

“Omar Took the Baby”

Andy barely had time to register the creak of the bedframe before two sharp waves of pain laced with fishhooks rolled over his back and found a home in his neck. Before Andy could kick free of the covers, cousin Titus curled one of his arms around Andy’s neck and ran the other long the back of Andy’s head. He began tightening his grip. Andy grunted and gasped as he felt the first surge of weightlessness flood his head. Only when his flailing hand squeezed Titus’ testicles did Titus finally roll off him and onto the floor.

There he sat. Breathing hard with his back against Andy’s press wood bookcase. The air around the bed now smelled of very sweet tobacco and sweat. It made Andy gasp harder.

“Omar took the baby and he’s not bringing it back,” said Titus, still breathing hard but now taking a moment to examine the cover of the *Rolling Stone* magazine he found on Andy’s floor.

Andy rolled over to his side. Good news. The blinking-light pain brought on by Titus’ opening kidney assault was subsiding. Bad News. As that pain retreated, the microscopic chemical holdovers from Andy’s epic whisky toot began to reassert themselves inside his head and intestines. Andy stared at his cousin a moment. Contemplated actually getting angry. Contemplated giving an impromptu class in cause and effect. He calculated a rough estimate of the energy he would be required to expend and immediately disposed of the idea.

“When that happen?” asked Andy.

“You know I don’t get this here. Dr. Dre on the cover of this magazine and all he does is sell headphones ain’t nobody can afford. This here is supposed to be a music magazine...” and Titus was off thumbing through the rest of the magazine, on the hunt for exposed nipple or barely shrouded labia.

“Titus... TITUS... When. Did. Omar. Take. The. Baby?”

Titus finally acknowledged him.

“This morning...”

Andy rolled out of bed and placed his substantial feet on the floor. Seeing that he still had Titus’ attention (sort of) he decided to strike while the iron was at least medium warm.

“If it happened this morning, how do we know that Omar is not bringing the baby back?”

“Cause he said so when she called him... said he wasn’t going to bring the baby back.”

Andy slid his elbows forward on his knees and rubbed his eyes. He saw that Titus had apparently found something of interest in the magazine so he raised his voice and tried to aim his words right at Titus’ head.

“So Omar came and took the baby this morning?”

“Mmm,” said Titus now chewing on his lower lip as he gazed at the page in front of him.

“And Odet called him at some point?”

“Mmmhmm...” said Titus now looking straight at Andy.

“And”

“And he say he ain’t bringing the baby back.” Titus seemed annoyed.

“Ok,” said Andy. He started to form another question in his mind, but discarded it. Better he play this out slowly, with the help of proper nutrition. Little would happen without generic Cheerios and coffee. Andy looked at Titus, willing him to leave his bedroom. He waited. He ran his hands through his hair. Finally he said:

“You can take the magazine wichoo.”

Titus stirred, looked at Andy, gazed again at the magazine, and struggled to his feet, magazine in his hand.

Andy rolled over to face the wall and collect himself before the final floorward push. The lights blinked off again as Titus delivered two stinging head slaps before closing the door on his way out.

The Dixie Trailer Park, a/k/a Dixieland Manor, looked to be in perfect working order as Andy peeked out of the small rectangle of screen that ran along the bottom of the opaque shower window. The screen was supposed to keep air flowing through the bathroom and prevent mold from growing. More often it functioned as Andy's first view of the living day, his bedroom lacking any windows. It was blue gray and dark outside. The ground was covered by a hard beaten down layer of snow pebbled with leaves and dog turds. There was no one in sight. Andy could hear the dirty slush of the snow beneath tires on the road outside the Dixie.

Andy looked at his face in the little mirror someone (likely Odet) had hung in the shower. Not good. Everything about his face, in fact everything about his body, was sending Andy a very strong indication that today was a day to be sacrificed to the business of recuperation and revival. Stay in bed. Send Titus to the Quik Stop for some Gatorade. Give yourself a clean slate. Start fresh the next day. All of this seemed very reasonable. But Andy expected that Titus was not about to let him hibernate and he had at least a trace of curiosity about Omar and the baby.

