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Light Along the River

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LIGHT ALONG THE RIVER
A short novel in two parts

A Thesis

Presented to

the Graduate School of

Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

English

by

Matthew Turner

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Accepted by:

Keith Lee Morris, Committee Chair

Dr. Alma Bennett

Dr. Bill Koon

ABSTRACT

Light along the River is a creative manuscript featuring a collection of ten short stories that loosely connect with each other. The collection is separated into two parts, with each part occurring in a three day span. The stories focus on a group of characters who live in a fictional present-day small Southern town. Each story is a glimpse into a certain character's life. Description of detail is heavily focused on, as well as the actions of each character. Descriptive images and detailed scenes, instead of a specific narrator, are used prevalently in order to tell the story.

This collection is accompanied by an introduction detailing the author's influences, and an exploration into the content and style of the short stories. The introduction also explores the effect that mill closings and the rise of methamphetamine use has had on society in a small southern town. The work includes a bibliography, which is a short list of works the author consulted during the development of the creative manuscript.

DEDICATION

This short novel is dedicated to my family and friends, whose love and support I could not do without.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my director Keith Lee Morris for his constant support and guidance throughout the development of this creative manuscript. Special thanks must go out to Dr. Alma Bennett and Dr. Bill Koon, whose patience and support enabled me to bring this project to completion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
PART I	
The Bar.....	10
Sudafed	16
What’s wrong with a little bit of love?	22
Tink.....	30
The Blackest Black.....	36
Vagabonds.....	44
PART II	
Winter Solstice.....	54
Down by the River	63
Ice.....	74
Sunday Coming Home.....	82
WORKS CITED.....	97

INTRODUCTION

When I first started this creative thesis I envisioned a collection of short stories that was set in a small southern town. These stories would somehow be able to stand on their own, while at the same time holding some common theme. As the project continued, it started to resemble a short novel rather than a short story collection. In short, the stories became interlinked in more ways than I had anticipated. Certain details that I had placed in one story would be alluded to in another story. Also, while reading the stories in succession, I began to feel as if they were building up to something, that no single chapter would be complete without particular information from other chapters. In the end, I feel I've created the opposite of what I initially set out to do. Each chapter in the collection would not work as well as an individual story; they feed off of each other, and taken together, offer deeper insight into the short novel as a whole.

The setting of the novella is a present-day small southern town, and the stories follow the actions of several characters. Landmarks of this small town become characters themselves because they seem to appear in every story. A large part of this town is covered with mill villages and mills that are being demolished. The river also plays a major role in the setting. The majority of the physical characters are addicts of some kind. Drug use is frequently touched upon, especially methamphetamine abuse. Other forms of abuse -- emotional, physical, sexual -- also appear throughout the novella. The action in part one occurs during three days in October, while part two centers on a three-day span leading up to Christmas. My focus all along was to have the entire action

take place during the fall and winter months. I wanted to show the reader glimpses of these characters in relation to the small town around them and in relation to the world as a whole. Having the two parts allowed me to show separate times in the lives of each character.

Each character in the novella is linked in some way as well. Either they have met in passing, or they are connected through their association with another character. I wanted to have multiple small town characters who shared some association with one another. Most of these characters seem to have no redeeming qualities, but in the end, my hope was to create a sense of redemption for two of the characters -- Jake and Sarah. These two are the most dynamic characters in the novella, and through their connection at the end they seem to reach a state of humility that the other characters cannot find.

Two main symbols re-occur in the novella. The river, as mentioned before, frequently appears in the stories. One character dumps used chemicals left over from his methamphetamine production into the river; another character drowns in the river in part two. Rivers in small southern towns used to be the heart of that town, along with the mill. The river powered the mill, and consequently, the rest of the town. In this story, the river represents a piece of the present day south. It is dirty, it no longer powers the mill, and like the characters in the novella, it seems to meander without direction or purpose. Another symbol that appears throughout the novella is light. Natural and artificial light play a large role. A majority of the characters are seen at some point staring off into the night sky or looking up at the clouds. Artificial light, especially the Christmas lights that

are so prevalent in part two, offer deeper insight into each character. I've tried to detail the distinct difference between natural and artificial light. The juxtaposition is supposed to symbolize some aspect of human connection. The characters at the end, Jake and Sarah, experience the "light" of human connection on a natural basis. In other words, neither has to use drugs or become obsessed with decorations in order to find some type of connection with the world in which they live.

The physical descriptions of my characters were something I specifically focused on. One particular detail was hair. Jake has long, oily hair in part one, and then in part two, his hair is fixed and cut. The main female characters in the novella, Carol Ann and Sarah, both have different hairstyles throughout the novella. Sarah dyes her hair jet-black in "The Blackest Black," and Carol Ann returns in part two with short, dark hair. I wanted this physical detail to symbolize some sort of change that had occurred in their lives.

The setting and structure of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* has always intrigued me. That novella is set in a small town in Ohio, and each chapter is loosely an individual story. This structure is not new to the world of fiction, but since I am from a small southern town, I felt comfortable writing about people and things I've noticed along the way. The characters in Anderson's novella are great and I instantly connected to their small town nature. Mainly, I felt this structure was great because it lets the town act as a centerpiece, a point of reference that connects all of the characters.

A major difference between Anderson's novella and what I've been working on

would have to be my project's objective voice. My reason for sticking strictly to an objective style would explain, in large part, why I feel the South is still an interesting place to write about. The characters in my novella are trying to cope with a changing world. Parts of the Old South, like the mill and mill villages that were important for so long, are deteriorating, and communities all across the south are having a hard time adapting to these changes. The characters in my novella express this frustration in their actions, and their desperation is exposed through detailed description of their physical features. Drug addiction has sunk its claws deep into the South, especially with the increase in home methamphetamine production. These characters respond to each action with flat emotions, almost as if they've become desensitized to the point that nothing is too absurd anymore.

The mills and the Old South in Carson McCuller's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* play a large role in the story. The mills are booming and although they bring a lot of money into the town, the townspeople never see a lot of that money.

On the main street there were several blocks of two- and three-story shops and business offices. But the largest buildings in the town were the factories, which employed a large percentage of the population. These cotton mills were big and flourishing and most of the workers in the town were poor. Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and of loneliness. (6)

Although McCullers worked in a different time, a similar feeling of loneliness and poverty are present in my descriptions of the town.

The setting for my novella is a modern southern town where most of the mills in the area are closed down. The mills still play a significant role in the town and its people, but in the opposite way from McCuller's. The South that McCullers, and other southern writers for that matter, wrote about no longer exists. I felt it was important to expose this difference and to write a story in which much of the southern characters are the same, but there is a dark undercurrent of change that is taking place in this region that was not happening fifty or sixty years ago.

My style of writing has been largely influenced by Ernest Hemingway, most notably the short story "Big Two-Hearted River." The writing is clear and direct, focusing on specific details as Nick camps and fishes along a river. Hemingway relays to the reader just what Nick is doing and how he is fishing. There is very little narrative guidance as to what the story is about or what a main theme may be. At the end of the story, Nick is simply done fishing:

He climbed the bank and cut up into the woods, toward the high ground.
He was going back to camp. He looked back. The river just showed
through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish
the swamp. (232)

On the surface the story appears to be nothing more than a fishing trip; however, the selective details force the reader to discover a deeper meaning. Although Nick is just

fishing, his actions represent, on some level, his emotional state. The swamp mentioned in the last line is a specific area of the river that is hard to fish in. This descriptive detail lets the reader know that Nick is going through some kind of emotional crisis.

When I first started working on my thesis, I picked up a novella by Denis Johnson entitled *Jesus' Son*. As things started to develop and I started reading more of Johnson's short fiction, I began to see some similarities in both works of short fiction. For example, *Jesus' Son* is a collection of short stories that loosely follow the drug-induced wanderings of one main character. The characters are dirty, grimy people who often live in abandoned houses or cheap motel rooms. The characters in my stories are much the same. The drug culture and addiction are prevalent in each and act somewhat as characters.

What is interesting about Johnson's novella is that, even though his characters could be described as rejects or losers, there is some humility in their actions. For example, in the story "Emergency," a character named Georgie finds a dead rabbit on the side of the road that also happens to be pregnant. Georgie brings the rabbits back to his truck and says, "We'll get some milk and sugar and all that, and we'll raise them up ourselves. They'll get as big as gorillas" (78). Even though Georgie and the passenger in his truck, the main character, are high on whatever pills they stole from the emergency room, there still exists some type of humility in their actions because their first thoughts are to care for the rabbits. The rabbits wind up dying in the cold night, and the two characters actually feel some hint of remorse.

This would relate to my collection mostly in the form of Jake. He is a meth addict who cooks and sells the drug. He beats up his girlfriend in the third story and bribes two kids with money and marijuana in the second. However, at the end of the novella, something has changed within Jake. He is on his way back to town for Carol Ann's wake and comes across Sarah, sitting on a curb in front of a gas station. They talk, and Jake's humility comes through when he takes Sarah on a tour around town.

In the end, I sought to create a work that relied mostly on the action of its characters and the details of their surroundings. I developed this objective style, in large part, to mirror the flat reactions that the characters have in regards to their own actions and surroundings. I wanted the scenes or images in each section to relay the story to the reader, much like the camera does during a good piece of narrative film. This objective style invites the reader into the work. This means that I place a lot of trust in the reader to find and understand what the details and scenes reveal.

"The Earth is round, and is inhabited on all sides, is insignificantly small, and is borne through the stars."

-Johannes Kepler

Part I

The Bar

On the edge of town at the bottom of a hill was a bar. Its one streetlight lit up half the gravel parking lot. The place was built with cinder blocks painted tan, and over the entrance a neon sign read “The Hole.” Dusty stone steps led to the main door which opened to a dimly lit room. A couple of pool tables were to the left, and some metal chairs formed a semi-circle that faced the pool players. A small juke-box sat by the entrance of the bathrooms. The bar itself was to the right. Old stools held squeaky seats with ripped cushions. The L-shaped bar was made of cheap pine with a layer of Plexiglas that covered the top. Beneath this pliable glass were scattered photographs and notes that various drunks had written on dollar bills.

Carol Ann walked straight to the bar, sat down, and stared at a mirror behind the bottles of liquor.

