

ROXIE

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*As delicious as jambalaya can be,
nothing compares to the story of how it got that way.*



“AVARICE.”

Blue looked up from what he was doing, not quite sure if the kid sitting atop washer seven was talking to him or just talking.

“A-V-A-R-I-C-E. Avarice.”

Blue had heard the word before but didn't know what it meant. He wasn't in much of a mood for learning, so he turned back to his task, emptying his pants pockets in search of enough coins to start a second load.

“Translucent,” the boy started again. “T-R-A-N-S-L-U-C-E-N-T. Translucent.”

The kid was scrawny and disheveled, his shirt two sizes too big and his pants two sizes too small. His hair sat atop his head like an injured animal, huddled along his scalp in a mop, as if it'd never met the attention of a comb, let alone shampoo. His shifty brown eyes bulged out of his head like he was being squeezed at the neck, intense and passionate in their focus. But he wasn't at all a threat. He only sat, peering out through the window at the 5 a.m. darkness of 35th Street, bouncing his heels off the front of the machine the way Blue and his buddies had when they

were his age. In the washtub beside him, he let the water run out full power as he went about his spelling.

“Resiliency. R-E-S-I-L-I-E-N-C-Y. Resiliency.”

Blue could tell there was something wrong with him. He couldn’t put his finger on what, but there was definitely something wrong. It was unclear who the kid was, but he must’ve belonged to the obese woman clipping coupons at the folding table in the corner. As Blue took a moment to glance up at her, he wondered how such a large woman could have produced such bony offspring.

“Paleontologist. P-A-L-E-O-N-T-O-L-O-G-I-S-T. Paleontologist.”

The coin slot assembly was broken on washer eleven, as were the slots on most of the other machines. But Blue knew the drill. He reached over top of it and started grabbing along the ledge for a wrench. He did the same at washer twelve, and then ultimately found one tethered to the back of washer thirteen. Taped to the base of the yellow handle, a slip of paper read, “Property of Title Laundromat,” written in black marker. It’d been forty years since the basketball team had won that Maryland state title, but the place continued to cling on to the neighborhood’s one flirtation with glory.

Blue balanced his coins in the slots and latched the wrench around the metal bar of the coin assembly. He quickly jammed the bar forward and used the wrench to pull it back with all his might, prompting the old thing to sputter into its rinse cycle. As he went to return the wrench to its place behind number thirteen, he climbed on the machine and looked up and down the row of washers, finding only two other wrenches remaining. At one point there’d been one for every machine, he remembered.

“Roger’s gotta start gettin’ thicker chains for these things,” Blue muttered, not necessarily speaking to the kid, just kind of talking out loud. “People keep making off with ‘em.”

The kid spun his head towards washer eleven. His kicking stopped for the time being, but he continued to let the water run down the drain. “You’re Blue, right?” he came out and asked, proud of his courage to talk. Something about knowing Blue’s name appeared to please the boy, and he did his best to fight away a smile.

Blue went back to rummaging through his pockets, unwilling to affirm what the kid already knew to be true. He wasn’t surprised the kid knew who he was. Everybody in this part of Baltimore did. Blue felt the need to say *something*, though, so he opted to admonish the young man instead.

“You gonna turn that water off, son?” The obese woman set down her scissors and looked up from her circular, perturbed that Blue had used the term *son*, when he appeared to be only a couple years older than the boy himself. But the kid wasn’t as agitated by the title, quickly returning to kicking at the front of the washer, as if Blue hadn’t even spoken.

“Condolences. C-O-N-D-O-L-E-N-C-E-S. Condolences.”

As Blue began counting his stack of coins, the kid reached for the bowl sitting beside him on washer eight. “Want some?” he asked, motioning toward Blue and tilting the bowl downward so he could view its contents.

Blue peered over the top of it, not hungry enough to eat this early in the morning, but still curious as to what was being offered. Inside, he found a mess of different foods that seemed to have been haphazardly combined, various rices and meats, vegetables and spices. It was all covered in an orange glaze and looked and smelled unappealing.

“What is it?” Blue asked in a snarky tone, making a face and craning his neck higher for further investigation.

“Jambalaya. My mama makes it, for sure.” As the kid responded, his mother went back to clipping coupons but continued to keep an eye on the conversation for good measure. “We’re from New Orleans,” he went on. “Everybody got a jambalaya down there, for sure.”

"I've never heard of it," Blue lied, looking back at his laundry in hopes that the conversation would die there.

"It's good, for sure," the kid came back, extending his fork forward, as if to prompt Blue to share not only the meal, but also the utensil. "Rice and andouille and shrimp and maybe some corn, for sure." Blue looked back and forth between the fork and the kid's face. His nose was red and runny, making the meal seem even more disgusting, the offer so much less enticing.

"We've been here a couple months now and they ain't got the same kinds of foods up here, for sure." Blue wondered how people from New Orleans had ended up in urban Baltimore, especially in this neighborhood, but didn't care enough to ask. "So, we liked livin' in New Orleans," the boy went on. "But we had to come up here 'cause . . ."

"Andy!" the obese woman shouted. The kid stopped his kicking and looked down at his feet, pulling his elbows into the sides of his body, an attempt to make himself tiny.

"Fiduciary," he started instead. "F-I-D-U-C-I-A-R-Y. Fiduciary."

Blue jammed his second collection of coins into the slots of washer twelve and grabbed the wrench to begin the process all over again. Twelve was rustier than eleven and noticeably more so than the last time he'd used it. The slot engaged, but Blue had to try three or four times to get it to pull back out. When it did, the machine roared and the obese woman jumped a little, startled by the violent sound it made.

"Cataclysmic. C-A-T-A-C . . ." The boy stopped and the woman looked up at him with scorn. "L-Y . . ." he paused. "S-M-I-C. Cataclysmic."

Blue was through being polite. He had bigger things to worry about than this kid or this obese woman or this laundromat's growing water bill. It was going to be a hard day, but rather than tackling the stress of what lay ahead, Blue set down his things and meandered to the corner, letting out a deep yawn only audible to himself. Calculating it unlikely

he'd get much better sleep if he tried again at home, he pulled a chair alongside washer thirteen and plopped down into it. He pulled his ball cap down over his eyes and folded his arms, resting all of his weight on his tailbone. With the roaring of the machines drowning out the incessant spelling, Blue was asleep within seconds.



Smith's yard was made up of a patchwork of red clay, weeds, and different grasses, uneven and not well kept, occasionally mowed, but never watered. The sun was rising over the cotton fields in the east, the pink sky bringing about a glimmer in the morning dew that demanded Smith's attention. He walked slowly with no destination in mind, just walking, lumbering about his yard as if he were hoping to get to know it better. About twenty feet from the house, he noticed a hill of orange dirt, all of nine inches tall, which had seemingly popped up overnight. In such a short period of time it had been created, yet its formation was purposeful, erected so carefully, designed and assembled with such precision and care. It was perfectly triangular, as if its intent was somehow to pay homage to the exact lines of a prism or the pyramids of ancient Egypt. Smith stood above it and watched, taking in its majesty, so focused on the individuality of its creation, disregarding the dozens of others just like it scattered about the rest of his acre.

