

One time when she had driven Dad off to who-knows with her selfish sensitivity, Mom told me there are some mistakes you'll just keep making. Though it might dress itself a little different, the same twisted aspect burrows its way into your good intentions and renders them all for naught. Then again, she also told me it was my fault when I'd forget to take the trash out or leave a cup on the counter and it was my fault too for making her hit me. There's a lot from those days that's muddled.

I know for certain it was Brian that busted the safe open. Kasey and I had tried and failed for months, using our bodies and tools we found lying in the yellow sweetgrass. It was Brian whom we discovered standing next to the safe's door, this look on his face like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz when she discovered she had first killed.

All he would say about the scythe in his hand was that he found it.

Inside the safe were some black and white photos mixed in with some color ones. Stacks of people who stared back with their faces at hard angles, wearing resentment as though it were genetic. Even the nice group shots registered something that wasn't in the photo—something that happened before or was about to happen after.

Kasey took a silver chain that was stuck to the safe's crumbling interior. A long scratched silver cross hung from it.

Brian said, "Shit's cursed."

"Says you," Kasey said.

"I'd be all over that if I was a ghost," Brian said.

"You would haunt me?" Kasey said.

"Only in helpful ways," Brian said. "Like Bob Marley."

"Jacob Marley," I corrected.

"I know what I said," he said.

Kasey held the necklace up and I took a photo. Behind the shining leaves and swaying

branches, the sky was cloudless. Far away and huge and too bright to look at. I don't know why but my throat lumped up then and I had to swallow to make it stop.

In the safe there was also a sealed brown bottle. Brian dared me to take the first sip. I hesitated, though it wasn't a real hesitation. Just for show, for suspense. I wiped its mouth of dust and kicked the stuff back. Bitter, then goddamn furious. I sputtered. "Moonshine?" I said. "Gimme," Brian said. He gulped—gulped—and handed it to Kasey. Kasey, seeing that nobody was convulsing or dying, took a nip.

Birds shrieked overhead. Off in the distance I heard a police siren start, then fade.

We roamed the rest of the property, dappled in the August sun, passing the bottle like an oath to each other. Against Kasey's advice Brian dragged the scythe along. There were four of these rotting, empty houses off a craggy road that receded back into the thick of the reservation. How far, we never knew. Kasey and I had only been exploring since the start of May, Brian since he got back from Florida in July. In fact, until Brian arrived, Kasey and I mostly used the farm to smoke weed at, or as someplace to go that wasn't the mall or someone's house. Brian helped us overcome locked doors, windows that wouldn't budge, heights we couldn't reach without a boost.

We had already conquered the barn, whose door had been blocked by a huge rock shaped like a wolf's head. Brian dug his heels in and got it to roll away. Not much in there beside rotten hay and also this porno book called "Stepfathers and Stepdaughters," which Brian loved. He carried it around and would do impromptu readings whenever there was a crowd around. As he passed the bottle back to me, he dug the book out and started reading from it.

"They actually say 'fuck box,'" he said. He screamed it—"Fuck box!"

Kasey shushed him. We had never seen cops out there, but the farm was next door to a nursing home full of wrinkled busybodies. They peered at us behind beige curtains whenever we parked in the home's back lot.

The fourth house was furthest away and surrounded by spindly shortleaf pines that looked like old women with their skirts hiked too high. A duplex, one entrance in front and one in back. The back was shut with a padlock, which we hadn't messed with because it looked new. It was easy to forget someone owned that place. We went quiet whenever we saw wide tire tracks in the dust, huge bootprints in the mud.

The throat-drying sweetness of the grass and the pine needles and the dust and our sweat and the prickle of possible danger—I always enjoyed the way alcohol heightens these things, lets me know them like they're new. I still do enjoy it. I took a photo then of something I don't remember now, swept up as I was.

A sound like bones breaking cracked the air and I stifled a scream. Brian had brought the scythe down on the door, shattering the wood and sending the padlock flying off somewhere. Kasey whimpered.