Andy washed his hair. His corn rows had disappeared a few weeks ago when he realized that Ms. Jolla, who did his knitting, had abandoned her trailer with no forwarding address. Andy missed them. They were a solid investment of efficiency. Very little maintenance. Just wash them every now and again. No day-to-day hassle. No worries about wearing a hat. Andy was coming to appreciate things like that.

In the shower, Andy let the water gush over his face. It felt like his skin was simply refusing to absorb it. Like every pore had been filled with a tiny bead of cement while he slept. Andy wrapped a towel around his waist and padded back to his bedroom. He put on his jeans and boots. Selected a t-shirt from those hanging in his closet. Then he searched his drawers and the floor. He finally found his favorite sweatshirt inconspicuously hidden under a pile of cousin Titus' clothes. Andy doubted Titus could find Auburn University on a map. Andy's Auburn hoodie though, he seemed to find without a problem.

As he made his way to the kitchen, Andy could here Odet in her own little room talking on her cellphone.

“tellin’ me he’s not brining it back... that’s my baby ... like he knows...”

These kinds of conversations had become a soundtrack to Andy’s existence in the Dixie. One sided with a little anger. Everyone who had a grievance wanted to properly vet it first. Make sure they could count on popular opinion to back their play. The phone calls were just the generals marshaling the troops before the offensive.

While Andy had initially imagined that motherhood would take away from Odet’s time to socialize, it seemed the opposite was true. Once the baby became portable, Odet graduated to another group of friends ... the young mother crowd. Like a floating support group, they moved between trailers and gathered in the laundry room on the appointed day. They fed babies, walked babies in strollers, advised each other on babies, and shared numerous complaints about the fathers of babies. The little ones were their membership patches to a very tight knit club, and they did a pretty good job of keeping the childless world at bay. They had a living-breathing claim that others should respect and support them. They were mothers. With children who loved them. The least you could do was stay out of their way. It was, most definitely, a little promotion for Odet. And it came with a posse.

Andy poured himself the last of the coffee and leaned against the kitchen window. Titus was sprawled in the little built-in bench by the kitchen table. On the other side of that table sat the highchair usually occupied by the baby. Frazier the cat was on the bench opposite Titus, clearly readying a move to the table. Odet was still on the telephone, louder now,

“NO NO NO”

Andy looked at the maroon stains on the kitchen counter and took the time to pass over them with a damp rag. Titus cajoled Frazier on to the table using pieces of cereal. Looking into the front room with its overstuffed furniture crowded around a small coffee table, Andy saw only trouble. The Tribe had gathered. It looked like they would stay awhile. The Tribe included

Andy's mother Belle, Titus' mother Ruby, Mrs. Richardson who did laundry with Belle and Ruby on Tuesdays, and Mrs. Monahan who just really liked other peoples' business, and thus liked Andy's family very much.

"Mmmm .. MMM.. see that..." said Titus. He showed Andy a picture from the skin magazine he was reading. Andy saw a young women with a look of careless desire on her face and an elephantine cock in her hand. Frazier was now up on the table. Titus offered the cat a generic cheerio and then poked Frazier in the eye with his finger when he approached.

"Shouldn't you be working?" asked Andy. He was rapidly realizing that his small home was in no way large enough for The Tribe, Titus, and Andy. And any crisis involving Odet would just bring the walls closer.

"No delivery yet and then I gotta bag it up. "

"So when does it get here?" asked Andy.

"Should be ten."

Andy observed that it was now 9:30. Odet was running the shower. Could it be that bad if Odet was running the shower? Wouldn't a true crisis trump a shower? Andy didn't have any more time to ponder that question because Mrs. Monahan walked in holding a Bear Claw.

"Morning..."

"Oh Hello ... Andy. I brought some Bear Claws."