He wanted to peer inside, to get a glimpse of the community dwelling below, but didn't want to aggravate its inhabitants or disrupt the beauty of their work. He opted to place only the toe of his weathered brown boot along the edge and scoop the dirt slowly to the left, creating a flaw in the design, but not one so deep that it couldn't be quickly repaired. Hundreds, maybe thousands of fire ants presented themselves, perturbed by the insult and poised to do battle. As he stepped back, a few of them advanced, voracious and desperate in their assault. Some attempted to

climb the toe, though they weren't quite as successful as those who'd located the free lace that had fallen loose from above, providing a ladder to the pant leg. Smith kicked his heel against the ground and shook them free, hoping he'd gotten them all, yet too much entranced by their splendor to look down and verify. If any remained, he'd receive some bites, he figured, but after all, he *did* have it coming.

Smith stood and watched the frantic rebuilding effort from the safety of his height before turning away and meandering toward the cotton field at the edge of his property. A warm wind blew across his face as he soaked in the solemnity of his quiet Mississippi town.

It was always quiet in Roxie. Even when there was noise, activity, it was quiet. Quiet in the sense that the rest of the world acknowledged the place as unimportant, a small dot on the map like thousands of others, where nothing of significance happens and the people's lives are inconsequential. But he loved it. He saw the power of their interconnected stories and the intention behind each citizen's existence.

Roxie was usually a rather vacant place on a Thursday, but this particular July morning had brought out more of her citizenry, most vying to feel even the slightest breeze amidst the oppressive heat. Along the edge of the cotton field nearly a hundred yards away, a group of workers circled an electrical power unit, just standing above it as they mulled over their assignment. There were three of them, two black and one white, two old and one young, two tall and one short, all donning orange safety vests and hard hats. Smith chuckled at the necessity of the hard hats, as the tallest thing near any of them was the electrical box itself, which couldn't have even reached the short guy's waist.

As they debated and discussed whatever it was they were trying to accomplish, Smith wondered how this collection of men ever came to be in the first place. These three men, born in three different decades, maybe in three different parts of the South, how had their lives collided in this moment? Why had they combined to tackle this project, this

task of unknown importance, all so committed to the same goal? Had they worked together in the past? Would they work together again in the future? Smith smiled before heading back toward the house, taken in by the enormity of such an arbitrary moment.

In the far corner of Smith's yard, an assortment of children were gathered on the picnic table, the one that had been left behind by one of his home's previous owners. The children assembled here often, though Smith never thought to correct them, as he didn't consider the table his own anyway. As he rounded the corner, the kids became aware of his entrance into their domain but didn't dare elicit an acknowledgement. Smith was still a young man, much closer to their age than the group would readily concede, but to them, an adult was an adult, and he was just as out of touch with their youth as any of their parents. He attempted to prove his composure, though he anxiously fumbled his house keys, sparking a pivot of three heads, but no direct eye contact. Smith waved anyway and called out, "Good morning!" to be met only by more silence.

Smith turned his attention to the Clarkes, his elderly neighbors down the block, who shared with him a pair of distant and obligatory waves. He gazed past them and toward the end of Magnolia, where he spied a sharp-looking young woman in an orange sundress marching intently along the adjacent street, piquing his interest though almost entirely out of view. Undoubtedly, she was someone he'd encountered before.

He took a moment to pleasure in the bliss of the town, the idyllic scene playing out before him, the presence of God amongst them all. Yet amidst this commotion and activity in his neighborhood, amidst all the warm feelings, amidst the temporary sense of contentment, he couldn't help but notice that the quiet of Roxie remained deafening.



When Blue awoke, there were seven washers and three dryers running. The kid was gone, presumably off spelling somewhere new. The obese woman's spot at the folding table sat vacant, only a couple of frayed coupon snippets and a can of soda left behind. He never caught the story of why they'd moved to Baltimore and regretted it, as he would never encounter the two again.

It was clear that others had come and gone during his slumber, as new, unfamiliar baskets sat atop the other washers. Blue stood from his chair and headed for the washtub, annoyed that none of them had bothered to shut off the water.

He looked up at the clock. "9:30," he pensively groaned to himself. Still another thirty minutes before he'd have to be at the cemetery. Part of him was relieved he wasn't late, but part of him wished he'd overslept.

The handles of the faucet were cold to the touch, despite the warmth of the water running below. Rather than turning them off, Blue grabbed onto the sides of the tub instead, slumping his shoulders and resting all of his body weight on his palms. The burden of the looming event was crushing him, forcing him deeper into the sink, deeper into his slouch, like Collins' ghost was actually standing on his back in an attempt to push him down further.

He closed his eyes and listened to the calming rush of the water, breathing heavy, in and out, methodically and naturally, almost as if meditation were a part of his regular morning routine. When he opened his eyes, he could only stare, mesmerized by the movement of the water as it circled the drain and disappeared into the blackness of its new home. "C'mon, Blue. Get it together," he muttered. "For Collins . . ." he added, lifting his hands to his face and running them slowly down to his chin.

He stepped away from the washtub and lumbered over toward dryer number six to sort through its contents, rummaging among the clothes in search of his collared shirt and dress pants. He hadn't dressed up since the last funeral, his grandmother's nearly six years ago when he was still in

high school. And the time before that? He couldn't even remember. His mother had probably bought this same shirt and these slacks specifically for that event. As he pulled them up, the pants were scratchy and tight and their formality heckled him. The heat of the dryer had produced so much static, he could actually *hear* the science behind his every step.

The hamper contained a tie, which he'd promised himself all week he'd wear, but now that the moment was upon him, he opted against it, initially satisfied with this decision, though deep down aware it was the wrong one. As Blue pushed open the front door of the place, he was hit by the warmth of the Baltimore morning and he forced his body out into it. Behind him, the water continued to flow from the faucet at full blast.

He arrived at the cemetery at 9:45, fifteen minutes early, or so he thought. A giant mass of people dressed in black stood huddled around the casket, hundreds of them it seemed, all awaiting his arrival so the ceremony could begin. As Blue meandered through the crowd, every gaze looked up and met his. There were nods of recognition, whispers of reassurance, winks from the older people; the kinds of things that convey a mutual acknowledgment that the situation is awful but don't really do anything to make it better. He was patted on the back at least three dozen times, each contact making him feel nothing. Undoubtedly, Jason had received the same treatment only moments earlier, he figured.

Blue looked up at the casket as he marched through the crowd. It was bigger than he'd remembered a casket being, yet it didn't seem large enough to contain all that Collins was. Mrs. Collins stood before it, with her sister to her right and Jason to her left, all looking down at the hole in the ground, as if they couldn't process the reason it'd been dug. Along the far side stood Collins' buddies from the Marine Corps, all dressed in uniforms unfamiliar to Blue, toting artifacts he didn't recognize, things that were foreign, yet substantial, as if they carried great importance to those who had the pleasure of understanding them.

Behind Jason was Blue's crew, the guys the whole neighborhood had known so intimately since childhood. They had always been such a symbol of power, the epitome of cool, yet standing there opposite those Marines, for the first time in Blue's memory, they appeared weak and subservient, just a mishmash of flawed individuals with troubled pasts and hopeless futures. Blue stared at them all, Cowboy and Davis, Ricky and Jeffries, the two Whitlocks. What a stark contrast existed between them and the men in uniform, impervious men of valor and conviction who would never have settled for the confinements of Baltimore. Blue tried to put them out of his mind, to ignore the presence of such men. After all, this was still *his* neighborhood, *his* people, *his* cemetery.