“You're good with that thing,” I said. “Could you imagine if somebody was living in there? And Death came swinging through one day?”

Kasey said nothing, took a slug from the bottle, and followed in last.

We came into a kitchenette carpeted in peeling black- and white-checked vinyl. Slats of sunlight from the boarded up windows cut the dusty air. A smell like roadkill wafted, but you could smell that just about anyplace on the farm.

The fridge was still working.

“What the hell,” Kasey said.

Brian said, “Once in Florida I found a microwave plugged into an extension cord on the side of a highway. No houses around for like, eight or nine miles.”

“I bet you did,” I said. I knew he thought using “eight or nine” would make his story sound more realistic.

He brandished the scythe at me a little.

“Jesus!” said Kasey. “Do I have to put you in time out?”

“Shh, the old people will hear you,” Brian said.

Kasey snorted and poked around in a drawer full of kitchen knives. “It's weird they left so much stuff behind,” she said. “Some of it's still useful.”

“I know why they didn't take the photos,” I said.

“Why?” Kasey said.

“Cause those were some ugly motherfuckers,” I said. “I'd want to forget them too.”

“Maybe they're still here,” Brian said from the next room over. It was darker in there. None of us had flashlights. “What do you see?” I said. “Nothing,” Brian said. Then, a deep ripping noise— Brian was tearing open a mattress. There were dozens of them around, slumped in dusky empty rooms or piled in the woods. Who could need so many mattresses? He hacked and hacked at it, pulling fluffs of yellow foam out until it was a limp shiny blue sack on the floor. I tried to take a photo but there wasn't enough light.

I was getting bored and—how can I put it—heavy, like all my blood had been swept out of me and now was setting to rush back in. “Let's go up,” I said.

The stairs wound narrowly around a plain column with no rail. With every step up the air was heavier, hotter. Kasey grabbed my arm, like she would do sometimes. I didn't know what to make of it then, still don't.

The hallway at the top went two ways—Brian went left, Kasey followed me right into a tiny room with a mattress on the floor next to two mirrors laying on top of each other. The sight wrenched from me a deep sadness that echoed on past me before I had the chance to understand it. I stood Kasey between the mirrors and the mattress and took a blurry photo of her reflection.

The room Brian found held nothing. We sat on the floor and drained the bottle.

“What could you even do in Florida?” I asked Brian.

“Nothing,” Brian said. “I couldn't even go to the beach. It was bullshit. We sat in circles and talked about our feelings.”

“So like group therapy?” Kasey said.

“I guess. It wasn't very therapeutic,” Brian said.

“It's only therapeutic if you actually talk,” Kasey said.

“Did they let you eat?” I said.

“I talked,” Brian said.

“About what?” Kasey said.

“About how it was bullshit that they wouldn't let me go to the beach,” Brian said.

“I heard that they have all-you-can-eat buffets because they want you hooked on food instead of crack,” I said.

“Hooked on life,” Brian snorted.

“The angel of death is hooked on life,” I said.

Brian laughed. I don't think Kasey got it. It wasn't a good joke, anyway.

“Why is there a ladder on the wall?” Kasey said.

Brian and I looked up.

“Probably for the attic,” Brian said.

The attic door was wedged closed finely in the ceiling, secured by something we couldn't see. Not even Brian was tall enough to reach it. I was feeling more sober and diminished every second.

Brian picked up the scythe and without a word swung it wide and upward. He cracked into the wood of the door and pulled down. The door fell like a shot pigeon. Both Kasey and I screamed. Then laughed.

The room flooded with a honed roadkill smell. Some photos fluttered down, all color. All dated

the thirty-first of May, 1999. One was of a woman sitting on a window seat in the same room we were standing in now. The foot of a worn brass bedframe in the foreground. She looked softer, more defeated than the people in the photos we found before.

One was of a gravestone.

“Our baby, A. Nickel,” Kasey read.

“Just add 'we sold,' and 'for' and you have the greatest gravestone ever,” I said. Nobody laughed.