-Somebody get me a drink?

-Sure, the bartender said, his crippled hand loosely shaking close by his side.

-Miller Lite.

She sat and stared down at the photographs embedded in the bar. Some of the photographs were faded, and specks of dirt were trapped between the wood and plexiglass. She picked up her cell phone and tried to call Jake, but she got no answer.

-Hey bartender, could I have another drink?

He shuffled over to her and looked her up and down. He nodded his head and wobbled to the cooler and kept his eyes moving all over her. He set the beer in front of her and sank back into the shadows behind the bar.

Carol Ann turned the bottle up and put it down half-empty. She watched the bar fill up with regulars. Men came in wearing bandannas, flannel shirts, and dirty jeans. Their muddy boots clanked around on the stone floor, kicking clumps of dirt and leaving imprints of dust on the grey stone. The women who came in all wore tight jeans and collared shirts. Their make-up was applied a little too heavy, the paleness exposed even in dull light. The stools around Carol Ann started to fill. Both pool tables hosted games, and people filled the chairs and watched. Someone turned the jukebox off and shouted that karaoke was about to begin in the back room. He motioned for people to follow him.

She eventually recognized one person who was drinking on the other side of the bar, a guy that she had gone to high school with. He seemed taller now, his brown hair thinning and the lines on his face showed the signs of hard living. He caught her looking at him and eased his way towards her.

-Carol Ann, right?

-That's right. Are you Hoyt?

-You remember.

-High School wasn't that long ago.

-Get you a drink?

-Yeah. Miller Lite.

After a few more beers, they walked towards the back room where drunken karaoke singers belted out their wobbly melodies. The room was bigger than it seemed from the outside. There were two long tables, each facing one side of a small dance floor made out of yellow and

orange tile. A few old couples were on the dance floor, not paying any attention to the rhythm of the music. They held each other in the soft light and swayed back and forth. Carol Ann and Hoyt sat at the end of one of the long tables. They laughed at one singer who opened his mouth and revealed two nubbins of what used to be teeth. Carol Ann finished her drink and took one of the karaoke song books and started rummaging through it.

-I'm gonna sing a song.

-Sounds like a blast, Hoyt said.

Carol Ann walked across the dance floor and up to a small stage to hand a piece of paper with her song on it to the karaoke DJ. A few minutes later she was called back to the stage and took the mike. She looked at her audience and tried to hide behind the screen that showed her the lyrics to the song. When the music started, she shut her eyes and began to sing.

I feel so bad I got a worried mind,

I'm so lonesome all the time

Since I left my baby behind

On Blue Bayou

Carol Ann plopped back down in her seat, sweating from the lights and alcohol. She wiped her face and forehead with a few damp napkins. She reached in her pocket for her cell phone and noticed the blinking light that told her she missed a call. She dialed Jake's number again and let it ring until his voicemail picked up. She quickly slapped her phone shut and let it fall with a hard thud on the table. As she was doing this Hoyt had arrived with two more beers.

-Hope that wasn't a bad call.

-It wasn't even a call.

-You need to talk to someone?

-I just need a beer.

-I also got a joint if you're game, Hoyt said, grinning a little.

-Lemme finish this beer.

Carol Ann cocked her head back and the cold beer ran down her throat. She looked around as more people began to migrate to the karaoke room. Both women and men stumbled to the dance floor and to the karaoke stage. Some danced and swayed while others wailed their favorite song. Carol Ann became dizzy with alcohol and the suffocating atmosphere of too many drunken people in one room together. She turned to Hoyt and looked into his eyes.

They rose from their chairs simultaneously and exited the back door of the karaoke room. Out back old keg barrels lined against the back wall and two sanded pits of earth roughly forty feet from each other for horseshoes. The air was thick and too humid for an autumn night. Hoyt and Carol Ann stood in the shadows and passed a joint back and forth. The smoke hung frozen for a moment in the thick air.

-So, how's the past ten years been? Hoyt asked.

-I don't know, could've been worse.

-Same here. I been workin at the mill since the end of senior year.

-I hadn't worked that much. Recently I just been livin with Jake.

-Jake? Jake Nichols? He's still around here?

-Far as I know.

They continued to pass the joint back and forth, each holding shots of thick smoke deep in their lungs, then exhaling plumes of smoke into the night air. Hoyt looked Carol Ann up and down. His eyes followed the slopes of her slender body. He licked his lips casually as he received the shrinking joint.

-You know, I had a hard crush on you all through high school, he said.

-That's cool.

-I got some more stuff in my car if you want anymore. It's real good.

-I think I should try to make it home; I'm kinda messed up.

-Fine. Mind if I walk you to your car?

The moon was hidden and small drops of rain fell. She had parked between two large trucks near the back of the parking lot. She fumbled for her keys and thanked Hoyt for the high. A rumble of thunder carried itself across the sky. Hoyt drew near her and jerked her arm away from the handle of her car door. He drove her to the ground and grabbed her throat and climbed on top of her.

She struggled beneath his weight. Rain started to fall on her face as she tried to scratch him. He kept one hand glued to her throat and let the other undo her jeans and pull them off. She flailed her arms and pulled at loose dirt. He ripped her panties off and lowered his head to a few inches above her face. His teeth were clinched and his eyelids peeled back.

He entered her and his face twitched in the increasing rain. Carol Ann tried to breath, but her lungs would not move. Her head jolted from side to side, and for a brief moment, she saw their contorted reflection in the dirty hubcaps of her car. Her eyes bulged and she reached

for anything. She grabbed rocks and dirt and felt the sharp edges dig into her skin. She swung hard and brought her fist to Hoyt's ear. He instantly let go of her throat and yelled as he sucked in rain and air. She thrust her bony knee into his balls. He fell off of her with a thud on the gravel and loose dirt. She stood up, spat in his face and kicked him in the ribs.

Thunder rumbled through the sky, quickly followed by a sheet of lightning that lit up the parking lot. She fumbled for her keys and unlocked her door. Her hands shook as she jammed them into the ignition. Her car started with force and she sped out of the parking lot, pelting Hoyt with gravel and peeled down the road.

She arrived at her mother's house a few minutes later. Her parents long gone to bed, she sat in her car and cried with a heavy rain falling and streaks of lightning flashing across the sky. Loud thunder rolled from dark cloud to dark cloud. She placed her arms and head on the steering wheel and began to cry. Her body heaved and twitched. Tears streamed down her face like the rain sliding down her windshield. She managed to find her cell phone and press re-dial. She let it ring until Jake's voicemail picked up. With a quiet screech she slammed the phone shut, laid her head against the driver's side window, and listened to a steady rain.

Sudafed

Jake sat in the blue Chevy truck as it rumbled down Main Street. They were at the street's one stoplight and he took the nasal spray out of his pocket, brought it to his nose and rapidly pulled the trigger. He inhaled deeply and lay back in his seat and looked over at Tink.

-Where we goin, man?

-We goin to Bi-Lo.

-Sudafed?

-That's the last of what we need. Now pass me some of that nasal spray.

Jake tossed a full bottle over at him and cracked the dirty window just enough to let some air in. He laid his head back in the seat and stared at the combination of streetlights and faint star light. His heart raced and he felt a little dizzy. They continued down Main Street at a slow speed, driving between empty buildings and a single row of old brick buildings that contained the shops of local businessmen. In front of these buildings was a large tar black parking lot with an empty grocery store and a McDonald's at the corner. After passing a few gas stations and churches of varied denominations, they approached the lighted parking lot of Bi-Lo. Tink parked his truck at the far end of the parking lot and quickly cut the ignition off.

-*Jake*. Wake up!

-I'm up. Let's go.

-We need Sudafed.

They walked across the newly paved parking lot, Jake with his hands in his pockets and Tink looking straight ahead. They concentrated on not drawing any attention to themselves. The

whoosh of the automatic doors greeted them, and they entered quickly. They strolled to the aisle of health care products and knew exactly where to look. With wide eyes Jake counted out ten boxes and strolled towards the cashier.

Jake stood in line and stared at the chewing gum. The ringing of his phone brought him out of his trance. He looked at the number once and pressed the ignore button. He placed his stash of Sudafed boxes on the counter and looked at the cashier. She was young. She had long golden hair that curled down to the middle of her back. She looked down at the little red boxes and then back to Jake.

-You know you can't buy that much at once?

-Why the hell not? Jake asked.

-It's store policy now. Some kinda new law. You want me to get the manager?

-No, just lemme get two boxes.

Jake paid the cashier and strolled out of the automatic doors with an irritated look on his face. He hurried his way back to the truck, climbed in, and slammed the door. With a sigh he took out his cell phone and pressed the call back button. He let it ring four times and then snapped his phone shut. Tink arrived a few minutes later, his square face red and his eyes full of anger.

-Can you believe that shit?

-What kinda law prevents people from buying fucking cold medicine? Jake reached for the nasal spray and casually brought it to his nose. He sprayed twice and inhaled as long as he

could. He brought his hand to his face and massaged his eyes as they watered and fluttered towards the back of his head.

Tink and Jake sat in the truck with the windows rolled down. An unusually warm autumn night brought a humid breeze through the cab. Tink tapped his leg against the door of the truck, gently rocking it back and forth. He chain smoked and occasionally scratched at an invisible bug on his forearm.

Jake was indifferent to anything but the kind of traffic moving in and out of the Bi-Lo parking lot. He lit a cigarette and waited anxiously for someone he could use to get the last of what they needed. He fidgeted with his cell phone and flipped cigarettes out into the warm autumn air.

Eventually, Jake climbed out of the truck and headed toward the entrance to Bi-Lo. The clouds began to hide the moon and move through the sky like large boats. The faint smell of rain filled the autumn air. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted two teenage boys buying drinks from a soda machine outside the entrance. Jake stopped in his tracks and turned towards the two kids. He approached them and leaned against the drink machine.

-You kids wanna make a few bucks.

-Depends on what we gotta do, one of them said.

-Just go in a buy a few boxes of Sudafed and some nasal spray for me.

-You got some kinda problem...can't go in -

-My problems are not important, you little fucker. Now do ya'll wanna make some money, or not?