All those present looked up from their quiet thoughts and prayers to see what Blue would do when he reached the front of the crowd, and he was aware of it. Mrs. Collins did not hold it against Blue that he was late or that the proceedings had been halted due to his dawdling. After all, putting her only son in the ground was something she wanted to delay for as long as possible. But she *was* perturbed by Blue's ensemble, his wrinkled shirt, his un-creased pants, his unapologetic absence of a tie.

Blue walked right up to her anyway and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "He always loved you best," Blue breathed into her left ear.

Mrs. Collins whimpered and clutched her sister's hand a little tighter. "Thank you, Blue," she struggled out, instantly pardoning his appearance. It was *these* kinds of gestures that made everyone overlook the flaws in Blue's character, she remembered.

Blue stepped to her right and embraced Jason next. "Heck of a way to get everyone together," he snickered. Jason patted Blue on the shoulder but ignored the comment, staring straight ahead and never taking his eyes off the hole in the ground. Blue carved out a spot between Mrs. Collins and Jason and turned to his left to check out the crew loafing behind his best friend. Davis grinned widely and nodded. Ricky waved enthusiastically, as if he were at a wedding, not a funeral. From behind

dark sunglasses, Cowboy smirked as he pointed his index finger and thumb at Blue, making the motion of a gun shooting in his direction.

“Will the family please step forward?” requested the pastor. Blue’s right leg started for the casket, but Jason held him back and shook his head.

“We are here today to celebrate the life of William Collins, a young man who was called to be with the Lord this past Wednesday evening . . .” the pastor began. Blue looked down at the hole in the ground, assuming Jason’s decision to do the same was the correct one. He went to put his hands in his pockets, the natural place for them in a moment of uncertainty, then opted instead to hold them at his front, as Jason was directing.

“Let us begin by reading a passage from the book of . . .” Blue found himself lost within seconds, unable to focus on the proceedings, trying to keep looking at the hole, at the casket, at anything that would keep his attention where it needed to be, on Collins, on his mother, on the enormity of this transformational event in their neighborhood.

One of God’s children, Blue told himself, not really sure what that meant. *A disciple of Jesus*, he conjured up, unsure who Jesus was or why he needed disciples. But these were just words, things he’d heard his grandmother say in his youth. He searched further, trying instead to grasp the impact of Collins’ death on the Marines. *Their fallen comrade*, he said in his mind. *Their brother in arms*, he insisted to himself. But again, these were just ideas, too, things he’d heard spoken at the fireworks displays and parade routes around every 4th of July.

Collins’ death should’ve meant something. Of course, it *did* mean something. To the community, to the country, to his brothers in the Corps, it meant everything. But it should’ve meant something to Blue, to their group, to the kids who had always called Collins their friend. It should’ve changed them, affected them more than it was. In the grand scheme of things, Collins’ death meant much more than any of *their*

deaths would've. Including Blue's. He knew it, and it gnawed at him. It reminded him of his wasted years. It reminded him that he should've been farther along by now, maybe settled down with a girl, or engrossed in a steady job, or at least on a path toward *something*. But he'd wasted too much time. They all had. Except for Collins. And it took his death for Blue to begin to realize it.



“Smith!” the open garage next door seemed to shout. “Smith!” it came again, as a wiry young brunette appeared from behind a stack of garbage bins.

“Oh . . . hi, Shayleen,” Smith stumbled out, giving a half-wave and holding his hand over his eyes to block the morning sun.

“Well how ‘bout that! I run into Smith on my day off hairdressin’! So where you been hidin’ yourself, sweet pea?”

Smith just blushed, regretting he hadn’t gotten into his car faster. The woman crossed the garage to approach him but stopped short of the threshold, looking down to the ground at the dividing line between sun and shade, as if she’d melt if she journeyed any further. Her long legs were like toothpicks, impossibly thin and feeble, like a good wind could snap her torso right off. Her hair was done up just so, styled atop her head in a ball with strands falling down the sides like party streamers. For some reason, she wore a heavy white vest, something you’d see at a ski resort in January, not a Mississippi garage in July.

“You know, Randy’s out of town all this week,” she declared between loud snaps of her gum. “He’s up in Memphis workin’ some framing job. They’s buildin’ a bank up there or sumthin.” She paused for a moment, then started talking a mile a minute, almost to the point that Smith couldn’t keep up.

“Yeah, he’s been workin’ for some outfit up there in Hattiesburg. Givin’ him a dollar an hour more than what Callison gave, and only sendin’ him to Memphis ‘n Little Rock, not Owensboro like the last place wanted him goin’. He just loads up every Sunday night with a bunch of these fellas from The Gripstone. They all head right up to Memphis, gas paid and all. Oh! And the best part of it’s that they’s puttin’ him up in this little *mo*-tel right across the street from Graceland! Can you imagine that? Graceland! Randy’s sleepin’ right across from where the king slept! Ooo, ooo!” she squealed.

“Well!” Smith answered, unsure what else to say, having never heard of Callison, Owensboro, or The Gripstone. “That sounds like a great opportunity, indeed!”

“You know . . .” Shayleen slowed her cadence and leaned against the frame of the garage door. “He ain’t gonna be back ‘til Friday night. And sometimes it gets a little lonely with him gone so long . . .”

“Oh,” Smith returned, looking up and down the street, at the sky, at anything.

“If y’all wanna come by for supper tonight, just gonna be me. Got all this ham left over from the hock sale. I ain’t gonna be able to eat it all up myself . . .” She started twirling one of her loose strands of hair with her index finger, then added, “Sure could use the company is all.”

Everything that made Smith a man was pulling him like a magnet in the direction of Shayleen’s offer, but he put his head down anyway and withdrew. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Shayleen. But I really appreciate it,” he said with as much gratitude as he could muster.

“Well, you know, Honey, if ya ever change your mind . . .”

Smith again opted to ignore the invite by looking about the neighborhood, placing his focus on anything besides her summons. As he peered south down Magnolia, he again caught view of the woman in the orange sundress, however this time he got a clearer picture of her. She walked hurriedly down Forrest with purpose, as if she were intent

on something more powerful than just exercise. She was too far away to catch a view of her face, but Smith couldn't help but be enamored by her long, curly blonde hair. There was something special about her, something he couldn't put his finger on. He just *had* to meet her.

"Honey?" Shayleen said again, ducking her head to interfere with his stare. Smith didn't look back. He was too focused on the blonde curls as they bounced out of view behind the houses at the end of the street. "Honey?" Shayleen asked again, before shouting, "Smith!" to grab his attention.

"Oh . . . I'm . . . um . . . what were you saying?"

"I said if y'all change your mind about tonight, then just come on by!"

"Oh well, I'm sorry, Shayleen, but I don't think that's gonna happen. It, it just isn't . . . Randy and I are friends and all . . . and . . ." Rather than continuing to stumble out nonsense, he attempted to wrap it up. "But again, I really appreciate . . ."

Suddenly a loud, tinny ringing started emanating from within the house and she turned her head towards it. "That's me!" she yelled out with excitement, as if she hadn't felt a thing from his rejection. "Well, see ya later, Smith! I bet you'll be by tonight once ya smell that ham fryin'!" As she disappeared again behind the garbage bins, he let out a sigh and stepped back to the comfort of his driveway.

