Ted said. I shot him a look and he shrugged.

“Let me do some research first,” Chelsea said. “I'll figure it out.”

I laughed again and they both shook their heads. Did that make me the asshole? I admit I could have done better, though I can't be to blame for everything. You get caught in certain roles—the insensitive prick who skips a third grade play to work for his family—and you're expected to do the right thing every time. It's like whenever we get a new president, he's wading through a shitstorm of criticism before he's decided what he'll have for his first presidential lunch. And sure, maybe those guys are slime for one reason or another, but there's *always* those who think he's a low-life no matter what he does, and they can't always be right. I'm not saying being a father and being president are comparable, though they share this: Anyone who says he's ready for it is a liar. Sure, some are more prepared than others, but once it happens, once you're in that hospital room or sitting down for the first time in the Oval Office, you revert to the same point as all those who came before you. Ground zero. Down here they drop you off in a warzone with a half-empty clip and no helmet. No one is ready. And if you fail because you weren't ready for it, that's your fucking problem, and what the hell were you thinking anyway for walking into the kitchen if you couldn't stand the heat.

After lunch Chelsea and I went for a walk. That was her idea. As we left I told Ted to give animal control a call, or the aquarium, or anyone who would know what to do with a sea turtle in a bathtub. It was forty degrees outside, and Chelsea was doing it barefoot. I tried to get her to put on some shoes, and when I said it again she gave me that look a dog gives you if you've lost his trust.

She was wearing Ted's musty copper-colored robe, a few sizes too big, the tail and cloth belt dragging behind her in the sand.

"What are we going to do with that turtle?" she asked me.

"You're thinking about *that*?" I said.

She stopped. "You know," she said, "you got this bad habit of answering my questions with more questions."

"I'm worried about you," I said. Chelsea kept her head down. Water ran around her ankles. "This all seems out of nowhere. Has this been going on for a while?"

"Has *what* been going on," she said.

"The drinking," I said. "The smoking. Partying. Whatever it is you're doing."

"What I'm *doing* is re-evaluating my future," she said. She stepped and turned to me, her lips slightly parted. With her reflective aviators I couldn't tell if she was actually looking at me. "And don't ask if my future is all booze and drugs."

"I wasn't going to ask that."

"Not even rhetorically?"

I paused. "No."

“That’s shit,” she said. She turned back and kept walking. I watched her for a few steps and my heart sank. I had this urge to sweep her up in my arms and just hold her like she was a child again. Now, though, at twenty-one, she would kick and scream and try to get away, and I would just hold on like she was a wild animal that had to be broken, had to be shown I wasn’t trying to hurt her. That if she would relax she would see that all I wanted was to help, and for her to accept it, however begrudgingly.

“Honestly, Chelsea, I don’t care about the turtle. Ted shouldn’t have brought the stupid thing inside in the first place.” We started walking again. “A bad storm’s coming tomorrow, so I figured we’d head out in a few hours. Tomorrow morning the latest.”

“You don’t get it,” she said. “You really think I’m going to just get in the car and let you drive me back to Boston.”

It was just the two of us standing on that beach, the sky and the sand one big collection of grey. And there we were in the middle of it. I told her yeah, that she was going back to Boston, and she laughed. I asked her what the hell else she was going to do, if she had no money, no job.

“I can get a job,” Chelsea said.

“I didn’t pay for three and a half years of MIT so you could drop out and wait tables.”

“You didn’t pay for that much,” she said. “I got a lot of scholarships. I’m pretty smart, you know.” And all I could think was who did this spoiled brat think she was.

I asked how she planned on getting herself out of the situation back at the police station. She didn’t answer that one. And then I told her I had a real important meeting Monday, and I was going to be there, and that *she* was going to have her ass in a classroom and that was that.

“You have to deal with these yuppies face to face?” Chelsea asked. “You can’t just tell them who to fire over the phone?”

“I don’t fire anyone,” I said.

“No, you just make recommendations.”

“If you hate what I do, why don’t you become a lawyer and try to get me thrown in jail?”

“Because if I became a lawyer I’d wind up seeing things *your way*.” With her robe and dirty pajama pants and aviators I felt I was walking with an addict I’d picked up from a halfway home.

“You ever think of what happens to those people after you fire them?” she asked me, but she was busy looking up and down the beach like she was expecting something.

“I don’t *fire* anybody,” I repeated.

“Because you know it doesn’t affect just them, right? The person you’re firing? It affects their family, too.”