Jake handed each kid a folded twenty-dollar bill with a joint hidden in the crease. He gave them instructions to buy two packs of Sudafed each and some nasal spray. Once the two kids realized what was in their hands, they bolted towards the entrance, their shoes squeaking. Jake went back to the truck to check on Tink. He found him on the floorboard of the truck. Tink had a fork and a rusty knife in his hand and he had ripped the radio out. His eyes were transfixed on the multiple colored wires and what they led to and what they controlled.

-What the hell you doin', Tink?

-Sorry. I just had to mess with something.

Jake slammed the truck door and headed to the tailgate where he propped himself up. He lit a cigarette and let the smoke slowly out of his mouth. The parking lot was thinning out, and a sheet of lightning could be seen a few miles away. Jake took out his cell phone and pressed re-dial. He let it ring four times and flipped his phone shut. A rumble of thunder passed nearby. Jake flipped his cigarette to the side and noticed the two kids sprinting towards him.

Jake took the plastic bags from the kids and counted four red boxes and two boxes of nasal spray. He looked back at the kids and nodded his head. Small drops of rain began to fall, and Jake jumped in the truck. He nudged Tink to start the engine, and they pulled out of the parking lot. He took a left and sped towards the main intersection of town.

-Hey, Jake said, stop by a gas station and I'll get some cigs and a couple of bottles of Jackets, that should do us.

Tink nodded and kept his eyes on the high beams. He was no longer shaking as much,

but a sudden depression had come over him. He chewed on a few more pills and wheeled into a small gas station parking lot. Jake got out of the truck and came back a few minutes later with two bottles of Yellow Jackets and a pack of Camels.

-You good to go, man? Jake asked.

-We got everything we need?

-Yeah. Where we cookin this shit?

-My place...the wife is at her sister's.

-Hurry up, storm's comin.

Tink revved the blue Chevy's gas pedal and sped out of the parking lot of Sav-Way. They took a side road that led back to Main Street. A heavy rain began to beat on the windshield; the wipers of the truck struggled to keep up. As they drove on, trailers appeared along side the road; their yards scattered with car parts and rusted bicycles. They passed "The Hole," and Jake took a quick glance at the parking lot. A junk yard was beside the bar, and Jake looked at all the rusted cars and trucks. At the end of this road, another gas station was to their right and in front of them, a small brick building that the town tried to make into a library. They took a left at this stop sign.

-I hate Main Street, Tink said.

-I know what you mean.

Jake sat on Tink's couch, smoked cigarettes, and listened to Metallica's *Master of Puppets*. Tink's trailer was full of trash and appliances he had taken apart and never put back together. His trailer was half a mile from Jake's house. It was surrounded by pine trees and

other ragged trailers. Thunder and lightning seemed only a few hundred feet above them. Tink's small home shimmied in the rising wind.

Tink was in the very back of the trailer with his glass bottles and chemicals. He wore heavy duty yellow gloves and pried open the top off an old car battery. He poured the powdered Sudafed into a metal container and mixed the combination gently. He took his gloves off and walked back to the other end of his trailer.

-Everything is mixin nicely –

-We got any more of that nasal spray?

-I don't know. I think I snorted them all.

The wind was easing and a light rain began to fall. Jake felt his body sink into the couch. He reached for a cigarette, but was distracted by the ringing of his phone. He stared at the name that appeared on the caller I.D. until his phone quit ringing. He turned the phone off and shoved it in his pocket. He relocated his cigarettes, lit one, and blew out a plume of smoke. The smell of mixed chemicals drifted through the trailer like a heavy fog. He laid his head back on the couch, closed his eyes, and listened to Tink take apart a television. Jake pulled a deep drag from his cigarette, placed his hand in his pocket, and flipped his phone open and shut. He sat and listened to the last rumbles of thunder move on.

What's wrong with a Little bit of love?

Jake was lying on the couch, watching a blank TV screen, when the front door began to rattle with angry knocks. He willed himself up off of the couch and stomped to the door like a caveman. Peering around the edge of the door he saw her standing there -- hand on her hip, looking for signs of life. She was a short, petite girl wearing tight blue jeans and a loose t-shirt that showed a touch of cleavage. Her auburn hair was full and wavy; it curled at the bottom of her ears and then slouched to the top of her shoulders.

-What do you want?

-I just came to get my stuff.

He stepped back and let her through, sweeping away stale pizza boxes and empty Coke bottles with his feet.

-You should've called first, he said.

-Sorry. I just want to get this over with, she said.

-Your junk should be where you left it.

-You look fucking terrible. When was the last time you went to bed, or ate anything, or even washed yourself?

-You're not my mother.

-You need to lay off that shit.

-Oh, and you're the person to lecture me?

-Seriously, she said.

-It's just something to do.

-Something to do? God Jake, you're such a *bastard*.

Carol Ann pushed herself away and stumbled down the hall over trash and dirty clothes. Jake sat down, lit a cigarette, and stared out of the only clean window in his house. It was a sunny autumn day, an energetic wind blowing east to west. From his spot on the couch, he could see distant scattered trailers, a few lanky tall pine trees, and a solid plume of black smoke billowing behind a neighbor's house.

In Jake's bedroom, Carol Ann found herself among more piles of clothes, trash, and what seemed like hundreds of empty boxes of Sudafed. There was a large pile of used road flares stashed in one corner, and empty bottles of Drano crammed in the bathroom. The stench of sulfur forced her to crack a window.

She began fumbling through drawers of an old chiffarobe, looking for anything that might belong to her. She kept moving mounds of junk around with her legs and feet. She eventually piled up a mountain of stale clothes and trash and climbed this junk pile in order to see over the top of the chiffarobe. She found a faded wooden box under dust and spider webs. She held the tiny wooden box in the palm of her hand, and opened the lid. She stumbled out the bedroom and down the hall.

-You sonofabitch, she said, hurling the empty box at Jake.

-What? He sat coolly on the couch, finishing a cigarette.

-Don't' bullshit me, you know what I'm talking about.

-Oh yeah....I gotta nice 8 outta that. Thanks.

She lunged at Jake and punched him in the nose with her tight, small fist.

Blood trickled down over his lips, and sent his vision into a blur of kaleidoscopic images of pine trees and black smoke. Jake seized her by the shoulders and slammed her on the coffee table, crushing empty beer cans and scattering cigarette ash and dust.

He climbed on top of her and held her legs down with his. She struggled to kick and tried to bite him as he gripped her hands. They wrestled until the table buckled under their weight. The slight fall stunned them both, and he fell beside her, breathing heavy. Her lip was busted and blood trickled down her cheek.

They both lay there, bleeding and uncomfortable under splintered wood and scattered trash, staring at the ceiling fan. Jake stared at the mounds of dust collected by the ceiling fan, its dust, the color of ash, years of collected smoke and dirt, spread like a fungus along the blades.

-I'm sorry, Jake said, trying to catch his breath.

-That was not yours to give away.

-Yeah, I know.

-I would've given you money for that.

-I know.

-I'm leaving this fucking town. I need to get out.

-Well, Jake said, struggling to stand up. Good luck with that.

-So, it's like that, she said, quickly sitting up. You just gonna walk away like that?

-What else is there?

-Dammit, Jake-

-Just finish getting your stuff. I'll be in the bathroom.

Jake sat on the toilet, clutching his knees with white knuckles. Pots and pans littered the bathtub, and various cooking utensils filled the sink. The blood around his nose started to dry, and he wet some toilet paper and dabbed a little. He stood at the bathroom sink and stared into the water-stained mirror; his long greasy hair was no longer able to cover up his hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. He grabbed a small bag that was twisted to form a bulge of clear, white crystals at one end. Jake pulled some tinfoil from his pocket and poured some of the crystal in the middle of the foil, then gently moved a lighter back and forth underneath. Smoke started to rise from the evaporated crystal, and with an old straw cut in half, he sucked hard and long so he could get all of the smoke he could. He sat back down on the toilet, with his head against the wall, eyes closed, shoulders slumped, slowly mouthing the letters L-O-V-E.

-What are you doing in there?

-Nothin'...Hang on.

-Never mind, I smell it. I wish you wouldn't do that shit while I'm here.

-Leave then.

Carol Ann's head thumped silently upon the closed bathroom door. She shut her eyes and spoke softly:

-Please, let's not do this again. Can't you just take a walk and let me get the rest of my shit.

-You want me to leave my own house?

-Please....

-Okay, he said, swinging the door open, almost letting her fall face first onto the stained

bathroom tile.

-Thanks, she said. Hey....you got a little somethin' I can take with me?

-Like what?

-I don't know, a little bump or something.

-Check the nightstand.

Jake walked to the front door, opened it, but turned around before he walked through. He heard her sobbing quietly and putting things in a garbage bag. A quick autumn wind rushed through the door and swept his hair around his face. He turned around and closed the door. He brushed his hair back and wiped his face with the back of his shirt.

The neighborhood around him hadn't changed in fifty years. His house was at the end of a small cul de sac, and behind this the ruins of a once prosperous textile mill loomed over the whole town, ancient relics of a better time. The mill's reservoir was located between the mill and Jake's house. The water had been stagnant for years; it sat and formed growth pockets of dark green algae.

Jake stood on his front porch and stared at the rows of houses with sunken foundations and faded asbestos siding that lined the street on both sides. Directly in front of him a few anemic pine trees and random trailers decorated the area like acne. The black smoke that he saw earlier was now a raging jet of thick smoke and darkness. Behind the houses to his right the sunken river moved swiftly and gutted its way into the earth. The tops of trees along the river curled towards the water and created a canopy of cracked limbs with leaves barely hanging on. To the left of the mill village was the main part of town, with one stop light, a

McDonald's, and an empty grocery store.

Jake groped in his pocket and brought out a smaller version of the same bag stained with whiteness. He took the toilet paper out of his nose, gently touching it and deciding it would handle whatever he forced up it. He twisted the bag open and used one of his long fingernails as a scoop and brought it to his nose. With a quick sniff the powder shot in his sore nose. Jake walked down the street and listened to the rhythm of his boots on the sidewalk with the light of an autumn day fading.

He had passed a few houses and kept his head facing the loafing clouds. Jake inhaled the chemical air of his neighborhood with his mouth barely open and eyelids wavering shut. Eventually he came upon a middle aged man and what looked like his daughter standing in their front yard, talking about the black smoke. He tried to avoid them, but there was something familiar about the girl that made him walk toward them.