Andy sunk his fingers into the sides of the pastry. His neurons registered the press of caramelized sugar under his fingernails with bright flashes of expectation.

"Thanks" said Andy after he had filled his mouth, "What's going on?"

'Well it looks like we have a little custody dispute between Omar and Odet. Omar took the baby and is not bringing it back." Mrs. Monahan seemed to look Andy up and down when she answered. As though he perhaps had the baby secreted somewhere on his person.

“Why’d he do that,” asked Andy. Titus now had a finger pressed under Frazier’s collar and was bouncing the cat a few inches off the floor. Every time Frazier’s feet neared the linoleum, Titus yanked upward.

“That’s what we are gonna find out. He probably wants that state money Odet gets.” Mrs. Monahan did not even turn her head in Titus’ direction, even when Frazier let out a little cat yelp.

Andy looked at his coffee cup. Then he finished the last of his Bear Claw. Ms. Monahan saw schemes everywhere and she made it sound like “state money” was some sort of easy street treasure trove. Plus “custody dispute” made it sound like there were celebrities and lawyers involved.

Andy thought all this, but managed just an “mmmhmm” to Mrs. Monahan who retreated back into the living room.

“Its good to see you are still around ... I guess,” she said over her rounded shoulder.

Andy stared after Mrs. Monahan and lifted his head to reply when Odet appeared. She was wrapped in a canary yellow terrycloth bathrobe and her hair was wrapped in a pink towel. Little pieces of green foam juttred out from between her toes. The mélange of color seemed to leap off her skin.

“Morning Odet.....” began Andy.

“He took the baby. And he said he is not bringing it back,” Odet’s face then seemed to melt as her mouth disfigured and her eyes began to squint. It was difficult to tell if the tears began before or after she finished her sentence. No matter. She launched herself into Andy’s chest. Her hands balled up little tufts of his hoodie as she sobbed and shook. This was not an unfamiliar posture to Andy, he and Odet having repeated it since childhood.

“That’s my baby...”

Before Andy could reply, The Tribe scrambled into the kitchen unencumbered by pastry. They surrounded Odet and Andy like they were the star crossed lovers from a high school play and the big number was about to begin.

“You need to call the police...”

“Call that lady at Legal Aid and tell him he took the baby.”

“You go to court and get an order up on his ass.... Make him show the cause”

“Don’t you worry, we will send Andy n’ Titus to get the baby.”

Andy started at the last comment that he thought came from the silver-haired Mrs. Richardson. Suddenly cell phones were being brandished. The Tribe was arming for battle. Andy extracted himself from Odet and hit the door. On the way he passed Frazier who had retreated to the crumb-filled alley beside the refrigerator. As he exited, Andy saw Titus approaching with a grilling fork in his fist.

Andy climbed into his truck, registering the longer than usual time it took to start. Immediately, Andy had to twist the wheel to avoid the Monahan Brothers who, dressed almost entirely in camouflage, were piloting a remote control Formula One racecar along the road. The Monahans, who had to be in their late twenties now, gravitated toward all things with small motors. Scooters, remote controlled cars, go-carts. You name it. If it presented a shrunken version of mobile reality, the Monahans were rolling it all over the Dixie to the delight of themselves and assorted pre teen boys who begged for a chance to pilot and then crash whatever the Monhans had.

Andy headed East, fiddling with the radio and keeping one eye on the dirt grey road. Not ten minutes later he pulled into the Archibald Morehouse Recreation Center. The Center was a large silvery tent that sprouted up about fifty yards off Morris St. It had a single metal doorway filled with dark tinted glass. Andy always toyed with the idea that if he opened the door

incorrectly or at the wrong time the Center would magically deflate on top of anyone inside. The whole thing looked pretty fragile to him.

Andy lugged his bag through the doors, and greeted the attendants with grunts of recognition. In the locker room he stripped down and put on a pair of sweats still emblazoned with the logo of the St. Petersburg Knights. Andy had just fastened a lock onto his locker when a shadow fell across him.