“I know.”

“And their friends and their town and—”

“I *know* what happens, Chelsea,” I said. “You think you’re the only one who’s ever thought about that? We always try to calculate what the economic cost might be.”

“Not emotional cost, though.”

What a bullshit romantic idea that was. I knew facetiousness when I smelled it and I didn’t even bother to respond.

“Well, I don’t see any more,” she said.

“Any more what?”

“Turtles.”

“We came out here to look for *turtles*?”

Chelsea took a few steps backwards and smiled at me half-amused.

“What’d you think we came out here for,” she said, “to talk?” And she turned around and walked to the cottage.

It was all nonsense. Chelsea spent the afternoon on Ted’s computer doing research, trying to figure out the genus of the sea turtle, determining where it might have come from, cross-checking its symptoms. It started getting late and I brought her some coffee and I asked her just what she planned to do with the stupid thing. “What do you think I’m going to do?” Chelsea said. “I’m going to make sure he’s okay.”

I put the coffee on the desk and watched her work. Then I figured the only way I’d have an out, the only way I could get her to come back, was to give in.

“So look,” I said. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll take care of it.” She stopped typing and swiveled the chair to face me. “And I’ll help. I’ll do whatever you want. But you promise the second we’re done you get in the car and let me take you back to Boston. Or at least back to my house.”

She sat there, considering. She took another glance at the computer screen, shuffled through the notes she’d taken.

“Okay,” she said. “Deal.”

But I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into. Because on Sunday morning she woke me and Ted far too early and dragged us out to the beach.

“So here’s the plan,” she said, wearing a black bathrobe like she was in mourning.

“Aren’t you cold?” I asked, rubbing my hands together.

“We’ll bring the turtle out here and wait for the tide to take him out. I figure if we place him in the right spot at the right time he’ll get swept out to sea.”

It sounded reasonable enough. At least at first. By noon, when the tide had failed to sweep the turtle out like she expected, she had me and Ted at the edge of the surf digging a giant hole big enough to fit a casket. Then we’re standing in a fucking ditch looking up at Chelsea who’s got the sea turtle in the Radio Flyer and telling us it’s not deep enough.

“What’re we *doing* this for?” I finally complained.

“We’ll put him in the hole,” Chelsea said. “At high tide it comes up and forces him to swim. And hopefully the tide carried him out this time.”

I stopped digging and leaned on my shovel.

“That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard,” I said. But I wound up being the only one feeling that way. Before long she had Ted coming up with ideas, and he spent a better part of the evening running up to where the water was ankle-high, flinging the turtle into the oncoming waves. But the fucking thing just kept getting washed onto the shore again and again.

I made a few calls to make sure everything would still go ahead with the meeting in case I couldn’t make it, though I didn’t say that to anyone I worked with. If it came to it, I’d leave real early Monday morning and hopefully have enough time to drop Chelsea off at my place before heading to the office.

The sea turtle sat in the Radio Flyer. Chelsea stood in freezing ankle-deep water. She was barefoot. Ted and I stood just where the tip of the flattened wave peaked and foamed.

Chelsea looked out on the ocean like she was expecting something to come from it. Like she was waiting for it to reach out in a god-like water fist and scoop the turtle up. She crouched and ran her hands under the water. Torn sea weed stuck to her fingers and she came toward us.

“Take him out,” Chelsea said.

Ted bent down to take hold of the sea turtle. He glanced up at her.

“Do I just throw him, or what?”

“No, just. Just put him in the sand.”

Ted tipped the Radio Flyer and I helped ease it to the ground. The sea turtle slid out and plopped onto the sand, face first. Even when we took the wagon away he still sat there with the waves washing over him. We stood around him, looking as the lazy-eyed beast barely made an effort to blink.

I watched Chelsea as she went to both knees, put her face right up next to the turtle’s, her arm around his shell like she was comforting a distressed friend. If she said anything, and I think she did, I couldn’t hear it. To see her console that turtle, to try and connect with it in such a strange fashion, it made me wonder if Chelsea had lost her mind. She drew away, stood up, shifted her gaze to the ocean. She kept doing that, looking back and forth between the turtle and the sea. I could see her cracking some equation in her head.

“He’s not moving,” Ted said.

Chelsea ignored him, bent down to the turtle again. I cleared my throat and let my eyes wander to my watch. Almost five.

“Hey, Chelsea,” I said. “It’s getting dark.”