-How you doing? The man asked.

-I'm good, Jake said.

-Do you know anything about all this smoke?

-No, not really, it's probably someone burning tires or something.

-I thought it was 'gainst the law to burn tires.

Jake began to look at the girl standing in front of her father. He still felt some familiarity, and her long blond curls gave her away as the cashier that checked him out the other night.

-I think I know you, Jake said, looking at her.

-Hi. I remember you coming in the store last night.

-I wasn't well then.

-Are you better now?

-Yeah, it seems that way.

-Sara, leave the man alone, her father interrupted. Why don't you head on inside and let me talk to this fella for a minute.

-Alright, she said.

Her father took his hands off of her shoulders and watched her as she climbed the stone steps of their front porch.

-How long you been livin here? The man asked.

-Pretty much my whole life.

-Me and the family moved here a few months ago, got laid off at the mill over in Burton and had to come here for work.

-Lotta people like that around here.

-Mills in this area is going straight to hell, but what I really want to talk about is crystal.

-What about it?

-Do you know where a man like me could find some?

-I think I can help you out.

Jake left the man standing by his chain link fence and walked on a few more paces. He looked up and noticed the dirty lamp light of the mill houses and the stained halo of

streetlights. The pleasant autumn wind had morphed into a cool breeze; the clouds had moved on and revealed a clear, crisp night. Jake clutched the dwindling bag in his pocket and tried to open it carefully, but his shaking hands spilled the remaining powder onto the sidewalk. He looked around for a split second, took out his straw, and got to his knees. The plastic straw hit the concrete swiftly and accurately. With one hand on the sidewalk and the other closing one nostril, Jake pulled dirt and specks of anything that he thought might be white through his nostril. He lifted his head up and lit a cigarette and sat on the sidewalk, blowing smoke rings and wiping blood from his nose.

The night began to grow cooler. Jake had no idea how long he sat on the edge of the sidewalk. His legs and feet had gone to sleep, but his exposed arms felt the twinge of autumn. He shook the cobwebs away and looked around. Smoke came out of a few chimneys, and the faint smell of kerosene filled the air. He walked by gutters that were filled with dog shit and trash. He kicked cans and beer bottles into people's yards and stumbled over cracks in the concrete.

As he approached the edge of his yard his pace slowed, he took a deep breath and listened to the wind scattered leaves. He sat down and gathered small sticks and thumped them across the yard. He laid back and placed his arms on the second step and watched the stars evaporate into a golden autumn morning.

Tink

After a night of wind and rain, high pressure moved through the area. A blue sky greeted Loretta as she made her way out of her sister's old mill house to a rusted red Chevy Cavalier parked under a pecan tree. She hurried out of the driveway and on to a back road that sliced through a field of overgrown kudzu. She put on her make-up and steered the car with her boney knees. Her work uniform was at home, a gray buttoned –up shirt with her name over the left breast and “Nylon Mills” along the collar. She wore jeans and the orthopedic shoes that nurses wear. Her curly black hair, silver above the ears and temple, was pulled into a bun at the back of her head. She cracked the window and smelled the morning air. Her shift started at eight.

The pale blue color of her trailer appeared and she gazed at the tall pine trees around the lot as she pulled into the gravel driveway. She got out of the car and slammed the door. Her feet clutched the gravel, and she climbed up a few rotten steps to the trailer entrance. Her husband, Tink, was asleep on the couch. The trailer smelled of sulfur and some kind of ionized mechanical scent made a home in her nose. A needle, spoon, and a tightly tied bag of white crystals were placed neatly on the kitchen counter. Loretta went straight to the bedroom, found a wrinkled work shirt, and ran to the kitchen.

She tied a belt around her arm, found a bulging vein and stuck the needle in. She nudged the needle and saw a little of her blood mix with the liquid in the syringe. She pushed calmly on the syringe and felt liquid rush through her body. She closed her eyes and licked her lips. She put her hand to her head, and her eyes rolled back. She fell in a lump on the kitchen

floor. Her body twitched, and puke and foam burst out of her mouth. The distant kettle sound of the mill whistle signaled third shift had ended.

Tink awoke on the couch with a metallic taste in his mouth. He wiped the sleep away from his eyes and saw Loretta lying on the kitchen floor. The morning light that came through the kitchen window covered the top half of her body. A few strands of her light gray hair danced in the light. Tink saw the dried puke around her mouth and neck and climbed off the couch. He walked slowly to the kitchen and kneeled down beside her.

He gave her a quick shake and placed his head on her chest.

Tink stood up straight and arched his back. He lit a cigarette and took a few puffs. His knees popped as he crouched down to cradle Loretta in his arms. He picked her up and carried her to the couch. He set her down in a sitting position, crossed her legs and propped her arm on the couch's dirty armrest.

They sat on the couch, and the smoke from Tink's cigarette made the trailer hazy. He sat beside Loretta for a few more minutes and watched the smoke dance around in the sunlight. He never noticed the column of ash from his cigarette as it grew and fell to the carpet. The mid-morning sun warmed the back of Tink's neck. He looked around at his living room and the stained wood paneling that made the walls. He stood up and walked to the kitchen. He ripped the kitchen cabinets off the wall and threw old boxes of food and cans in the middle of the floor. He broke the table and chairs and threw them in the floor with the rest of the trash. Blood trickled from his knuckles.

After the kitchen was gutted, he took a shop broom and pushed trash and splintered

wood out of the kitchen door and into the backyard. He walked outside and found two old wooden pallets and placed them in the middle of the back yard. He piled all the trash and junk onto the wooden pallets. Tink worked a steady pace of gutting the trailer and developed a routine of taking a break to sit beside Loretta. He sat down, sweaty and dirty.

. Their bedroom was in the back of the trailer. Bed sheets draped across the two windows and a mirror caked with dust faced the bed. Tink walked in and opened the nightstand drawer. There were numerous empty plastic bags and bags filled with different shades of white crystals. He took a clear glass pipe and a couple of small bags to the couch. He began digging in one of the small bags with his index finger and thumb. The crystals felt like tiny rocks between his fingers. He placed a few of the larger rocks in the cradle of his pipe and brought a small torch to the bottom. Smoke filled the pipe and then disappeared quickly. He blew out a cloud of smoke, coughed a little, and licked the sweet taste from his lips and teeth.

The morning sun began to heat up, and the wind started to throw the tops of trees in every direction. Tink carried pieces of their bed and an old chiffarobe to the back yard. The tall pine trees leaned over the trailer and moved shadows around. At one corner of the backyard, two 50-gallon barrels, rusted brown, sat in partial shade. Years of waste had been dumped into these barrels, gallons of used chemicals that were burned and transformed into a decaying sludge.

The river was only a few hundred feet from Tink's trailer. The water was rapid and high from last night's rain. Tink pushed over one of the barrels and rolled it down towards the river's edge. He punched a hole in the barrel with his pocketknife and kicked it into the river.

He stood back and watched the barrel make a heavy thump against the raging water and listened to the sputtering noise as it sank. He watched the river's heavy current. The early afternoon sun settled on his forehead, and small gleams of sweat mixed with the dirt on his face.

The entire trailer was empty except the couch that Loretta sat on, two old bed sheets, and the coffee table in front of her. Tink had ripped the cabinets out of the kitchen and bathroom, stripped the curtains and blinds, and ripped all the doors off their hinges. Most everything they owned was piled in the backyard among the dying grass and brown pine needles. Tink sat down beside Loretta again and lit a cigarette.

Loretta's skin had turned pale. The track marks along the inside of her arms appeared like mountain ranges. Her posture was frozen, head back and legs crossed, a stiffened arm on the couch with two torched cigarette butts between her fingers.

The afternoon sun was brighter with all the blinds and curtains removed, and revealed patches of dust that hadn't seen light in years. Another mill whistle rang in the noon lunch break. The wind rattled the dirty windows and whistled around corners of the trailer and through the screen door. The old bedroom sheets were laid between Tink and Loretta, ash and smoke sinking into the fabric. Tink got up and grabbed his pipe and bag, placed them beside the front door with his cigarettes and keys. He picked up the coffee table and went back outside.

Tink sorted out the trash in his back yard and set tires of every size around the pile. Whatever would burn the hottest, he placed in the middle. All the slow burning material was

scattered in a circle outside the flammable center. He stood back and looked at his creation, the fast moving October wind blowing his stringy hair and dead leaves between his feet.

Back inside, Tink went straight to the couch and grabbed the old bed sheets. He placed the sheets on the naked floor and cradled Loretta in his arms and took her off the couch and placed her on the sheets. Her legs were still crossed, and her opened mouth showed a blackness of decayed teeth.

Tink uncrossed her legs and closed her mouth; he scraped out the burnt ash between her fingers and laid down beside her. He shut his eyes but didn't go to sleep. Flies began to move around the empty kitchen and living room. Tink and Loretta lay on the old bed sheets for an hour. Tink smoked his cigarettes and stared at the mounds of dust collected by the ceiling fan. He listened to the mounting flies buzz in and out of the kitchen. He smashed his cigarette out on the linoleum floor.

He rolled Loretta up in the old bed sheets, picked her up and walked outside. The pile of trash in their back yard was laid out like the foundation of a building. He placed her in the center and began stacking tires around her and doused the entire pile with gasoline. He drenched the tires in gas, and then worked his way around the entire pile. He stepped down from the pile and walked a few feet away, lit a cigarette, and stood under a few rocking pine trees.

-Think I'm gonna go across the river and into the next town.

-They got a jockey lot up there, heard needed some help.

-I'll get some milk on the way back.

Tink flicked the rest of his cigarette on to the pile of trash, and it seemed his whole back yard exploded in flames. The flames were tall and hot, growing and dancing towards the tree tops. The tires hissed and bubbles of rubber melted off their rims. Black smoke started to billow from the center of the back yard. The smoke swirled and climbed above the tree line. He watched the smoke as it was tossed by the wind in all directions. The undercarriage of tree tops became stained black with ash and smoke. He walked back inside to get his keys and the rest of his bags of crystal, left the door unlocked, and climbed into his truck. He sped out of the driveway and quickly caught a few glances in his rearview mirror of the black smoke, rising with the current of a strong autumn wind.