“That you Andy?”

Andy turned and confronted a barrel chested man of about his age with sleepy eyes deeply set into large eye sockets. Before he Andy could make any identification, a giant hand slapped his shoulder.

“Damn dog ... I didn't know you were still here.”

“Well yeah...” started Andy, the arm slap having jostled bourbon-encrusted nerve cells from a temporary slumber. They responded with anger.

“Alright then. ... well I'll get witch you. Damn Andy still around” and off the figure lumbered leaving Andy alone in the bay of cream-colored lockers.

Andy's workout was more about survival than strength building. He struggled to limber up, a fact he partially blamed on the Center's dubious insulation. His run jostled his spine and hurt his knees. It felt as though he was running through sand. It got better on the second mile when he seemed to finally get his legs under him, but the evidence was clear: Andy was carrying too much weight. Not the kind of weight that would get him on some television show. Not the kind of weight that would require a staple gun to rectify. But it was persistent. It had settled deep beneath his skin and fixed itself to his vital organs. It was not noticeable unless you were an athlete deeply attuned to the rhythms of your body. Unless you were a man used to covering ground in short order. So for Andy it was unmistakable. He was lugging around more than he needed to and it was slowing him down. This realization, clear in his mind, combined with acid

bourbon belches, inspired to drive down his spirits. It was like hitting a blocking sled. Nothing to do but keep your eyes focused a few inches ahead of your feet and keep on.

Like anyone who had played any sport for any length of time, Andy had promised and promised again that he would never let himself get drunk the night before a full workout. While he had hoped that the pain of experience had seared this lesson into his brain, such was obviously not the case. Last night had started innocently enough. He and Titus were playing NASCAR Challenge on the X Box sitting on the couch with their legs up on the coffee table. Smoking weed, they spent most of the night flipping their thumbs around the controls and summoning every ounce of body English they could muster. They banged shoulders frequently and strategically. And when things got too bad. When the crash was simply too bad to survive, or the one of them (usually Titus) built up an insurmountable lead, they simply hit reset and started anew. Fresh cars. Fresh track. This scene, or something close to it, was undoubtedly repeated simultaneously in trailers all around the Dixie, the residents generally preferring to entertain themselves cheaply and privately.

Andy had paused the game and was headed to the bathroom when he glanced back at his cousin. Titus' narrow shoulders were twisting around as he continued to play, his hands only pausing when he reached down and tugged at his groin. Andy's eyes moved to the greasy KFC bucket sitting on its side atop the table. Titus had produced it and the little baggie earlier in the evening. He had shaken both offerings and made some little noises with his lips and nose. Andy had registered some of the worst kind of discomfort. The kind that totally erased what were, moments earlier, feelings of comfort. The kind of discomfort that trumped familiarity.

Thus began a journey through a fifth of Old Weller and the better part of Titus' baggie. He recalled Titus had been along for part of the ride but had disappeared when Andy dropped his controller and began telling tales of St. Petersburg. Left to his own devices, Andy had managed to fall asleep in his own bed.

Andy struggled through his weight workout. Each repetition set off another round of small caliber gunfire in his head. He sweated profusely and longed for the knee brace he had left back at the trailer. At the end, Andy was left with the gritty belief that he had done the right thing. Persevered in the face of discomfort, pushed through the pain. This was the stuff that had been drilled into his head by coaches since his high school days. The game had no use for people unwilling to submit to its disciplines and requirements. “Every day you sweat and ache, everyday you just keep going on,” said his coach at Saginaw Valley State, “you prepare yourself for the day you will face real adversity.”