Brian went first up the ladder. Kasey and I followed and the roadkill smell heaved on us like pounding water. An ecstatic buzzing grew exponentially louder, deafening.

Until my eyes adjusted I could only see tiny white shapes in the stifling blackness: just teeth curled around an off-white rectangle, maybe an electrical outlet; what little light was caught on the wings of black flying beads of a dozen shapes; then, the sheen of what matter was left, its texture roiling, a rotted marmalade slush abuzz with unnatural life. I turned on the light meter for my camera and pointed.

I think, maybe, it had been a cat.

“Don't look,” Brian said, crouched at its side, the flies missing him entirely, “you don't wanna look.”

Kasey and I, being batted and bitten on our faces and necks and arms and legs, yelled and jumped through the door and ran down the stairs and up the craggy road back to her car, afraid we might have been heard by someone.

No one came, no cops anyway. Brian walked out to the car with his hands in his pockets, looking calm as the day he was born.

Somehow, we found more alcohol after the sun went down. Somehow we ended up at Brian's—his parents weren't home. Kasey passed out in his bed. I tried cuddling next to her but she moaned at me to

stop. Brian and I drank out of purple cups he got from his kitchen.

I sat spinning in a swivel chair. Brian sat on the floor.

“How's Adelaide?” I said.

“Good,” he said. Then, “She thinks I shouldn't be smoking pot.”

“Are you talking about that shit you sold me? Shit's laced, dude.”

“No it's not.”

“It is! It was horrible. I couldn't recognize my own mom.”

“She tries to tell me what to do. Addy does.”

“I wouldn't like that,” I said.

“Yea. It sucks.”

“Why don't you break up with her?”

“Too nice.”

“That's true.”

“She called every Saturday while I was gone.”

“Why did they send you anyway? To Florida?”

He sipped from the purple cup. “Drugs. Sex. Rocks in my head.”

“Do you mind me asking?”

He didn't say anything for a while. Then he rolled up his right sleeve. A puckered flurry of lines scarred from wrist to inner elbow. The deepest ones aligned mid forearm and read S A M. The skin around them was veined and bulging—I think they were pretty old. So I touched them all, let their permanence settle into me the same way I used to imagine the Holy Spirit did back when I sang in church, with my finger following the lines in the hymnal and breath moving in and out of me.

My throat started lumping again. My teeth felt slimy with alcohol. I couldn't say anything—what would I have said? I didn't look people in the eyes in those days so I wasn't watching Brian move

or his face coming close into mine. Pressing himself into me, long lean arms and all.

“That's not a nice thing to do,” I said.

“We're not nice people,” he said into my ear.

“Think of Addy.” I swallowed.

“She's a bitch.”

“She doesn't deserve this. Nobody does.”

“You're one to talk.”

He had a point. I had a deplorable track record, which he knew. I liked Brian, wanted to hold him until he fell asleep and woke up sober, wanted the scent of my hair and skin to give him goosebumps even when they were just a memory.

Then I felt that deep sadness wrecking me again, only this time I knew: because none of those things meant anything. We both had our histories and circumstances trailing behind us like toilet paper stuck to our shoes. Tricky to shake.

I couldn't tell you why I got up then and left into the night instead of doing what I could have done. I ran into Adelaide on Brian's porch and hastily explained why Kasey was asleep in his bed. She twirled her red hair and nodded while I spoke. For some reason she was reminding me of the photo of the lady sitting on the window seat. Open and soft and ready to embrace.

She asked where my camera was—I guess I did always have it on me back then. I realized I had left it in that attic.

That night I dreamed of two gigantic houseflies, one that ate fruit and one that ate animal flesh. Both were then stripped of whatever soft organs flies have until they were both fly skeletons. The skeletons crumpled into powder. I inhaled it, smelling sunshine, breathing pine.

I woke with the feeling that all the things I called my own, all the aspects of my person and the friends whose faces and bodies and words I used to draw that person, weren't mine at all, never would

be.