The Blackest Black

Sarah sat on the end of her bed and watched the sun rise. Night noises of frogs and crickets had evaporated in the early morning, and rays of sun shot through her blinds. In the corner of her room sat an old chiffarobe her mother gave her; it held an old jewelry box and a couple of red and gold pom poms. Another chest of drawers, rectangular with a mirror in the center, faced the windows. The rest of the room contained a small closet, a small T.V. on a stand, and various stuffed animals stacked in a corner.

With rays of sunlight carving through her room like prison bars, Sarah stood up to get ready for school. She showered and scrubbed herself pink. She dried her hair and let her blond ringlets hang over her shoulders. She stood in front of the mirror and put a little make-up on. She wore a plain shirt and blue jeans. She heard her parents downstairs talking, and the smell of bacon drifted through the house.

She sat down at the table for breakfast and faced her father. He had his work uniform on and a cup of black coffee in front of him. He glanced up from his paper and looked at Sarah; his eyes followed the contours of her collarbone.

-What's wrong with you this morning?

-Nothing.

-Well, you better not be gettin' sick or anything.

Sarah sat at the table and stared at her food. She glanced up occasionally to see what her father was doing. He mostly sat reading his paper and sipped his coffee. The morning sun lighted the dining room. Rays of light bounced off the hardwood floors and exposed every

stain and imperfection. Her mother continued to wash dishes and clean kitchen counters. She walked over to the table to gather more dirty dishes.

-Is that all you gonna eat, hon?

-I'm not really that hungry.

Her father shook his head and got up to grab his wallet and keys. His work boots stomped along the floor, and the sound echoed down the hall. He came back a few moments later, carrying a coat and thermos. He stood behind Sarah and placed his hands on her shoulders. He let the tips of his fingers grip her collarbone. He bent down to kiss her on the top of her head, his hands were cold and dry, and the tips of his fingertips left small, white indentations along her collarbone.

-Have a good one, he said to his wife.

-You too, she said.

-Sarah, you should be gettin' ta school pretty soon, her father said.

-Yes sir.

Sarah sat at the kitchen table and watched her father exit the house. She still felt his clammy hands and briefly thought about a friend who had a leg amputated in a car wreck. Her mother continued to flutter around the kitchen. The plastic soles of her slippers scraped against the kitchen tile. Sarah looked toward her mother and watched her scamper from the kitchen to the dining room then to the laundry room.

-I don't feel like going to school, I think I'm getting sick.

-Don't be silly, you have cheerleading practice, and the game tomorrow night.

-I know. I just feel like crap.

-You look fine to me – What was that?

-Nothing. I gotta go.

Sarah walked out into the morning sun. The trees in front of their house swayed and brown leaves scattered the yard. She drove an old Ford Taurus, a gift from her grandmother when she got her license. The top was rusted and the dash cracked. Large rips decorated the faded gray leather seats. She backed carefully out of the driveway and moved slowly out of her neighborhood. At the end of her street, she heard the whistle from the mill screech. She took a left and then headed deeper into the mill part of town.

She drove down a slender road bordered by large oak trees. Old houses with tin roofs were scattered among rolling hills and pine trees. Barb-wire fences ran along each side of the road, the wire rusted in places and grown into trees. The road started to run parallel to the river and then curved toward rows of old mill houses.

The streets were narrow, and all the houses had stone porches with rusted wrought iron gates. Sarah rolled her windows down and took in the cool air. The wind whipped her blond hair and caused it to hover above her neck. She looked at each house and its stained asbestos siding. She came to a clearing that used to be a parking lot. It faced one of the oldest mills in the area. She parked under a tall oak tree at the end of the lot.

The old mill was built sometime in the early 1900's. It was a four-story red brick building with two tall smoke stacks that stood in the back. A fence with three rows of barb-wire at the top surrounded the mill. Inside the fence, a crane with a wrecking ball slumped

beside the building. Sarah sat on the hood of her car and watched men in white hard hats walk around the mill. They pointed up at the fourth-story windows and pointed at specific places the large stone ball should land. One of the men entered the crane, started the engine, and warmed up the wrecking ball. Sarah watched the ball sway from side to side; its first strike sent a large chunk of the building to the ground. The sound of brick falling on brick filled Sarah's ears.

She sat on the hood of her and felt a slight autumn breeze run up her neck and behind her ears. She watched the wrecking ball as it finished off the old mill, its red bricks in pieces and spilled along the wrinkled concrete of the mill's foundation. The men in hard hats locked up the crane and got into their heavy duty trucks. There were no dump trucks to carry away the crumbled old building. The two smoke stacks remained and stood over a pile of broken red bricks.

It was after lunch before Sarah entered her car again, its old engine struggled to turn over. She pulled slowly out of the parking lot, drove left past the Baptist Church and past the community pool where she and her friends used to swim in the summer. The intersection she came to was in a populated part of town. A local fried chicken place, burned down and rebuilt three times, stood across from a Bi-Lo. Two gas stations on opposing sides of the road battled for the best gas prices and the best homemade hot dogs. Sarah turned into the Bi-Lo parking lot and parked at the back.

Sarah got out of her car and slammed the door. She walked into Bi-Lo and tried to avoid anyone she might know. Once she got to the back of the store, she let herself walk a little slower. She looked at the meat and chicken and the \$4 slices of ham steak. She wandered down

the dog food aisle and gazed at chew toys and the dog beds they kept on top of the shelves. She finally made her way to the pharmacy section of the store. She walked through the teeth care section and then entered the area for hair products. She came to the hair dyeing products and let her eyes move from box to box. She picked up a box of L’Oreal “Blackest Black” and headed to check-out.

She exited the parking lot and traveled down roads that ran between kudzu and littered trash. There were churches and driveways that led to more churches scattered along the road. Junkyards and single wide trailers with yards covered with toys and car parts seemed to appear at the end of every curve. Once she reached the edge of town, she pulled her car off onto a small gravel clearing, tilted her seat back, and fell asleep, as the rush of cars zoomed by. She awoke to an October overcast, which made her think it was late. Hurriedly, she did a u-turn and headed back to town. She drove down Main Street and saw the McDonald’s full of kids and other eateries packed with families. It was nearing 6 pm, and she knew cheerleading practice ended an hour earlier. A few minutes later, she arrived at home and took her things into the house, hiding the hair dye in her book bag.

-Where the hell have you been, her father asked?

-I was held up at practice.

-You coulda called somebody.

Sarah turned and stepped lightly to the refrigerator. She rummaged through the gallon tea jugs and discount condiments and took out a Diet Coke. She walked over to the window above the kitchen sink and looked out at an empty bird feeder.

-I'm not hungry, mom. I think I'll just go to my room.

-What's wrong, her mother asked.

-Nothing, I just wanna lay down.

-Come here. Lemme feel your head.

-You don't have to –

-You *do* feel kinda warm. I'll come up and check on you later.

Sarah walked out of the kitchen and felt her father's eyes on her as she disappeared up the stairs. She went to her room and locked the door, took out the hair dye and read the directions on the back of the box. Sarah went to the bathroom and locked the door. She got in the shower and scrubbed herself pink.

She stood in front of the bathroom sink, and her hair dripped water to the floor. She put the dye in her hair and massaged her scalp to make sure that the color reached far down into her roots. She felt the wet hair in her hands, strands like rope curled between her fingers. She sat on the toilet with a towel wrapped around her body and crossed her legs.

After a few minutes of her feet tapping the bathroom tile, she hopped back in the shower and stood under the steaming water. Back at the sink she stood in front of a fogged mirror and combed her wet hair. She felt the plastic bristles of her comb pull at her hair and jerk the knots out. Once her hair was smooth, she picked up a flat iron she had warming up on top of the toilet. She ran her fingers through her hair and let the flat iron steam her curls flat. Her mother came up the steps and knocked lightly on the door.

-Sarah, you okay in there?

- Just washing my hair.

-Come downstairs when you get through and eat something.

-I have a lot of homework.

Her mother walked downstairs, and the steps creaked as she placed her weight on them. Sarah had one towel wrapped around her head and one around her body. Once in her room, she took off both towels and threw them on the floor. She stood naked in front of her mirror. Her dark hair hung over her shoulders like black draperies at a funeral parlor. She put her nightgown on and sat on the corner of her bed and watched the moonlight streak through her windows. She kept herself awake and listened to the old house creak and whine in the quiet night.

The next morning she dressed quickly and went down to the kitchen. Her mother was cooking breakfast and her father was at the table. He sipped his coffee and read the newspaper. He looked up as soon as Sarah walked into the kitchen. His eyes slanted and he cocked his head.

-What in the *hell* have you done?

-I just dyed my hair.

-Yeah, *black*.

-*Sarah!* You even got rid of those pesky curls, her mother said.

-I think ya'll are both crazy.

Sarah sat at the table, ate a few eggs and a piece of toast. She kept her eyes on her food and her foot tapped rapidly against the kitchen tile. Her father pushed his chair back and

grabbed his wallet and keys. He walked over to Sarah and placed his hand on her cheek.

-Have a good day at school.

-Yes sir.

-Fix that hair when you get home. I don't like it.

After the rumble of her father's truck faded down the road, Sarah got up and grabbed her things. On her way out of the kitchen door, her mother turned to her.

-I really like your hair; you should keep it for a while.

-I might.

The red and gold statue of a bull stood out front of Sarah's high school. She stared at the bull's glaring eyes as she passed it on the way to the parking lot. She got out of her car and quickly went inside. As she walked down the hall, fellow cheerleaders and other people looked at her hair.

-Like what you've done to your hair, the principle said.

-Sup, Sarah? Cool hair, one guy said.

-Hey Sarah, great hair, a cheerleader said.

-Wow Sarah! Very cool hair, her English teacher said.

Vagabonds

Jake pulled himself up from the bottom steps of his front porch. He stretched his arms and let the sun cover his torso. The air was slightly cool and ran through his thin hair. He turned around and walked inside his single-story mill house. Pieces of the coffee table were scattered along with other trash on the floor. He kicked empty beer bottles as he walked to his bedroom. He grabbed an old army duffle bag in the back of his closet and stuffed it with clothes, then took out the first drawer of his nightstand and emptied its contents onto the bed. He picked up several small bags filled with minute crystals, shoved them into his pockets, and went to the kitchen.