Andy had sucked that particular tidbit in. Tucked it back in his mind and pulled it apart occasionally to test its veracity in the face of his life. Right now it was unclear to him if he was in the face of true adversity, or simply still in training. The bankruptcy of the St. Petersburg Warriors of the Federated Football League had certainly seemed like adversity at the time. It had been Andy’s one chance to play his sport professionally. To live in Florida in an apartment all his own and collect a paycheck. He had signed a contract for \$32,000 a year and the bankruptcy court apparently let his employer skip the last three payments, perhaps deciding that Andy’s well being was of little concern in the larger sense. Andy learned he was also considered an “independent contractor,” and not an employee of the Warriors. Thus no unemployment and no continued health coverage. He did get a nice e-mail thanking him for his dedication and wishing him luck in his future endeavors.

Andy broke his lease and came back to Pinnacle County and the Dixie Homestead Trailer Park. He had played a full season in an upstart football league, collected about two thirds the money owed him and acquired a series of knocks, deep muscle bruises, curious aches, and an as yet undiagnosed problem with his ankle which was now prone to swelling for no apparent reason. Worse, the precise reason for his return to the Dixie was unknown even to him.

Andy ran his towel over his head and face. He trekked toward the showers with heavy legs. Just as he approached the mens’ locker room he stopped in his tracks.

CLOSED DUE TO MAINTAINENCE

Yellow police tape ran across the entrance to the lockers. Maybe somebody's idea of a joke. It seemed to Andy a fitting end to his workout.

Thrust back out into the cold with sheen of bourbon- sweat covering him, Andy again started up his truck and, lacking any alternative, headed back to the Dixie. That is what Andy missed most. Back during his season with the Warriors, he had seldom found himself at loose ends. Between workouts, practices, trainer sessions, and meetings Andy was able to move from point to point without much thought. The week between games passed like a flash. And if you did find yourself with time on your hands and the energy to use it, there was a bevy of teammates eager to hit the bars of St. Petersburg and see exactly what price a football player in a second tier league could command among the female populace.

But not so now. Now there was time to fill. Worse there seemed to be all sorts of disguised potholes that sent you running in different directions. His life used to imitate the straight arrows drawn by his coaches. Through the two hole and right at the quarterback. Andy had not really experienced a straight line in some time. Lately, everything was a detour of some sort.

Pulling back into the Dixie, Andy entered the trailer by the side entrance in the hopes of avoiding the Tribe. He was in luck. Perhaps a plan had been concocted or maybe some new crisis had erupted. In either case the only people left were Titus and Andy's mother. Andy found Titus knee deep in yellow page directories. There were two stacks of books of different sizes on the floor. Titus would grab one, then the other, and shove them into a plastic bag from ream hanging on a wall hook. The bagged directories were then deposited in one of two huge yellow shoulder bags sitting on chairs. One was already full. Titus nodded as Andy passed through the kitchen.

Andy hit the shower. This one he took with impatience. It was another detour. He did not even bother to gaze out the window screen. As he was dressing in the bedroom, his mother appeared carrying a cup of coffee. She didn't waste much time.

“You know Omar don’t you.”

For Andy, this was the second time he had been assaulted in his own bedroom in the last five hours. But that was another fact of life in the Dixie. All of your associations, good or bad, were open to the general public and it didn’t seem to take much for someone to want to exploit them. Put in a word. Convince so and so. Get with this guy ... I hear you have an ax to grind with Well me too .. maybe we could ... And now it was Omar.

“We played together some...”

“Well he has lost his mind. Taking the baby and saying he won’t give it back. You need to go have a talk with him. This will kill Odet. That baby is all she has. “

“All a lot of people has, it seems.”

Andy had no idea where this came from. Maybe it was the presence of the Tribe. Or Odet’s floating maternal band. Maybe he was still pissed off about his shower. But it just seemed to him a lot of people had a hand in this baby. All sorts of wants. All sorts of opinions too.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Andy was not getting away with this.

“It just seems like Odet did not have much going on before this baby. Now the baby is all she has. Big job for a baby.”

Andy’s mother paused. She leaned in on the doorframe. She pursed her lips for a moment and Andy temporarily feared a verbal onslaught. But then she relaxed her face.

“You have football. Odet doesn’t have anything like that. Where would she ever get it?”