Smith climbed into his car, and as he flipped down the overhead visor, a rusty spoon fell into his lap from above. The spoon had long ago replaced his missing car keys and fit his ignition quite nicely. He wedged it into place and turned it slowly, the engine firing up with a sputter of effort and a plume of dark smoke ejecting itself from the tailpipe. Before he could put the vehicle in reverse though, he noticed a slip of paper, folded in half and taped to the front of his windshield. Smith opened the door and grabbed it, slinking back into the comfort of his seat as he unfolded the note.

“SMITH,” it read on the outside, and then followed in beautiful handwriting within:

Thank you for making use of my mailbox. I couldn't wait until Sunday to address your question. Please don't feel bad about your confusion. Many lifelong attendants of the church go to their graves without a proper grasp of grace and mercy. If you're having a hard time understanding it, just remember this – Regarding the past, we don't rue or regret, we confess and ask for mercy. Regarding the future, we don't worry or fret, we pray and ask for grace. Always here to answer your questions – Pastor Wells.

Smith clutched the note for a moment, peering out at his property as the message sank in. He appreciated the gesture immensely, and the power of the statement helped to clarify his confusion, but he still wasn't satisfied. He felt God's redemptive qualities every day, but he just couldn't believe that *he* deserved God's mercy and felt unworthy of asking for God's grace. But maybe these were just powerful concepts that couldn't be wrapped up in a sermon or in a song, or in a note taped to a windshield. Maybe they were just things that had to be experienced for themselves.



By the end of the service, Mrs. Collins had expended all of her tears. The people of the community crowded around her and her sister, administering hugs and well wishes, many of them for the last time, as the grieving process would now belong entirely to the family. The Marines stood empty-handed, having placed their objects on the casket before it was lowered into the ground. Jason remained motionless, standing by and soaking it all in, while the rest of Blue's crew began to converge around an oak tree several yards away. Blue meandered from Mrs. Collins' side to find comfort in their familiarity.

“Crazy, huh?” Ricky noted, not armed with anything more insightful to say.

“Yeah . . . ,” Blue started, himself paralyzed with vacancy. “I can’t believe he’s really gone,” he added for show.

“My man!” Cowboy hollered, grabbing Blue by a handshake and pulling him in for a pat on the back. “Nice job up there in the front row,” he added with a touch of mockery. Blue was annoyed but not surprised by Cowboy’s tactlessness.

The others approached Blue, one by one, all with the general pat condolences that accompany a solemn occasion. They had all had the past week to let Collins’ death sink in, so there was very little to say in this one final tribute, seen by them only as a formality.

“Hey, we’re all gonna go down to the bridge for a couple drinks,” Ricky announced. “You know, I think it’s something Collins woulda wanted,” he added, hoping to make the idea more acceptable.

“Okay, I’ll . . . I’ll meet ya down there,” Blue replied as he turned and began to trudge off.

“We’re going straight there. Just come with us!” Davis demanded.

Blue turned back toward the group and waved them off. “I’ll be there in a little while. I’ve . . . I’ve just gotta run down to the laundromat real quick.”

“Don’t forget to separate your skirts from your pantyhose!” Cowboy hollered, badgering as always. Blue and the others remained stone-faced, as if the comment hadn’t even happened.

“Hey, I’ll come with you!” announced Ricky. Blue groaned to himself, but before he could deny permission, Ricky shouted back to the others, “We’ll see you guys later at the bridge!”

The two walked away, and as they exited the cemetery, Blue noticed his departure was very different from his arrival. Packs of people still stood here and there, everyone saying their final goodbyes, hoping to make a clean exit and avoid lingering. When his shoes hit 35th Street,

Blue paced the sidewalk, peering back through the iron gates upon the scene devolving behind him. Mrs. Collins was organizing her family to head off to brunch and the Marines were folding up a flag. The pastor was consoling an elderly relative and the kids were chasing each other around the headstones. Jason remained in the same position, separated from the rest, hanging his head and peering down at the earth that now contained his friend. Blue considered returning to comfort him, but unsure of what exactly he'd say, he continued on ahead.

"So Davis is having a party on the 24th and I hear Bo's gonna be there with his cousin Charlice," Ricky rambled out, tagging along at Blue's side.

"Charlice?" Blue returned, annoyed by Ricky's change of tone, yet enthused by the prospect of a new girl.

"Yeah, Charlice. Short girl, kinda heavy, red hair. Charlice." When Blue's confused expression didn't budge, Ricky added once more, "You know, *Charlice*," as if simply restating her name with more clarity would somehow jog Blue's memory.

"Oh yeah, okay. Charlice," Blue responded, still doubtful he knew who she was, but disappointed by Ricky's description of her either way.

Ricky continued on like a machine gun, unfazed by Blue's disinterest in Charlice. "Davis said he has the money he borrowed from you last weekend, and Cowboy's gonna be out of town next week for some wedding. Oh, and Sandy Baker was up at Jeffries' thing last Saturday and she asked specifically about you and Jason . . ."

As Ricky read off one piece of inconsequential news after another, Blue tried to appear attentive but couldn't get his mind off Jason, probably still standing there, probably still staring at that hole in the ground. For the first time in memory, Blue was struck by the superfluous nature of Ricky's stories, of *all* their stories, and was bothered by his role in them.

"Man, you should have seen the look on Davis's face when *Molly Sanders* walked through the door," Ricky continued, absorbed in the inanity.

“Hmm,” was Blue’s only response, trying his best to be polite.

“So I have a job lined up next week and maybe you’d be interested in jumping in on it,” continued Ricky. “It’s at some tire distributor that Cowboy works with. I guess it has something to do with Whitlock.”

Blue looked back at his friend dubiously, probing for more information as their group possessed two unrelated guys named Whitlock, who each could not have been more different from the other. Nobody ever had to provide a first name or description of the Whitlock they were referring to, as it was always just implied by the context.

“Whitlock?” Blue probed, unable to catch the inference.

“Yeah, Whitlock,” answered Ricky with a shrug, as if to question why Blue would have any issue with the “good” one. “He’s the point man on this. I think he might even be there to oversee part of the job.”

“Oh . . . okay. I suppose I’ll be free,” responded Blue, now able to identify the Whitlock in question. He looked off in the distance before pensively adding, “*Tire* distributor.”

Ricky couldn’t tell if Blue was asking a question or not, so he chose to ignore the statement altogether. “It’s gonna be Wednesday or Thursday. I’ll tell Jason about it too if I see him.”

“Yeah . . . yeah, you do that,” Blue came back soberly.

When they reached their destination, Blue opened the door of the laundromat, finding a collection of people going about their business within, all completely unaware that a boy had just died. Blue wondered how they could’ve missed it, how they could’ve been in *here*, how they could’ve been so lost in the foolishness of their day-to-day routines that they’d missed their opportunity to celebrate all that Collins was. They cared only about themselves, he decided, something Collins would never do. Blue scrutinized their selfishness, their meaningless preoccupations. He read it on their faces; the girl in the corner, the old man folding socks, the mother feeding her baby at a table. He looked to his left, reading it on Ricky, too. And as much as he didn’t want to admit it, as painful as it

was to see, when he looked into the mirror upon the south wall, he read it scribbled all over his own face as well. Yet he still chose to overlook the fact that even though *he* had been present at the cemetery, he had been just as far away from it as any of the people in the laundromat.

Blue grabbed his clothes and his container of soap and hurried out the door, with Ricky dotting along behind. At no point did Blue think to shut off the running water.