Jake took his duffle bag and used it as a large broom to knock off the trash on his kitchen counter. He took one of the small bags from his pocket, opened it, poured half of it on to the counter and used the ridges of his hands to form a crude line that resembled a raised mountain range on a globe. His face went down to the counter, and one thumb covered a nostril. He snorted the entire line in one breath, went to the kitchen sink, and brought a few drops of water to the inside of his nostril. As soon as he was finished, a knock on the front door echoed through the empty house and seemed to stir dust particles off of the top of the TV.

Jake walked to the front door cautiously and eased it open. A tall man with a faintly gray goatee stood with his hands in his coat pockets.

-Jake, the man said.

-Yeah, who is it?

-John, we met last night. I just moved in down the street.

-Okay.

-We talked about a mutual friend named Crystal.

-Oh, yeah...That's right. Come on it.

-Sorry to stop by so early. I just seen you out on your front porch earlier.

John stepped into the house and awkwardly followed Jake into the kitchen. The trash on the floor crunched like dead leaves under his feet. Once in the kitchen, Jake removed the bags from his pocket and laid them on the counter.

-Take your choice, they all weigh the same.

-How much?

-80 for one, 140 for two.

-Alright then, I'll take these two.

-Cool. Hey, would you mind givin me a ride?

-Sure.

Jake grabbed his duffle bag and the rest of his bags and headed out to John's truck, leaving the keys to his house on the kitchen counter. The air hit Jake's face again, and it watered his eyes.

-Where do you need to go?

-Just behind the old mill they fixin to tear down.

-Alright, you wanna little bump before we go?

-Yeah.

The inside of John's truck was filled with empty Yahoo bottles and empty cans of

Kodiak. A Styrofoam cup filled with tissues and spit sat in a cup holder, and loose change filled the ashtray. Jake hopped in and bounced a little on the squeaky front seat. John started the truck, whipped out of the driveway, and sped down the road.

The truck wheeled to the right and ran down “G” street, between a Baptist church and a junkyard. The smell of old gasoline and oil mingled with fresh autumn air. Jake’s stringy hair glistened in the morning sun like an oil spill. He took another bag from his pocket and used his fingernail as a shovel. He huddled down in his seat to block the wind and rammed another shot up his nose. The cool wind brushed small beads of sweat across his forehead. He laid his head back and shut his eyes until they came to a four-way stop sign surrounded by pine trees and patches of kudzu.

-Turn left right here, Jake said.

-Alright, how much further?

-It’s just down the road.

-You gone be around this weekend?

-Probably not. Here! Turn right.

The truck bounced along a gravel road rutted by rain and rushing water. A small single wide trailer appeared in the distance and a man pushing a wheelbarrow raised his head. The truck stopped a few feet from the trailer and Jake stepped out.

-Thanks for the ride.

-I’ll see ya soon.

-Sure.

Jake grabbed his duffle bag and walked towards the trailer. The roof and sides of the trailer were stained green and dark brown. A few skinny pine trees swayed overhead and some cedar trees slouched over the river in front of the trailer. Jake stared at the man and walked slowly towards him.

-You know who I am, don't cha?

-Yeah... I reckon you my boy.

-It's been a while.

-Last time I seen you, you was what, 6 or 7?

-Thirteen.

-Ah, that's right. Come on over here and have a seat.

Jake followed the man to the front of his trailer, which faced the river. Three rusty folding chairs struggled to hold themselves up on the compacted red dirt of the riverbank. Jake's father was a short skinny man and wore a black bandanna around his thinning gray hair. He had a ponytail that wiggled to the middle of his back. His gray stubble collected itself in patches around his cheeks and chin. He was missing most of his teeth and three fingers on his right hand. He lit a cigarette and turned to Jake.

-You got any of that stuff?

-Yeah.

-Well let's do a little, then you can help me out.

-Alright.

Jake brought a bag from his pocket and handed it to his father. Tall pine trees leaned

over the trailer behind them and moved shadows around the yard. They continued to sit there and pass the small bag back and forth while large crystal white clouds moved swiftly overhead, the strong wind racing them through the sky.

Jake stood up and took a few steps back in order to get a panoramic view of his father's home. The windows were dirty and had no screen. Puddles of water had collected on the dented parts of the roof, and green algae grew along the edges of the puddles. His father had been re-doing the underpinning of the trailer, replacing the plastic façade with old bricks and mud.

-Where'd you get those bricks? Jake asked.

-I stole these bricks from that old mill they tearing down, his father said.

-The old Gerber mill?

-Yeah, that motherfucker. I worked there for 41 fuckin years, and all they gave me was an \$800 a month pension.

-Damn.

-So, how 'bout helpin me finish this underpinnin'.

Jake walked over to the wheelbarrow and his father followed with a bag of mortar mix. He then went to the river with a bucket and brought back some water to mix with. An old shovel stuck in the ground near the front door of the trailer was used to stir the mixture. The mid-afternoon sun heated their backs and drew lines of sweat along their t-shirts. Jake's father handed him a trowel, and they each scooped a dollop of mud. Jake's father knelt down and began mudding a line of bricks. Jake followed and laid a couple of crooked bricks, crudely

jointing and scraping slanted lines along the edges.

Jake and his father mudded and laid bricks in the October sun. The wind blew steadily and cool. The bricks were discolored and cracked in places. Put together, they made a crude pattern resembling the mud at the base of the riverbank. After a few hours of silence Jake's father stood up and arched his back.

-So, where you headed? He said.

-What makes you say that?

-People don't just carry around a duffle bag for the hell of it.

-Maybe I do.

-See you got your mother's sense of humor.

-I don't know, thought I might try to get outta this town.

-I tried that before.

-Well, I ain't comin back.

-I said the same thing.

A few hours later, the underpinning around the trailer was finished. Jake's father dumped the rest of the mortar mix into a rotted tree stump and sat down beside Jake near the riverbank. They each lit a cigarette and glanced at the sky. The sun was setting, and streaks of orange and yellow sliced through the sky like flames. Jake reached in his duffle bag and dug around for a while until he pulled out a thin clear glass pipe. He placed a few pinches of the crystal powder into the bowl, lit the bottom of it, and rolled the pipe back and forth between his thumb and middle finger. He passed the bowl and lighter to his father. The crystal in the bowl

popped and hissed and glowed orange in the fading sun.

The cool October wind of early evening blew Jake's stringy hair across his face and dead leaves between his feet.

-Shit, I'm gettin' hungry. Jake's father said.

-I guess I could eat a little.

-Why don't you start us a fire, only this time don't fall in it.

- What the hell does that supposed to mean?

-You don't remember that? His father asked.

-No, I don't know what you're talking about.

-Ah, hell, you musta been five or six and we was campin with your grandpa. It was in the mornin' and we had this fire burnin all night. You was dancin aroundthe fire, pokin it with sticks, ol' grandpa kept sayin 'boy, you gone get too close.' And dammed if you didn't.

-What happened?

-Shit, you fell in. Grandpa rushed over to ya and jerked you up. You was cryin and shakin. I don't know what he did, but he somehow talked the fire out of ya. We thought you was gone scar.

-I don't remember shit about that.

Jake jumped up to find some wood, and his father stood up and grabbed a ratty old throw net that hung over the bank and slumped into the water. He slung the net as far as he could into the river and waited until it sank to the bottom. He pulled the net and felt the current of the river tug on his tight hands. He pulled the net back on the bank and watched a few young

stripers and catfish struggle and flop around on the hard dirt. He collected the fish and placed them in a stainless steel pot filled halfway with river water.

Jake had lit a small fire in a pit surrounded by rocks from the river. He kneeled down in front of it and gradually added pieces of dried wood. The flames burst orange and yellow and gave birth to shadows that danced along the cold ground. Jake stood up as his father approached the pit.

-These fish too small for guttin, want take too long to boil 'em, he said.

-Fine with me.

-So, how much money you need.

-I don't need no money.

-Sure ya do. I can only give ya bout fifty bucks.

Jake's father walked into his trailer and came back out with some bread, a couple of Natural Lights, and two paper plates. He handed Jake a plate with two pieces of stale bread and a beer and went over to stoke the fire and check on the fish. A few minutes later he came back and placed two pieces of fish on Jake's plate. They both ate in silence, throwing bits and pieces of the fish into the river. They sat with the water rushing in front of them and firelight behind them, reflecting and dancing off the back of the steel chairs.

The October sky was now freckled with stars, and the bright moon drew faint shadows from the two sitting men. Jake checked his pockets and stood up holding his duffle bag.

-Thanks for the food.

- Sure thing, they was free.

-Well, I guess I'll see ya.

-Here, take this with you.

-Thanks.

-Come back sometime; think I might add a porch.

-Might do that.

-You know where to find me.

Jake nodded his head and placed the fifty dollar bill into his pocket. He turned around and walked down the gravel driveway. He stepped out onto the paved road and picked up his pace. He walked between rows of trees and kudzu. The moon was getting brighter, and it gave everything around him a blue hue.

After a couple of hours of steady walking, Jake came to a sign letting him know he'd reached the edge of town. Before he could move on, he heard a whimper coming from the ditch across the road. He walked to the ditch and found a dog that had been hit by a car. The dog was white, but most of the coat around its hind legs had been stained pink with blood. Jake looked at the dog and listened to it whimper. He walked closer to the dog and kneeled down over it. The dog's eyes were glossy and dim. Jake stood up and forcefully slammed the heel of his boot into the dog's head, fracturing its skull. The dog let out a quick and violent yelp that rushed through the night like wind. Jake climbed out of the ditch and back on to the paved road and headed out of town.

Part II

Winter Solstice

Carol Ann picked at scabs around her mouth and nose as she drove through the center of town. She had lost her job in the city waiting tables and was forced to go live with her parents. The cold air came through her slightly opened car window and ruffled her short, dark hair. She drove slowly down Main Street, glancing at the shopping center to her right. The buildings seemed small and plain compared to the elaborate shopping mall of the city. Christmas decorations clung to the tops of streetlights in the center of town. Green tassel wrapped around the one stop light. The wire mesh of the decorations was rusted in places, and some of the bulbs were dim and busted.