She heard me but she either didn’t understand I was implying we should leave or didn’t care. I shoved my hands in my pockets and shivered when a healthy breeze rolled through. In the distance, the floodlights on the pier went on.

“Put him back in the wheel barrow,” Chelsea said. She crossed her arms, tucked her hands under her armpits to ward off the cold. “We’ll have to drop him in the ocean.”

“You want to take him to the pier?” Ted asked. “You want to bring him out on my *boat*?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “No, no, no. I’m not getting on that piece of shit. Not with a *storm* on its way.”

“How else are we going to help him?” Chelsea asked, real serious.

“I don’t *care*. I don’t *care* what happens to him, don’t you get that?” But Ted picked up the turtle and got him back in the wagon, and he and Chelsea went back to the cottage and loaded the sea turtle into his truck.

At university my philosophy of ethics professor was some sort of existentialist. Primarily, what he believed we *ought* to do and what we *should* do were not one in the same. Meaning that while he believed we *ought* not to kill people for sport or neglect our ailing elders, we *should* operate in accordance with however the rest of society was operating. None of it made much sense to me, and even the prof was ashamed at the conclusion he’d drawn: Since we’re hardwired to survive and desire to have the best existence we can, conforming to society’s whims was often (though not always) the easiest way to get by. He thought it was too late for the individual citizen to do anything of real substantive content.

His examples were always dire. You’re a passenger aboard the Titanic, and like everyone else you find yourself afloat in water so cold you feel as though every part of you is being torn through with shears. Assuming you’re not in the business of surrendering your life and that the issue of women and children first is, in the inevitable ensuing panic, irrelevant, everyone is naturally clawing at his neighbor in order to land himself safely in one of the few lifeboats available. So what should *you* do?

When some of the more liberal students proclaimed they wouldn't attack fellow passengers regardless of what was being done to their own person, I sat there shaking my head and asked how anyone could think that *that* was the right thing to do. "You set no example of virtue," I said. "You'll die and no one will remember you for accepting your fate with even a modicum of grace." Not only that, but your refusal to participate in what you think is wrong in no way does anything to *stop* what you think is wrong, and your rolling over and dying most likely will only allow such trends to continue, seeing as how the world has one less person with that opinion. No, I thought you ought to fight your way on to the boat, dunk heads and toss superfluous weight overboard. I regretted the idea of doing what you hate to get ahead of it like anyone else, but the prof, like me, was all about real-world application and wasn't about to pretend that passivity meant piousness.

And when I said what I said people just snickered. Then they started objecting, reminding me of what Kant said about using people as means to an end or some shit. And I said all that hullabaloo was nice but unless they were actually practicing that themselves I thought it was pretty hypocritical. For the rest of the semester no one really talked to me and they obediently lapped up the prof's every word. No one gave me credit for saying what the rest were too chickenshit to say. That there's no one watching, that we were too accustomed to wishful thinking, that once we swam out in the ocean after leaving the sheltered harbor of higher education, most of us would go beyond standing on the shoulders of our peers to get ahead; we would tie cinderblocks to their ankles and tell them it was for their own good. And those we loved? Why, we'd end up dragging them by their feet, fingernails scratching across the floor, trying to get them to realize what we thought we'd already figured out: That there wasn't anyone out there who was going to look after *us*, so take care of your own and to hell with any bullshitter

trying to talk about the collective. There was no use in saving the floundering. A life jacket kept you afloat, but only for a while, and it sure as shit didn't keep you warm.

On the docks I watched Ted lower himself into the boat, a small standing-room-only fishing vessel so old it must have come into his possession after being decommissioned when the Civil War ended. The night was much colder than the day. He held his hands out to me, expecting the Radio Flyer to ease into them. I stood, my breath refracting through the bright lights of the docks. Nothing prepared me to take Ted's trawler out on the ocean at night, not when there was a storm coming.

"This is ridiculous," I finally said. "This is absolutely ridiculous."

"Hey, Jack, come on," Ted said. "Just hurry up so we can get this over with."

I heard myself fuming through my nostrils. I put my heel on the Radio Flyer and gave it a strong push, sending it crashing into a mess of ropes at the stern. Chelsea jumped back in fright.

"Jesus," she said, covering her mouth. She went to the turtle and cuddled it like a wounded soldier. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"What are you *talking* about?" I cried. "What are you talking about, Chelsea? It's just a fucking turtle. I'm not going out on the ocean when a storm's coming just to save a fucking *turtle!*" I turned away and faced the quiet black void of the ocean and screamed at the top of my lungs. The cold rush of still night air pulsed through me, shot out to my fingertips like an electric shock. How far my scream traveled, I'm not sure. I only know it didn't echo. Nothing I cast out ever came crawling back.