“I had football you mean.”

His mother fixed him with another look.

“Talk to Omar, will you?”

Andy brushed past her as he left.

In the kitchen, Titus was now loading the bags onto his skinny shoulders. He had what looked like a hunting knife hanging from his belt.

Frazier watched from atop the refrigerator.

Back in the truck, Andy's cell phone jangled just as he was exiting the highway in Lincoln Park. Another distraction. The day was plagued. He checked the number and saw the now familiar area code for Los Angeles. It was Manny, a defensive back who had also had his FFL career abruptly terminated by bankruptcy proceedings. Like Andy, Manny had returned to his hometown. Out of nowhere he had called Andy in August. It seemed Manny had gotten into the acting business. Or as Manny put it "the falling down business." Hollywood, Manny explained, had a rapacious need for young men who were willing to take a few fake punches, fall over in dramatic style, and drive motorcycles and cars while looking tough. All the better if these men were in top shape and dark complected. Baldness helped too. Andy, Manny thought, would fit the bill.

"Come out here. Work out. Get yourself known and I can hook you up. \$50 an hour and ain't nothing in this business ever happen on time. They feed you too." said Manny.

Andy was interested at first. He asked some questions. But the more he thought about it, the more the thing just seemed unreal. Like it was movie itself. So he was just going to amble on out to LA. Bullshit. Manny didn't know what he was talking about. Manny was probably sitting in his own little apartment right now. Probably had his feet up on something knowing Manny. Chatting on the phone to his old buddy. Maybe looking at his watch. Has someplace he needs to be. "Gotta go now Titus. Get your shit together and call me." Click. The ring tone as insubstantial as the idea of tumbling around Los Angeles.

As he pulled into the Western Auto on Ecorse Road, Andy had become a little upset with Manny. Like he was just teasing Andy. Calling him up and offering something he knew he couldn't have. Fuck him.

Andy pulled into a parking spot. He bowed his head for a minute and tried to clear his thoughts. He had been doing this ever since a trainer in St. Petersburg had talked to him about the importance of a clear head. Mindfulness he called it. Focus on the task at hand.

Omar, who was behind the counter, saw Andy the minute he walked through the doors. Andy would never expect Omar to run away, but he was a little off put by the way he leaned over with his elbows on the counter and grinned at him.

“Betcha got quite a little party at your place right now?”

Andy just looked at him.

“Oooh Omar has the baby. That crazy Omar. Go get the baby.”

Andy kept up a steady pace to the counter. He had liked Omar in high school where he had played tight end and Andy had been a line backer. During the brief time Omar could be said to be seeing Odet, Andy’s affection for him had grown. He maybe joked around too much, but he was big hearted. And Omar had yet, to Andy’s knowledge, done any dirt of any magnitude. Andy decided to spare Omar the hard ass routine. Wouldn’t work anyway.

“Fuck yeah. This shit woke me up early this morning. ‘Omar has the baby and he is not bringing it back.’” Andy delivered the last part in a falsetto.

“I have the baby. Never said I was not bringing him back. Odet just decided that for herself.”

“Made that up did she? Just like that.”

Omar now stood up straight. He exhaled.

“Listen Andy, I was trying to have a conversation with Odet and she just ran with it. I make one little comment, she gets scared and just went off. Hung up on me.”

“Mhhmm. What comment was that?” Andy noticed a coffeemaker brewing alongside a stack of Styrofoam cups. Steam still coming out of the moist pot.

“I told Odet that maybe... maybe... I didn’t want to raise Augie around here. Maybe its best for him... best for us... to head out.”

“Oh yeah. Where to?”

“North Carolina.”

Andy was caught off guard by the fact that Omar seemed to have a prepared answer.

“And what’s there? Or you just like the weather.”

At this Omar turned and put his back to Andy. He opened a little drawer behind the counter. He pulled out a manila file folder and dropped it with some flourish in front of Andy. The little folder settled on the counter under a puff of air. Someone had sketched a Ford Mustang on the front cover.