Carol Ann lit a cigarette and sucked in a long draw as she glared in her rearview mirror. She sped up as she left Main Street and took a left down a road that ran between two fields and an elementary school. The winding road wandered through patches of kudzu and small clearings of light yellow grass. Carol Ann finally came to the entrance of the driveway she had known her whole life. She eased onto the driveway, a dirty brown mailbox near the edge of the road on her right, and a shallow ditch to the left.

Her room was the same as it was when she was in high school. There were dance trophies unevenly aligned across a dresser, dust covering the gold colored figures that posed frozen in time. The sheets on her bed were pink and the carpet stained in places. Her apartment in the city was much bigger. She stuffed the trash bags in her closet and stack the boxes in a corner.

On the way back to her car to get the rest of her stuff, she saw her mother's car pull into

the driveway and stop at the entrance. Her mother got out of the car and strolled towards the mailbox. She took the envelopes and magazines and made her way the few hundred yards to her house. Carol Ann raised her head and followed the car as it pulled in behind her. Her mother stepped out and looked at her, then nodded her head.

-How long are you here this time, her mother asked.

-I don't know, maybe a few months.

-You look too skinny. Have you eatin' anything?

-No, I ain't hungry.

They stood in the front of the one-story house surrounded by swaying pine trees. The sky was light gray. Carol Ann's mother walked towards her and crossed her arms. Large branches overhead creaked in the cold wind.

-What you gonna do? You gonna go back to school? Her mother asked.

-No, I'm not goin' back to school. I'll get a job somewheres.

-Sure, flippin' burgers or baggin' groceries. They ain't no more mill.

-Like I'd work in a damn mill anyways.

-What, you think you too good to work in a mill. Your grandparents worked forty years in the –

-I don't care! I'll figure somethin' out.

-Fine, do what you think is best, but if you get into any kind of trouble, don't come back.

Carol Ann stormed back into the house and slammed the box she was carrying on

the floor in her room. She plopped down on her bed beside the nightstand and let out a deep sigh. She brought from her pocket a few crumpled bags. The bags were empty but contained a white residue along the inside. She ripped each bag and used her driver's license to scrape the residue onto her nightstand. She then took out an old McDonald's straw, cut to the length of four or five inches. She used a paperclip to scrape the inside of the straw. After all the scraping and cleaning, she managed to form a slender line of discolored white crystals. Her head sunk down to the nightstand.

Driving back through Main Street, Carol Ann glanced at the churches and the messages on their marquees exclaiming "Tis the season!" Old buildings faced the shopping plaza, local businessmen attempting to sale cheap appliances and jewelry. An insurance salesman stood outside his cement building, smoking a cigarette and watching the cars pass by. People passing by on the other side of the street waved at Carol Ann. She threw her hand up as if brushing off a fly.

After the business section of Main Street she passed a small park on her left. The park was decorated with cardboard cutouts of Santa Claus, elves, and Christmas trees. Other cutouts showed children with bright smiles and elves making toys. Lights were strewn over the swing sets and cracked tennis courts and blinked on and off in the fading winter evening. The park's natural spring fountain shimmered in the lights. Cardboard wise men huddled over a plastic baby doll in a basket, their eyes transfixed.

She eventually turned left down a road that ran parallel to the park and a gas station. The road curved under a train trestle and ran up a slight hill until an old mill came into view.

The mill had only recently been shut down. A few patches of dead grass clung to cracks in the parking lot and a barbed wire fence enclosed the main buildings. Carol Ann drove by and flicked her cigarette out of her cracked window.

Down the street she pulled into the driveway of another house. Directly behind this house, the mill's large dilapidated buildings made the house look small. There were no lights on in the house, but Carol Ann went to the front door anyway. She banged on the door and stomped around on the front porch. She looked in windows and recognized the splintered coffee table on the living room floor and the stained couch in front of the windows that seemed to not have felt the sun in years.

Carol Ann remembered the last time she was at Jake's. They had got into a fight and fell to the floor. They lay side by side and their arms touched. She felt the warmth of his skin pulse through her.

She eventually strolled to the house beside Jake's. The porch light was on, and she climbed the steps and banged on the door. A girl in her mid to late teens with jet black hair opened the door.

-Can I help you? The girl said.

-Yeah, do you know Jake; he lives a few houses over?

-I think so. I haven't seen him in a while though.

-Damn.

-Sorry, the girl said.

-Who's at the door, another voice boomed from inside.

-Someone looking for a guy named Jake, the girl turned her head and said.

A tall man appeared before Carol Ann. He stood beside the girl and put his hand on her shoulder.

-Can I help you, the man said.

-I'm just lookin for Jake, he lives down the –

-I know who you talkin about. Haven't seen him in a few months.

The man stomped back into the living room, leaving Carol Ann and the girl standing in front of each other. Carol Ann turned and walked off the porch.

-Hey wait! The girl said.

-Yeah, what?

-Last time I saw Jake my father was giving him a ride somewhere.

-Do you know where?

-Not really.

-Thanks anyway.

Carol Ann returned to her car and drove down other back roads and through neighborhoods flooded with Christmas lights. She eventually entered a circle of mill houses located in the oldest part of town. Most of the old mill had been cleared away, leaving a blank space with small patches of brown grass. The circle was on the side of the mill located closest to the river. Carol Ann drove slowly between the tightly drawn together houses. She stopped in front of a brown house, pulled her car half on the grass. The house had a large front porch with six or seven warped steps leading to the front door.

The slow shuffling of feet and the mumbling of an old woman greeted Carol Ann on the other side of the door.

-Who is it? A cracked voice said.

-It's Carol Ann? I'm one of Jake's friends.

- Carol who?

-Carol ANN.

-Oh, okay. Hang on a second.

The door opened and a short old woman appeared before Carol Ann. Her hair was white and curly. Her skin sagged along her cheekbones and down her neck. She wore a white cotton night gown with faded flowers. She wore bifocals that rested on the bridge of her nose.

-Sorry to bother you, Carol Ann said.

-That's quite alright, come on in and have a seat.

-Thanks.

Carol Ann walked in and looked around at a living room that was used primarily as a bait and tackle shop. Right at the entrance there was a dusty glass display case with an old cash register sitting on top and small fishing lures scattered inside. Numerous fishes were mounted on the wall, their mouths open and full of dust.

-Sorry the place is such a mess, the old woman said.

-That's okay.

-Jake's grandfather ain't the cleanest of men.

-Have you seen Jake recently?

-I'm not sure...let's go on in here and have some coffee.

Carol Ann followed the old woman down a slender hallway made of plywood. The carpet was a dirty mustard color, and the floor bounced as they walked. The hallway attached the bait and tackle shop to a single wide trailer. The trailer was filled with stacks of old newspapers and *National Geographic* magazines. Carol Ann sat down on the edge of the couch.

The old woman strolled into the kitchen and gingerly took two coffee mugs from the cabinet. Her hands shook as she filled the two mugs with coffee. She wobbled back to Carol Ann and handed her a mug and then sat down across from her. She slurped from her mug and looked over at Carol Ann.

-So, who did you say you were lookin for?

-Jake...

-Oh, that's right. Lemme think...I guess I haven't seen him in a while now.

-Okay. I just...thought maybe you knew where I could find him.

-Honey, nobody tells ol grandma anything... His daddy lives down by the river, he might know something.

-I may see if I can find him.

-Oh, he lives in a single wide, right there on the bank.

-Do you know of anywheres else Jake might go?

-Naw. Jake was always a quiet boy. Most of the places he went to was in his head.

They both sat there in silence. Carol Ann watched the old woman take a large gulp of

coffee.

-Could I use your bathroom, she asked?

-Sure, it's down the hall to your left.

Once Carol Ann was in the bathroom, she turned around and locked the door and went straight for the medicine cabinet. She flipped through therapeutic lotions and anti-fungal creams. She finally found a bottle of pain pills and quickly took three of them and stuck the rest in her pocket. She flushed the toilet and turned the cold water on. She ran her hands under the cold water and then pressed them to her face.

She unlocked the bathroom door and went back to her perch on the couch. The old woman across from her had laid her head back and fallen asleep. Her chest rattled as she inhaled and exhaled.

Carol Ann exited the house quietly. The steps of the front porch creaked as she walked down them. Once in her car, she took a couple of pain pills from her pocket and popped them in her mouth. The houses around her started to come alive with Christmas decorations. Their lights glowed and other decorations glimmered in the cold winter air. She left the circle of mill houses and took a road that led behind the circle and down to the river. She parked her car in a small clearing facing the river, turned the car off, and lit a cigarette. The sound of moving water carried in the clear night. Carol Ann stepped out of her car, and stumbled a bit as she climbed on the hood.

The night grew colder. Patches of clouds blocked areas of stars, and a crescent moon carved out a place for itself. She sat and listened to the river and watched the dim shadows of

trees at the river bank. She pulled the rest of the pills from her pocket and chewed them up. She slid off the hood of the car and stepped to the edge of the river. The water meandered by her, but she kept her eyes on the other side.

Carol Ann took a step and then jumped. The ice cold water instantly chilled her bones, and the shock caused her to inhale a mouthful of water. Her head bobbed up above the surface. She flailed her arms and coughed and tried to swim. Her cold hair matted itself across her eyes and face. The cold air pounded her chest, and she went under again. The river continued to move and she struggled to swim, her clothes now heavy, her arms and legs burning, and her chest so tight she could barely swallow. Before she went under for the last time she saw the lights from houses along the other side of the river, and her eyes focused on the bank and then dimmed to darkness.

Down by the River

On the first night of winter an arctic front moved through the area. A cold wind whistled through town and shook the green tassel on stoplights and blew loose pieces of trash across the empty parking lots. The low that night was 24 F. A heavy frost crept across car windshields, and the ground froze. The morning was covered in white like a wedding veil, and white smoke billowed out of chimneys and the exhausts of cars. The distant kettle sound of the mill whistle ended third shift, the last shift for the holidays.

John awoke that morning and sat up in bed. He felt the cold coming from the chilled windows. He ran his hands through his thinning gray hair and down his unshaven face. He slipped on his clothes and boots and lumbered down the steps and into the kitchen. There was a large drawer at the end of the kitchen counter, small screwdrivers, dead batteries, and other knick-knacks cluttered the loose drawer. At the back, John found what he was looking for, a small dirty pipe that he shoved in his pocket. He let the screen door on the back porch close with ease.