Smith pulled out of his driveway with anticipation. His daily forty-minute commute never seemed long enough to contemplate all that needed to be contemplated. Sometimes he'd leave the house early, and once he'd arrive in Natchez, he'd just drive around, usually in circles through the streets surrounding the factory, stalling in thought, but never daring to be late for work.

Today, he cruised down State Road 84 without a working radio, the only sound coming from the hot Mississippi air pounding the thresholds of his four lowered windows. He considered Pastor Wells' note, prayed for Shayleen's broken marriage, practiced wittier things he should've said to the kids on the picnic table. But the overwhelming thought that dominated it all was his loneliness. Roxie had been the scene of his spiritual awakening. It was where he had met God, yet his earthly life still held so many voids. With all the effort and long hours he'd been putting in at work lately, he continually fell short of recognition. And although he'd been so friendly with everyone in the community, he just couldn't seem to forge any deep relationships. He'd made a connection with a girl in the church choir, only smiles back and forth so far, but he hadn't yet worked up the courage to approach her.

He considered the beautiful choir girl for a moment. There was something so appealing about her, a sweetness, a joyousness that he'd

never seen duplicated in another human being. Would this be the week that they'd finally meet? Or would he somehow happen to bump into the girl from this morning, the blonde in the orange sundress? Something had to change, he decided, as he couldn't handle another day of *Shayleen* being his best option.

Just shy of Natchez, Smith exited the highway and pulled into the gas station on Wicker Avenue. After pumping his gas, he collected some bills from the center console and headed inside to pay. The room was nearly empty, just a display near the register crowded with various potato chips and jerkies, fruit pies and other miscellanies. The walls and floor were all white, but white like a void, not the white of freshness and possibility. A couple of bare shelves stood along the south wall, scratched and rusted, further advertising the place's futility. It smelled of cleaning supplies, so much so that Smith had to cover his nose to avoid developing a headache. A room off to the side seemed to contain a kitchen with evidence of food being prepared, random boxes and bags of staples scattered haphazardly, a pan with steam rising from it, a spatula dangling from a cord tied to the ceiling. Smith sniffed at the kitchen with mild interest, though it was impossible to smell the meal over the noxious dominance of chemicals.

"Morning, Hon!" came a voice from behind the counter. A girl popped her head up from underneath, a stack of cigarette cartons stuffed within her grasp. "What can I do ya for?"

"Good morning," Smith countered. "I'd just like to pay for pump four."

She put down what she was doing and leaned against the register, a sly, engaging smile flashing across her face. She was young, maybe nineteen or twenty, with big, bulbous eyes that dominated her narrow face in an unnatural, almost inhuman way. They were further exacerbated by various eyeliners and powders, almost as if she were attempting to accentuate their distinctiveness. Smith found her to be

cute, but not in the normal perception of what cute was, just cute in the uniqueness of her features and the unusual comfort she seemed to show toward strangers.

“Never seen *you* in here before,” she started with a giggle, taking his money and pressing a bunch of numbers on the keypad. “I think I’d a remembered you.”

“Oh, yeah,” he replied, undecided in his willingness to match her flirtation. “I think I’ve been in here a time or two . . . but not in a while.”

“You live ‘round here?” she asked, cramming his money into the register’s drawer.

“No, I work up the road at the mattress factory. That big blue building up on Industrial Way.”

“Oh . . . cool,” she returned with a clear sense of disappointment. “My cousin Marty works up there. He does . . . numbers or somethin’.”

“Oh,” was his only response. The more they talked and the longer he lingered, the less appealing she seemed. Her swollen eyes appeared to be getting even larger and more cumbersome as they stared. He began to compare her to the choir girl from church, the same way he had with all females lately, and as he did so, his interest only plummeted further.

“You should come by on your lunch break, Hon. Just startin’ to prep some jambalaya for the rush. Best in Natchez, maybe all of Mississippi, I promise!”

“I’ll try to make it,” was all he offered back, cringing at the idea of the unappetizing option.

“So I stubbed my toe on a parking block when I was takin’ out the trash this mornin’!” she announced, trying to summon him to stay. “I took my shoe off and my toenail’s all black! I don’t know if I’ll be able to do much dancin’ with that nail hangin’ on like that.”

“Dancing?” Smith politely feigned, looking out toward the pumps and anticipating the safety of his car.

“Oh, yeah! Me and my cousins go up to Darci Lynn’s every Thursday night. You know, Darci Lynn’s up on 3rd, downtown? Never miss a week. We get up there around eight and dance ‘til at least eleven. Just gonna be hard with this toe is all.”

“Oh, I’ll bet,” Smith returned. She was now growing as unappealing as the meal she offered. There was something offensive about her, an oddness, a peculiarity. She was unashamed and overbearing. She was shadowy and blatant. She represented something familiar, yet repulsive. And she just *wasn’t* the choir girl.

“So what? You married of sumthin’?” she probed.

“No.”

“Girlfriend?”

“No, not at present.”

“Well heck, today’s Thursday, you know! Y’all should come down to Darci Lynn’s tonight! Gonna be a good crowd, it’s so warm out!”

“Thank you for the offer,” he started, preparing to shoot it down. Before he could finish, she cut him off.

“Oh, sorry, Hon. I know you gotta get gettin’ to work. How ‘bout we talk about it over some jambalaya at lunchtime?”

“Yeah . . .” Smith replied. “We’ll see if I can get out for a lunch break. I’ll . . . do my best.” He turned toward the exit and almost started running toward it.

As Smith climbed into his car and began to drive away, he looked back at the station and saw her standing at the window waving to him. He took a moment to re-evaluate her, and a bit of the cuteness returned. All in all, though, nothing about her compared to the sweet nature he read on the face of the girl from the choir. As he turned onto Industrial Way, he chuckled to himself, amused by the exchange but disappointed he wouldn’t be able to stop for gas there ever again.



Out in front of the laundromat, Blue and Ricky encountered some younger kids, maybe still in high school, but probably freshly graduated. The group peppered Blue with questions, disregarding Ricky almost entirely, as if his presence were inconsequential by comparison. They asked all about the funeral and offered mild condolences, speaking highly of Collins, yet ultimately seemed only concerned about who *was* there and who *wasn't*.

By the time Blue and Ricky freed themselves from the kids and started pacing the sidewalk again, Jason was back home from the cemetery. He had taken time to change into blue jeans and a plain white T-shirt and was now just standing aside 35th Street at the front steps of his family's row house.

"Hey, brother," Blue spoke softly, putting his arms around Jason's massive frame.

"Hey."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really," Jason admitted. "It was . . ." He could only shake his head, expressing more disappointment than sorrow. "It was rough."

"So, whattaya think Mrs. Collins is gonna do about the . . ."

"I don't know," Jason cut him off before even hearing what Blue had to say. Jason was aloof and succinct, totally out of character. He just stood there, leaning against the railing of the steps, peering off at the horizon as if it went on forever. "I don't know," he repeated.

"So . . . what . . . do we do now?" Blue asked.

"Well . . . ?" Jason took a deep breath and shrugged, desperate for a break from thinking about Collins. "For now, I'm gonna head up to the bridge. Just waitin' for my sister, she's gettin' ready inside."

"Martina?" Blue asked, but before he could receive an answer, the red front door crept open and Martina presented herself at the top of the steps.

“Hey, Babe!” she called out to Blue as she held the door open for someone else behind her. Ricky and Martina shared a polite, yet reactionary hello, the way any two people would who classify one another only as acquaintances.