Andy opened it. Inside was a computer printout bearing the logo of Western Auto. He skimmed the page and its dot matrix printing. From what Andy could see, Omar had been offered a job as an Assistant Manager at a store in Raleigh.

“That. *And* I like the weather,” said Omar.

Andy ran his fingers over the paper. It reminded him of the little two-page contract with the Warriors he had pulled off the fax machine at Knight Drugs. Just a few pieces of paper reciting a lot of mundane information with a huge opportunity nestled in the center. Andy got it. Papers like these could make you feel a little cocky. You were needed somewhere. You were in motion. The future beckoned and promises had been made. Still. What about the baby?

“You’re an Assistant Manager here,” he said.

“Uh huh. And I don’t make dick. That store does three times the business we do. It services commercial accounts for tires and brakes and all sorts of shit. You press for a little while. Manager. Then maybe something else comes along. You go here. You go there. More money each time. People know you. ‘call Omar for that ...’ No more living with my moms.”

“So what? You told Odet you were going to take the baby to North Carolina?”

Omar snorted.

“No. I told her she needs to think about Augie growing up here versus Augie growing up there. Augie going to school and coming home to a house. Augie getting taken care of. Just something to think about.”

“Hold up. You can’t say that. Odet dotes on that baby. He doesn’t want for nothing. “ Andy was serious about that point. Since he was born six months ago, Odet seemed to spend every waking minute with the baby.

“Ain’t talking about that kind of being taken care of. I know he is fed and changed. Odet is on all of that. I’m talkin’ about other things. Bigger things. You know.”

Andy used his face to convey that he didn’t know. Even though maybe he did.

Omar looked at him dead in the face. As though he could not believe Andy was feigning ignorance in the face of the obvious.

“All this shit just buries you. The Dixie. Ass backward Pinnacle County. Everyone needing something from you. Everyday something new. Bad roads. Closed stores. Fuckers getting killed. And it hits Odet too. This baby is all she got and he’s the one paying for that. Its always going to be that way. Odet, her moms, my moms, Ruby. The little mommy crew. They will always have a finger in him. They will get dug into each other and dug into here. And he will keep coming back. He won’t get out.”

Omar stopped and looked off to the side. Looking closely Andy could see that Omar’s chest was rising and falling a little faster than before.

“I get you. I get you about the Dixie. I get you about Pinnacle County. But Odet and the rest is family.”

“Uh huh. And they family that don’t know anything but the Dixie. And then they feed it to Augie like Similac. Without even knowing. And pretty soon that’s all he knows. And even if he can, he won’t. “

“Won’t what.”

“Anything bro. Anything. He just won’t. His bones will get thick just like theirs and he won’t go nowhere. Get like Titus and just want to hurt shit. You know that fucker is psycho right? Yeah ... uh huh... Titus. Augie’s uncle. Good start right there.”

“So what you going to do about Odet? She just supposed to stay here?”

Here Omar paused. He put his hands in his pockets. Andy watched him closely.

“I like Odet. You know that. But she acts like a grand momma around here. Like she is already old. Like its always going to be this way. She has a baby and a crew and that is all there is world without end Amen. She can come. I want her to come. But she is going to have to leave all the Dixie and its bullshit behind. She is going to have to learn to want something.”

Andy now put his hands in his pockets. He eyed the coffee maker again. The pot was now almost half full. Omar was coming heavy and it was hitting Andy hard.

“So you gonna bring the baby back.”

“Fuck ya I’m gonna bring Augie back. Not stealing any baby.”

“And maybe you feel out Odet on all this ...”

“If she will let me talk...”

Andy realized this was his cue to offer to help Omar, whom he basically liked and whom he could see in Raleigh, North Carolina wearing a denim shirt with Western Auto on it and busting some guy’s balls about brake pads. But his heart wasn’t in it. The business of propping up Odet, of taking her side in every little drama, feeling guilty when Odet had a problem. Her problem piling up on your problem. The Tribe. This was how bad things started. Agree to help out a friend. Smooth over some bad pavement and then, before you knew it, everything was in your lap. It was all on you. You owned it. Omar was not all wrong.