And I found myself standing there for a long time listening to the slow churn of salt water, to the creak and splash of decrepit fishing vessels. Neither of them had to say anything. I surrendered and got on the boat. I did that, and when I settled myself with a life jacket, I stared long and hard into Chelsea so she would know the only reason I was doing it, the only reason I would ever do it, was because I loved her. Because she was my daughter and even though her pathetic stand on this beach ate at me until I couldn't stand it anymore, I would do it for her.

The ship left the dock. We went out into the ocean, near blind, the three of us a thumbnail floating in a blanket of water that could have come up and hugged us so tight we'd hit its deepest depths.

How could I have been the only one thinking this was ludicrous? How could I find myself yet again the odd man out, the voice of reason ignored for the benefit of something that could never understand what we were doing, that could never appreciate the risk we took to make sure it found safe and comforting water once more?

We stood on the boat and headed out into the night, each of us shivering in our boots and life jackets. Once we were out about a football field's length from the shore, Ted and I took the turtle from either side and tried to lift him up, but he was too heavy, our arms too tired from having lifted and carted him all day. After the third try Ted stepped back to catch his breath. He didn't try to pick it up again.

"Come on," I said, exhausted. "Come on." But Ted wouldn't budge. I looked at Chelsea and she stared back at me with her helpless blue eyes filling with tears. I frowned and motioned for Ted to come forward again. It was like he was unaware I was there. Both he and Chelsea just looked at the turtle.

"All right," I said. "No one wants to help, I'll throw the Goddamn thing over myself."

“Jack,” Ted said.

“No, no,” I said. “*I’ll* do it.”

I got on one knee and wedged my fingers under to the belly of his shell and lifted with everything I had. I fell backwards and the turtle came with me, upside down, in my lap and heavy like a sack of bricks. Sweating, my arm muscles burning and aching with fatigue, I hoisted that turtle to the railing of the stern and prepared to toss him in the ocean.

“*Dad*,” Chelsea said. When I looked at her she just shook her head. Ted was holding her, trying to console her. I couldn’t figure out what had come over them.

And I took a good look at that turtle. His fins were flopped over lazily, eyes shut, head tilted to the side like he was asleep.

Chelsea came forward to the railing and petted his head. She sniffed, wiped her nose, put her hands in her pockets. We looked at each other, sorrow in her eyes, a dead sea turtle in my hands. We stayed that way for a long time. Ted took some of the weight and we threw him into the ocean. The water came up and swallowed him with a deep gulp. Fog curled where the sea met the vessel, like the turtle disappeared into a vapor, into the ether of the natural world. Chelsea cried the whole trip back and my hands never stopped shaking.

Here’s something I obsessed about for several months: I happened to do business with three or four large companies headquartered in Illinois, and all in all, about 2,000 people were let go. Now, not everyone that was fired lived in that area; we gave a suggestion of cuts from certain departments based on collective performance from across the country and handed it to the company heads, and from what they told us, the layoffs stretched from coast to coast. We had to

work that way because they weren't giving us performance reports of individual branches and they didn't comment on their *own* handling of the businesses.

In the news a few months later this one story detailed the number of house foreclosures around Chicago. I didn't think anything of it at first. But when this correlation popped up a few more times and seemed to follow me wherever my team and I worked, I found myself having an extra beer before heading to bed. I kept thinking about these who'd bought a house thinking they could pay it off because they and their spouse had jobs. And I wondered if I hadn't been slack sometimes, or just dishonest in my work, getting something for myself by penciling in the margins in our final reports some extra cuts that could be made even though they weren't necessary. Before I got too far ahead of myself everything blew up and the economy tanked and fingers flew everywhere. It was the fault of those who bought the houses. It was the fault of the profit-hungry investment firms. It was the fault of corrupt politicians. Look, I'm not pointing fingers. I'm as much in the dark as anyone else. As sick as it made me, all I could think about was my own complicity, and just how much of a hand I might have had in it all. Sometimes I hear these kooks on the radio or see them on the internet ranting and raving about how it's all one big conspiracy. Who think it's all under control. Who think that everything that's happened and is happening and will happen is going according to a very specific plan carved out decades ago. And sometimes I wish it was true, because at least then all this would make a bit more sense. Because then I know I could throw my hands in the air like everyone else who wakes up and reads in the newspaper that everything's gone to shit and can't imagine they're the ones who allowed it to happen.