“Hey, Girl,” Blue returned, peeking around Martina to see who else would be joining them. When he caught view of who it was, he was left speechless.

“So I got some work for us loading pallets on the docks,” Jason started, unable to pick up on Blue’s distraction. “Friday morning, cash money. Me and you, but you’ve gotta be on time or this guy’s not gonna hire us again.”

Blue mumbled an affirmative response, only partially aware of what he had just agreed to.

“You know this guy,” Jason continued. “We did some shutters on his boathouse last summer . . . and I think you were with me when we painted his garage.” Jason paused and scratched at his chin. “Or maybe that was Whitlock.”

Blue stared past his friend at the girl in the doorway, doing his best to conceal the exhilaration that rushed over him. He became instantly aware of himself, running down an improvised checklist of his appearance, wondering if he was dressed appropriately and remorseful that he hadn’t taken the time to iron the shirt or put on the tie. As the thoughts of his appearance dominated his mind, he remembered the laundry basket and soap in his clutch and became mortified with embarrassment. He set them down and kicked them aside, removing them from her view as quickly as possible, yet slowly enough so as not to draw any further attention to this evidence of his normalcy.

“So remember to bring your tools on Monday, just in case. I’m gonna talk to this guy and see if he has any other work next week, so we . . .” Jason continued to prate on, but he lost all courtesy Blue may have afforded him, as Blue saw only this precious girl and heard not a

word of what was said. The girl looked back at Blue with equally intent eyes, virtually demanding him to be captivated by her.

She was thin as a rail with pale skin and sunken cheeks, though her agile, athletic frame gave off a strange aura of health and vitality. Her long dark brown hair was unkempt, though peculiarly neat, as if she'd tried all morning to make it look nice, but didn't really know how. She seemed like a girl who had it together, but looked like a mess in her tight tattered jeans and loose-fitting V-neck white T-shirt.

But what he noticed more than anything else was her posture. She stood pigeon-toed, adding to the allure of a girl with a wary nature. Something about it drove Blue crazy, and he decided he would have to bring it up to her at some point. At the base of this stance were two green tennis shoes that were so tiny the size didn't seem to match at all with her taller frame.

The long black necklace that adorned her collar swung languidly with each of her guarded movements and her dangling earrings patted the sides of her neck as she descended the steps. She wore a wristwatch loosely, as if it had been a man's and could never close tight enough around her bony arm. Blue wondered how she had acquired it.

He was taken by her, confused by this instant love he felt for a girl he had never even heard speak. At this point, he had no clear evidence that she even *could* speak. She just stood there, peering carelessly from behind her dark brown eyes, wondering to herself what Blue had in store for her.

“ . . . so I swapped the old pair for a newer one,” Jason droned on. “You know, so we'd have an extra wrench that's a bit more dependable.”

“What's your name?” Blue asked, stepping right past his best friend and extending his hand toward the girl. Jason was perturbed by this insult, though quickly realized his own impoliteness by not introducing the two in the first place.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Blue. This is my sister’s friend Kelly,” he explained. “She dropped by the house this morning and didn’t have anything going on, so she’s tagging along with us to the bridge.” Blue stood grinning and nodding his head as this information sank in.

“Hi, Kelly. I’m Blue,” he let out as he engaged in a handshake. Her hands were tiny and her fingers were cold and dry despite the heat and humidity of the day. Blue wanted to pull her in close to him, to propose marriage, to whisk her away to a tropical honeymoon, but he stepped back instead, speaking to the group at large, without taking his eyes off of her at any point.

“Yeah, I’ll meet you guys up at the bridge,” he started with a shrug, carefully injecting himself into their plans. “I’ve gotta stop home real quick, and then . . .” He was captivated by her eyes as she stared back deeply into him, biting at her lip and flashing a flirtatious smirk. “I’ll be there . . . as soon as I can,” he finished.

But before leaving her company, Blue had to determine what Jason’s intentions were with this Kelly, just to make sure Jason didn’t have interest in her himself. The clever Blue hastily strategized and quizzed his friend, “Hey, I heard Sandy Baker’s gonna be up at the bridge today.” Sandy Baker was the girl that all local males had forever sought after. She and Jason had enjoyed a strange on-again, off-again relationship for years, so Blue hoped they were in the on-again period.

“Sandy Baker?” Jason returned with excitement. “Oh, well . . . I guess we’d better get going then.”

Blue figured that if Jason had recoiled from the possibility of seeing Sandy in Kelly’s presence, he obviously was interested in Kelly himself. But since Jason showed excitement upon hearing about Sandy, Blue didn’t have to worry about competition from his best friend. Although relieved by Jason’s response and proud of his own crafty remark, Blue did feel guilty, as he had absolutely no idea what Sandy Baker’s plans were for the day.



The Natchez mattress factory was an ugly building nearly three stories tall, sheathed in turquoise-painted aluminum and beginning to show its age. The structure possessed very few windows and even less character, with the exception of one confusing mural found alongside the southeast corner depicting an elephant riding a mattress down a snow-capped mountain. Two giant smokestacks rose from the rear of the building, casting a pair of long shadows over the railroad tracks below. The tracks, once a pickup point for outbound mattress orders, were now unusable, riddled with weeds and scattered cigarette butts, only occasionally seeing maintenance from their owner.

Smith always entered the building through the front doors nearest the office area. Although these doors were reserved for management and office personnel, nobody had ever told him he couldn't. He hoped to show he belonged up there, though he did take some ribbing for it from the other laborers in back. As he strode across the orange tiles of the lobby, he cheerfully greeted his would-be co-workers, despite their confusion towards his presence in their realm. Smith entered the factory floor and punched in at the management counter before reporting to his work station. The familiar smell of processing overwhelmed his senses as he readied for his day.

Because of an unplanned overnight work stoppage, Smith's station was much tidier than it normally was when he arrived. The cutter he was relieving had just fired up the machine for the day and hadn't had much time to dirty the area. After reviewing his daily safety checklist and examining his surrounding equipment, Smith cozied up to his trimming booth and began feeding cloth into the machine.

But before he could unwind the first bolt of the day, Smith felt a peculiar sensation. Scanning the area, he identified that three or four figures had descended upon him and now stood directly behind, seeming

to be watching over his work. Despite the earplugs he wore to drown out the sounds of the machines, he was able to pick up occasional words and ascertained that the group was, in fact, talking about him. Free of shame and willing to show his initiative, Smith worked harder yet, accentuating his movements to demonstrate perfect form in using his assigned equipment, just in case this was an assessment of his skills.

Before long, a bead of sweat began to form at the top of his brow and, conscious of being evaluated, Smith had to decide what to do about it. He pondered communicating to the group how hard he was laboring by wiping the sweat with his handkerchief and then reconsidered, as they might infer that he was complaining about his assignment or, worse yet, the factory's work conditions. Continuing to drip sweat may have displayed a mighty work ethic, however it might also have been seen as a sanitary hazard. As Smith continued to overanalyze, the stress over what to do with his bead of sweat ultimately led to the creation of another bead of sweat. All this concern about his appearance led to a sloppy cut on a series of fabric strips. Although none of the spectators noticed his beads of sweat, all four noted the fabric error.

After several long minutes, and before he could give his crowd any more entertainment, Smith was formally relieved of his post by Garrison, a fellow cutter. Garrison, whose face was dirtied from a previous assignment, barely looked at Smith, managing only to lock eyes for an instant, his expression suggesting his own recognition of the abnormality of the situation. Smith turned away from his machine and squarely faced the three men and one woman, all appearing to be high-level management, as they gazed back at him, studying him up and down as if he were a specimen in a science project.