Andy was at a loss. He nodded at Omar. Or maybe he shrugged. Whatever it was, Omar seemed satisfied. Andy turned to walk away.

“Hey Andy...”

“Yeah...”

“He’s my boy.”

Omar was expressionless.

Andy hit the door without looking back.

The Tribe had left. Sale opportunities at Wal Mart had replaced the morning’s crisis at least temporarily. Titus had left. Took his bags of yellow page books and started his delivery route on the other side of the road.

Odet rolled the bottle of Diet Coke between her fingers and gazed at the high chair across from her. Augie usually spent Saturdays with his father and Odet usually spent the afternoon shopping with one of her friends. Pushing someone else’s baby stroller through the store, sharing opinions on the best brands of wipes and diapers. But now Omar took the baby he wasn’t going to bring it back. He didn’t say it just like that. But he may as well have. Omar said he wanted to take the baby away from the Dixie. To another state where Odet did not know a soul. All he could talk about was a new job and a new apartment and a new start. New. New. New. Omar didn’t know.

In high school, Odet had learned what “tactile” meant. It meant you could feel it, touch it, and that it was present. Augie was tactile. Everyday he was a tactile reminder of who she was and who her people were. She was Augie’s Momma. That baby’s momma. And her baby loved her in the most tactile way possible. Put his hands on her face. Burped when she thumped him. Giggled when she ran her fingers over his stomach. Omar didn’t talk about anything like that. He may well have snatched that baby right from her arms. He didn’t talk about anything tactile.

Odet lit a cigarette, a privilege allowed only in an empty trailer. All morning she had been crying. Not because she would never see her son again. She would. Omar was no kidnapper. He wasn’t taking the baby now, but she had a feeling that she and Augie would soon be in a place where things would be less tactile than they were in the Dixie.

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When Andy got to the trailer only Odet was at home. She was sitting at the kitchen table. The light fixture above the table bathed her in a yellowish smoky light that made her skin look sickly. Her hair wasn't done and you could clearly see where nature ended and L'Oreal took over. Her sweatshirt featured Minnie Mouse with a come hither look.

She wasn't doing anything except playing with her own fingers. A cigarette mashed up in a plate. Augie's high chair sat across from her and Andy knew with great certainty that she had been staring at that chair before he came in the room. She was still and Andy could barely make out the outline of her frame against the yellowing wall paper. While Odet had gained weight while she carried Augie, she now looked like the little girl Andy had walked to eighth grade.

Odet finally acknowledged him. Andy stared at her for just a second. His mind tumbled through some possibilities. He discarded all of them.

Andy sat opposite Odet and he looked at her hands now splayed on the table.

"Omar took the baby..." She started.

"Naw. Naw. You know that's not right O. That's not what he said." Andy found himself on the cusp of angry and sad.

"He said he was gonna take the baby..."

Andy looked up. He saw the unknown that was North Carolina clouding the corner of his sister's eyes.

"Gonna take you and the baby. Omar wants you to be from here, not live here. Whistle just blew. Time to get out O."

For a third time, Andy rolled out of the Dixie. The future of Odet and Augie distracted him so much that he had to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting a dead animal sitting in the middle of the road. When Andy jumped out of the cab to investigate, he almost immediately recognized

the carcass. The remote control Formula One. Formerly property of the Monahan Brothers. It was now a twisted and cracked wreck of bright red plastic and tiny grey gears. Andy kicked it to the shallow snow filled ditch at the side of the road. No reset on that car.

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Once back on the highway, Andy put a finger in his ear and wedged his knees on each side of the steering wheel. He flipped open his phone. He scrolled and finally jabbed the little telephone button when he found the number with the odd area code.

No answer.

Andy left a message.

It was still early in California.