I was sitting in the bathtub, my legs stretched out in front of me, fully dressed. Hail rained down from above and beat the cottage from every angle. Sometimes there'd be a piece that took a good try at the window, hitting it hard enough to make me jump. Chelsea, donning a new bathrobe Ted picked up for her after dinner, came in and went to the mirror to put her hair up. She stopped when she noticed me, startled, and she said, "*Désolé*. Didn't know you were in here."

I waved it off. She tossed her hair a few times through a band and looked at me. She put her hands on her hips.

"You been *crying*?" she asked. I shook my head, no, and she went back to the mirror. "Cuz you look like you've been crying."

She left the door open and even through all the beating of the hail I could still hear Ted doing something or other in the kitchen. Sometimes there'd be a big piece that would hit the house with such force it made everything shake a little. Like you could hear glass bottles rattle for half a second. That sort of thing.

"Any particular reason you're in the tub?" she asked.

"Just wanted to see it from his perspective."

"The turtle's?" But I didn't answer and she picked up on it and went back to whatever she was doing. "So how's it feel, then?"

"It's okay," I said. She ran the water in the sink, splashed her face, dried it with a towel. She came and kneeled at the side of the tub. I said, "I'm gonna miss my meeting, you know."

"I know," she said.

"And it's your fault."

"I know."

I said, "I could get in a lot of trouble. If I'm lucky I'll still have a job."

“You’ll still have a job,” she said.

Finally a piece hit the window behind the mirror so hard we could see the crack through the blinds. Chelsea jumped a bit and laughed to herself. She got up and went back to the mirror.

“You seem all right,” I said, a lump the size of a cue ball lodged in my throat. “You were pretty broken up on the boat.”

She shrugged and said, “Yeah, well. It happens.”

And I wanted to ask her how she could be okay, how she could let it go that easily.

Another piece hit the window and nearly took the whole thing out.

“Chelsea,” I said. “Get away from the mirror. Get away from that window.”

She glanced behind her. “It’s fine,” she said.

“No,” I said, and I stood up in the tub. “Get away from that window. It’s going to break if another piece hits it like that.” I could hear myself breathing. Chelsea gave me this look like she was afraid I might get sick. “Here,” I said, and moved to one side. “Get in the tub.”

“Qu’avez-vous dit?”

“Get in the tub.”

She put her brush down and smiled, confused.

“Why, exactly?”

“We have to take shelter,” I said. My voice went in and out.

“We have to take shelter,” she repeated. “Why don’t we just step out of the bathroom—”

“Get in the tub,” I said, and my voice cracked.

“All right, all right,” she said. “Don’t get excited.”

“Don’t get excited,” I said.

“Don’t get excited,” she said. “Move over.”

She stepped in and I crouched down, and after a moment she did the same, and I could see her smiling to herself, almost laughing. I reached out and put my arm around her, and then the other. I sat there and held her, covering her head as if the hail might break through and bury us. I held her, and she let me hold her, and I closed my eyes and didn't dare move, too afraid that if the light shifted or my finger twitched the roof of the cottage would blow right off and this moment would fall apart as if it was made of glass.

One more thing: Later, when Ted had gone to sleep, Chelsea and I sat on the couch together. She was wrapped in a blanket, her head on my shoulder, a sign I took of hope, though it hardly mattered. We didn't discuss Boston or MIT. We didn't mention the deal we'd made of the turtle dying or any of the stupid things the two of us, and especially me, had done. We sat together, a small action of mutual agreement, watching the fireplace, alive with burning logs, pieces of hail shooting down the chimney and sliding across the floor. What a thing to see, ice emerging from flames.

And sometimes a piece of hail would bounce off one of the iron prongs on the hearth holding the logs in place and fly through the air for a moment before coming back to earth. When they hit the hardwood floor the pieces would travel in different directions, melting in a matter of minutes. How many could I save if I dove from the couch with my hands outstretched like a baseball mitt? And what would I do with them afterward? I didn't know, and I wouldn't know, but there was something to be said for this piece of ice that formed in the sky, that hurtled from high above to come down to this cottage, to choose this chimney chute. This one shard that

came through the fire intact, that flew through the air and reached its apex, this piece so close to me sailing, spiraling, *shattering*...