The leader of the quartet stepped forward, and with a stern and sullen delivery announced, "Mr. Smith, we'd like you to follow us."



As Kelly turned to follow Jason and Martina east towards the bridge, she swung her head in the direction of Blue, back and to the left, with just enough force to shift most of her long dark hair over her right shoulder. Tugging with both hands on her relocated hair, she pirouetted delightfully in her tiny green shoes, now facing Blue as she took three or four long strides backwards, remaining in step with the others, and gave one last beaming gaze before turning back on course. As Blue's heart melted from the girl's delicate maneuver, a passing motorist honked and shouted, reminding him that he was still standing in the middle of 35th Street. Dismissing Ricky and promising to meet up with him later at the bridge, Blue set out to deliver the laundry back home and regroup.

Once inside his family's row house, Blue greeted his mother and dropped his clothes and the soap in the doorway, eliciting nearly no response from her, as she was busy reading the back of a cereal box at the kitchen table. After the morning's unexpected turn of events, Blue concluded that laundry would be his final chore of the day.

Blue proceeded to ramble down the hallway to his room and went straight for his closet, where he tried on every shirt he owned, looking for something casual yet refined enough to impress the girl he planned on wooing today and someday marrying. He swapped the collared shirt for a yellow T-shirt with blue and white stripes. Then he changed it to a plain black shirt that showed off his chest, but feeling he might come off as pompous, he switched plans altogether in favor of a white button down, hoping to accentuate his ability to be more formal. He sprayed some cologne in the air and walked through it, but in his hurry to see Kelly again, he moved much too fast for any to collect where he wanted it, the droplets falling behind him and anointing the carpet instead.

Blue gathered up his things and prepared for his journey to the bridge. The bridge had come to be a meeting place for a delinquent group of young people in the neighborhood and had been ever since they were school aged. Although all of the local youths knew about the bridge and

what went on there, few dared venturing without invitation. Originally, it had been Blue and Jason who had stumbled upon this spot when they were just ten years old, a pair of young boys in search of trouble. They dreamed then of what was now reality, a common place for their circle to gather without the constraints of authority or meddling of interlopers.

“The bridge” itself was essentially a major highway rising several stories above the sparsely wooded area that separated Blue’s neighborhood from the next one to the west. The bridge spanned nearly a mile with a series of canals and rivers flowing below it, all directly adjacent to 35th Street. On one side of the structure, Harp’s Junkyard sprawled about a half mile to the east and on the other there stood a giant mound of dirt littered with weeds, standing nearly as tall as the highway itself, whose initial origin was a mystery even to those who had spent a lifetime in its presence.

But Blue’s crew cared only for what lay beneath the bridge, a giant concrete slab extending from the ground at a forty-five-degree angle up to the base of the highway, a perfect spot for young people to lounge and waste away the day. The river running along the bottom of the slab provided swimming opportunities when high and wading when low and the concrete pylons in the middle offered triumph for those brave enough to reach them. Covered from the elements and concealed by trees from both the junkyard and the dirt mound, the bridge’s potential was obvious to Blue and Jason when they had initially discovered it, though few predicted they would overstay their welcome this far into adulthood.

As Jason and Kelly arrived at the bridge, the two saw completely different scenes. Two pairs of eyes, the same functional organs capable of processing identical images, both gazed upon very different landscapes. Jason saw the embodiment of freedom and pleasure, a spot where he could come to unwind or indulge, depending on his mood that day. He saw memories and old stories, some of them honest and others badly embellished, but all legendary. People came and went, but he was always

there, proud that he had logged more hours in this spot than anybody except Blue.

Kelly saw an urban kid's excuse for a playground. She saw the dilapidated conditions of the bridge itself, the beer cans strewn haphazardly about, the orange tinge to the water, the graffiti and rust created and preserved by foolishness. Yet she was still intrigued, confused by this urban world and mystified by Blue and Jason's reasons for making it their paradise. It was a blurrier vision than Jason's, as Kelly herself had spent her whole life living outside of Baltimore, only occasionally venturing into the city for a downtown event but certainly never to this neighborhood. Although disgusted by the conditions, she recognized an opportunity to do something new and saw Blue and Jason as her tour guides.



It was rare for anyone other than floor leaders to take interest in any specific employee, unless there had been a safety violation or a serious discipline issue. Smith scanned his memory for any way he might have acted out of line or performed the job in an unsafe manner, to no avail.

Reaching the management counter, one of the men said something inaudible to the woman, and then all three men splintered off towards the stockroom, leaving only the woman to lead Smith away. Smith was struck by the woman's height, taller than all three of the men, a feature just distinguishing enough to overwhelm her persona. He noted that she wore flat shoes, probably in hopes of underplaying her stature as much as possible. Smith wondered how her size had negatively impacted her life to this point but then felt guilty for obsessing on it himself.

He followed the woman through the large green doors that separated the factory from the business operations. They meandered through a series of corridors, the woman remaining entirely speechless, unnecessarily adding to the suspense.

“I’ve never been up here before,” Smith let out with a smile as they entered an unfamiliar hallway. The woman responded with a noise, not quite a groan and not quite a grunt, but either way not something designed to ease his mind or attempt conversation.

The two arrived at their ultimate destination, an office with a large imposing door and the Natchez Regional Director’s name and title spelled out in gold lettering. As the woman ushered him into the room, Smith blushed, cognizant that he had processed only the man’s title, regretful that he’d passed over his name. The director was busy scribbling all over the papers draped across his desk, feverishly jumping from one to another as if he were being timed. The woman coughed to get his attention and interrupted, “Sir, Mr. Jack Smith to see you.”

The director looked up and smiled widely. “Come on in, Mr. Smith,” and before his guest could reply added, “It’s nice to finally meet you!”

Smith was relieved to find a nameplate on the director’s desk identifying him and politely responded, “The pleasure’s all mine, Mr. Donaldson,” as he reached out and assertively shook his boss’s hand.

“Sit, Mr. Smith, please sit,” Donaldson ordered.

Though nervous and still not quite sure what this unorthodox meeting could be about, Smith injected some confidence into his demeanor. Based on Smith’s poise alone, the two men would appear to be business equals in the eyes of an outsider who was unfamiliar with Smith’s position and gave no regard to their difference in dress.

Donaldson was a man of about fifty but looked considerably older than that, much like those who toiled in the local fields. But the difference was in his skin, weathered in the fashion of a man who had spent his life making important decisions, not one who bore the burden of sun and sweat. Judging by the mass of work that lay strewn half-finished across his desk and the look of fatigue in his drooping eyes, Smith surmised that there was a reason he had never met Donaldson before, and that he was likely the busiest man in the mattress factory.

“Well, Mr. Smith,” Donaldson started as he rose from his chair and paced toward the window. “I’m sure you’re wondering exactly what you’re doing in the regional director’s office. This company has been going through a bit of a restructuring, trying to find a true identity ever since Mr. Martin took over.” Smith had no idea who Mr. Martin was or what he had taken over. Donaldson was accustomed to addressing people who did.

“Mr. Martin has decided that, as a successful company in the industry, we should be focused on identifying growth from within rather than seeking outside influences that may not share our commitment to excellence. Each of the regional directors has been tasked with finding acceptable candidates to begin to groom for upper management positions and we have made sure to keep watch over all the ranks, not just current managers.” Smith shifted an inch forward in his chair as Donaldson paused. “And that, Mr. Smith, is where *you* come in,” the boss added as he pivoted back toward his desk.

“It has been brought to my attention that you have been one of the exemplary workers in our factory, and although you’ve only been trained on your particular machinery, all of the floor managers agree that you could be more valuable to the company in a larger capacity going forward.”

Smith sat still, attempting to look as professional as possible. He was hoping to deliver Donaldson a cool temperament, as if he had anticipated this moment and seen it coming, all the while praying that his true childish excitement wouldn’t be exposed. This was, after all, a shock to Smith. Although he had hoped for recognition at work, he inevitably thought that it would come in the form of a handshake or a pat on the back.

“Of course, we will be stepping you up incrementally,” Donaldson continued, “keeping you on the factory floor for now, but in a management role to see how you handle it. This is a big opportunity, though .

. . . for the future. But first, we need to secure your commitment to the company and . . . well, frankly, find out if you're even interested in the position!" Donaldson followed his question with a smile and one raised eyebrow, probing Smith for an affirmative response. Smith didn't have to think about his answer at all, but paused for good measure anyway.

"I thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Donaldson," Smith said with an accentuated raise of his chin. "And I accept your offer. I am very honored and appreciative. I look forward to learning more about the new position."



Unsure if anyone was still home, Blue shouted, "Be back later," airing his intentions to nobody in particular. Without waiting for a response, he pulled open the heavy front door and invited sunshine into the dark foyer. He paused on the front steps to go through the mail, thumbing through the stack of letters, eventually dropping all but one back into the mailbox before descending the stairs toward the sidewalk.

The only piece of mail of his was a yellow envelope sloppily addressed to him by his father, whom he hadn't heard from since January and hadn't seen since high school. Within it, he found a few dollars stuffed into an unsigned birthday card. The old man must've confused June and July again, he figured. Blue peered out at 35th Street as he walked, still holding onto the card, not sure whether he should kiss it or burn it, trying to figure out a way to do both, eventually settling on neither. He crammed the money into his front pocket and slipped the card into his back, where it'd remain until next laundry day when it'd find its way into the trash.

By the time he reached the corner, Blue had already disregarded his father's insensitivity and turned his focus back on Kelly. He began to dream up grandiose visions of his future with her as he danced across

the broken pavement. Despite his distraction, Blue's feet were still able to steer him down the familiar dirt path that ran alongside Title Laundromat and ultimately led to the bridge. But before he disappeared into the brush, he was summoned by a shouting figure running toward him as it dodged traffic across 35th Street.

"Blue, Blue!" shouted Davis, sporting his usual ear-to-ear grin across his radiant face. "Hey, man," he continued, out of breath. "I had to run home to get some bottle rockets. Gonna shoot 'em off once it gets dark . . . for, for Collins, you know."

"Hey, just what he would've wanted," poked Blue mockingly.

"Yeah, right?" Davis agreed, completely missing the sarcasm.

Davis was redheaded, nearly six and a half feet tall, built with a muscular, yet slender frame. Throughout the east side of Baltimore, he was widely known and well-liked by a range of social groups, but he was tied to Blue and Jason's more than any other. Although most of their crew had joined along haphazardly over the years, Davis was one of the originals, and his charisma made him the most likable to outsiders. A brilliantly creative young man, Davis had a mind for the arts, intelligent enough to pursue any career of his choosing. But in his youth, he'd used his good looks and exuberance inappropriately, spending more time avoiding responsibility than chasing success. A veritable mainstay at the bridge, Davis had recently abandoned all hopes of a steady career path, instead focusing only on leisure.

Davis skipped alongside Blue, brimming with energy. He noticed that Blue seemed more reserved than normal, almost as if something were wrong, but assuming it was related to Collins, he refrained from investigating, trying instead to lift Blue's spirits through comedy.

"I heard Sandy Baker's gonna be over at Cowboy's thing on Saturday," he chuckled out. "Maybe you and Jason can *fight* me over her." Davis's jaw bred an instigating grin, which seemed to stretch wider than his face allowed, fully displaying both rows of his perfect teeth. His bright red

eyebrows crested nearly all the way to his hairline with the pleasure of his own humor. “That is, if I don’t swoop in first and snatch her up in my talons!” he shrieked, contorting his hands into the shape of a falcon’s claws and jumping up and down with a loud “caw caw!”

Blue couldn’t help but laugh, comforted by his friend’s usual state of silliness, but also amused by the impossibility of fighting for any girl but Kelly. Prior to today, Blue had contemplated moving in on Sandy Baker without Jason’s knowledge, but now he could barely summon the energy to give her a thought.

He continued to smile graciously while Davis danced around, squawking like a chicken as they meandered down the trail. When the two arrived at the opening to the bridge, they once again became serious, discovering a mass of people who had already assembled. Davis scanned and studied the crowd, while Blue immediately found the only one he came to see.



As he turned and walked down the hall, a sense of exhilaration overwhelmed Smith’s every muscle and his fingers began to tingle. His mind wandered wildly as he now saw a ladder to the top that was so desirable, yet just recently so out of reach. Maybe he would climb his way into Donaldson’s chair someday, or even higher! What a difference he could make at the company, after all! Smith pictured raising the company’s profits and improving the standards for the guys he’d been working with all along, even though he had no idea how he might accomplish either.

But realizing he might be getting too carried away, he stepped back to ponder how this could negatively affect him, calling to question the whole idea. How would his relationship with his coworkers change as a result of his decision? What would his new pay be and how might

that alter his lifestyle? Could he even handle this with no management experience to speak of? His shoulders slumped as he asked himself, *What if they have made a big mistake in their assessment?* Smith's gallant waltz through the halls slowed as the impact of these questions sank in.

You know, I was pretty comfortable at my old cutting machine, he thought, as his gait nearly screeched to a halt. But just then, he shook his head and remembered the excitement of what had just happened back in Donaldson's office, leaving his mind clear enough to realize he had not followed the route the tall woman had led him in on.

Smith stood in the middle of the hallway, not quite sure of his next move. He took a step back in the direction of Donaldson's office, but thought better of it, should he run into the boss again and be charged with aimlessly roaming. Going any farther did not seem to be much of an option either, as the hallway ahead was unlit and appeared to be an unused stretch of the building.

During his moment of indecision, a man and a woman suddenly appeared from within an adjacent meeting room, talking between themselves and looking down at their portfolios. The pair paused when they noticed Smith and, perplexed by his presence in their hallway, hurried on by with a nod of recognition, yet a nod signifying only that they recognized him as a fellow human being. Smith politely addressed the two as equals, as if they knew all about his new promotion, though in truth, neither was aware nor interested in his recent success.

After several miscues, Smith eventually located a stairwell that led him outside and into a lonely, unused grassy area littered with trash and cigarette butts. Smith walked the perimeter of the building and entered the front doors again, experiencing a sense of *déjà vu* from just an hour prior. Though now, as he greeted the same front desk attendant and encountered the same preoccupied faces in the lobby, he couldn't help but feel that this time things were different, that this time their realm was his too. Smith finished out the work day at his old cutting station

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and then drove back home to Roxie, comfortable with a job well done. The solitude of the vehicle calmed him as he tilted his seat back one click and enjoyed the sound of the wind swooshing through his windows.