Frozen dew had hardened the ground. As John walked across the backyard, it sounded as if he was walking across cornflakes spilled on a hard carpet. He looked over at one corner of the backyard and noticed a patch of frozen mud. The ground had sunk in a little and a faint sour smell filled the air.

John came to a gate at the very back of the yard and quickly unhinged it. He followed a trail that ran between naked pine trees that led down to the river. Thick roots jutted out of the brown earth and curled across the trail.

He pulled the pipe out of his pocket and stuffed it with a couple crystal rocks. He brought the pipe to his mouth and lit it. Clear white smoke erupted from his lungs and mouth and drifted away in the cold air. He stood on the hard ground and watched the river. A swift current lumbered at the depths of the river, but on the surface, the languid water quietly floated by. Out of the corner of his eye, John spotted something that looked like a large piece of drift wood, its branches slightly bobbing up and down in the water. As the object drifted closer, he began to make out a figure, and recognized the blond hair swaying just below the surface of the water. The body floated a few feet from the bank and came to rest, nudged up against a dead tree that had fallen in the water.

John walked to the edge of the bank, still clutching the pipe in his hand. He looked down at the body, the skin stretched and pale, lips blue. John walked to the edge of the woods and found a dead limb. He poked the body a few times and watched the subtle ripples evaporate. The morning sky was grey. A solid slab of stone-colored clouds labored high in the atmosphere. John turned his head sideways and looked down at the young woman. He looked into her lifeless eyes and noticed how the taut skin of her face had smoothed the sharp creases at the corner of her eyes. He turned around and threw his stick back into the woods, and with his back to the river took another long hit from his pipe.

Back inside the kitchen, John's wife alternated from the sink to the stove, washing dishes and preparing eggs and bacon for breakfast. The top of the stove was slick with bacon grease and egg yoke. As soon as John walked in, her head jerked up and she cut her eyes at him.

-We need to talk about last night, she said.

-Not now, woman, he said.

-But John! –

-You need to call the sheriff and tell em to bring a meat wagon.

-Good Lord! She said. What for?

-They's a dead woman floatin in the river.

-Are you serious? Do I know her?

-No. Now call the damn police before she thaws out.

John walked over to the kitchen table, and his wife ran into the other room to call the police. He sat down and picked at his eggs and crumbled his bacon into several pieces. He looked out of the kitchen window at the bare limbs and mounds of dead leaves. The events of the day before ran through his head in a blur.

The last day of work before the holidays was an uneventful one. One half of the looms were already shut down. Supervisors were leaving early, and this pretty much left John to himself. He wandered around the large mill, snorting loud and heavy as cotton dust saturated the air. As the whistle blew, John was already half way home. He came to his front porch and stood in the fading daylight. The moon had shown up early and John looked up at it. He saw the light blue sky high in the horizon with a shade of darkness just behind it.

-Daddy, Sarah said, opening the front door, there's something wrong with the toilet.

-Dammit. I just got home. Can't I sit down a take my shoes off?

-Sorry. But water is bubblin up out of toilet, and I just thought you ought to know.

-Shit, he said.

John's wife had his dinner set for him, and he kicked his boots off and sat down to the table. He ate like a wolf that hadn't eaten in days. His fork clanged against the glass plate, and he shoved food onto his fork with his dirty fingers. Hunched over his plate, he would occasionally come up for air and take a large gulp of sweet tea. After he was finished, John pushed his plate away and looked to see if anyone was around. He laid a line on the table and dropped down to absorb it.

-John, his wife said. You really need to get in there and look at that damn bathroom.

-Alright, dammit. What the fuck did you women do to it?

The upstairs toilet was right at the top of the steps. There were many school mornings when Sarah would be in and out of that bathroom, dressing for school. John never used that bathroom. His was in the corner of the master bedroom. It was a small rectangular bathroom with a toilet right beside a shower. John always took a dump with his bathroom door open.

John walked into Sarah's bathroom, and his bare feet instantly became saturated with toilet water.

-Damnit. Why can't someone put a fuckin towel down?

He walked over to the toilet and looked with disgust at the water seeping out over the edge onto the pale linoleum floor. He jiggled the handle and more water spilled over.

-Jesus Christ. Did one of you clog the toilet?

-Of course not, his wife said. It just started this afternoon when I flushed it.

-I like how things around here just all of a sudden happen, he said.

-What do you think is wrong?

-Fuck if I know. The shitter is probably full. I been noticing a soggy spot in the yard.

-What does that mean?

-It means I'll be digging a new hole for a septic tank and the backyard will smell like shit for a while.

That night was quiet, and the buzz of thousands of Christmas lights could be heard all over town. John's wife was still awake. She sat on the couch and watched *A Wonderful Life* and their Christmas tree lights flickered red and green. John had just finished snorting a thick line when he sat down next to his wife, their knees touching.

-You know we really haven't done anything in a while.

-Well, work has really tired me out these past few months.

-John, do you still find me attractive?

-What kinda question is that?

He awkwardly put his arms around her and they began to kiss and grope. He felt nothing. There were no tingles in the groin, it seemed as if he was paralyzed from the waist down. Eventually his wife got off the couch and went into the bedroom. He could hear her soft cries, and he got up and unplugged the Christmas lights, letting the cord fall limply to the floor.

John's wife entered the kitchen in a panic. His face was red with blotches of anxiety. She quickly went to the dishwasher and scrubbed the breakfast plates, the water splashing out of the sink. She rapidly looked over at John, sitting stone faced at the kitchen table.

-John, get it together, police are on their way.

-You all tender about a dead body, she asked?

-Woman, I know shit that'd bring you to your knees.

-Damn, I was just kidding.

-I'll go out and wait on the police.

John stood out in the driveway. He was smoking a cigarette and watching his smoke rings dissipate into the grey morning. He walked to the back yard for a second and over to the area where the septic tank was. Puddles of mud had started to saturate the grass and a thick smell of methane invaded the air. He made a quick decision that the next hole would be dug under Sarah's window. Cursing under his breath John stomped back to the driveway just in time to greet the sheriff.

-Seems you found a dead woman floatin in the river, the sheriff said.

-Yeah, she's back there dammed under a fallen tree, John said.

The sheriff was a middle aged man who looked as if he has spent his whole life in the same town. He wobbled with John down to the river and they stood, looking down at the pale young woman, floating still in the water, as if she had become a part of the river.

-You recognize this woman, the sheriff asked?

-I...No, don't believe I've ever seen her before.

-Well, we will bring a gurney around and get this mess cleaned up. You sure you've never seen her?

-I don't know this woman.

John walked back inside and watched from the kitchen windows as the coroner wheeled the body into the hearse. John waved at the sheriff from the window and watched their cars disappear into the neighborhood. He walked into the living room where his wife and daughter were watching *The Maury Povich Show*.

-I don't understand why ya'll watch this crap, he said.

-Because it's entertaining, Sarah said.

-Girl! I don't know what's gotten into you, but –

-But what?

-You women startin to drive me crazy.

John stormed out the back door and into the garage. He grabbed a rusted red wheelbarrow and threw a rake and a can of gasoline in it. He wheeled everything out into the front yard and began rapidly raking dead and fallen leaves. His sole purpose that afternoon and in to early evening was to rake all the leaves in to small mounds scattered throughout the front yard. He took the can of gasoline and went to each mound, poured a little dab into each center and walked back to the garage. He took a quick hit from his pipe and watched the Christmas lights of neighborhood houses flick on.

Sarah and her mother were standing in the kitchen, preparing dinner. They had cooked steaks that were on sale from the supermarket. Sarah set the plates and silverware. She put ice in three glass cups and filled each with sweet tea. Her mother was standing at the kitchen window that faced the front yard. Her head was slightly cocked and her lips were held tightly shut. Sarah went to the window and stood beside her mother.

-What *is* he doing?

-I'm not really sure. Your fathers been actin strange lately.

-Has he?

-Do you think he's up to anything?

-I wouldn't know.

John was in the front yard rapidly walking to each mound of leaves. He lit a match and threw it into a pile. The small mound erupted into a ball of fire. He did this repeatedly to each pile of leaves until the front yard resembled a miniature battlefield. John stood in the center of his yard, each pile of leaves burned to nothing more than ash and smoke. The wind wisped through his thinning hair, and his unshaven face failed to keep his cheeks from getting red. The sun had already disappeared, and the wind had moved the clouds along. With each mound now reduced to nothing, John walked back to the garage, stomped his feet on the hard pavement and turned his back on the clear cold beginning of night.

The table was completely set by the time John entered the kitchen. Food was on the plates, and the glasses were filled with tea. The lighting over the table was dim, and the lights on the Christmas tree alternated from red to green. John sat down before his wife and daughter and began eating.

-John, can't you wait till we all get seated, his wife asked?

-Well. Ya'll hurry up, I'm hungry.

-What has gotten into you these days?

-Nothin', just sit down and eat.

The silence of dinner was only interrupted by the clangs of forks and the grinding of teeth. Sarah faced her mother, and she never cut her eyes in her father's direction. She ate very little. Her mother took small bites of food that was perfectly balanced on the end of her fork. She glanced at her husband and then back to Sarah.

-So, tell me about your last week of school, she said.

-Nothing much to talk about. Everybody was ready to go home for Christmas break.

The rest of their meal was eaten in complete silence. Sarah barely touched the food on her plate, and left her parents at the table. It was completely dark outside, except the moon was half full and a multitude of Christmas decorations buzzed in the night. John left the table without putting his plate in the sink and walked out to the front porch to have a cigarette.

John's wife cleared the dishes and wiped down the table. She sat down in front of the TV, half ignoring the local news. She mostly watched the front door, waiting for John to come back in. She kept her eyes open for so long, her vision blurred. The sound of the front door opening startled her.

-John, can we try and talk about last night, she asked?

-Not right now, its been a long day.

-Look, I want to know what's wrong with you. Somethin's wrong.

-I done told you I'm not in the mood. Nothin's wrong.

-I wanna know why you can't make love to me.

-Woman...

-You think you should go to the doctor, get some of them pills for –.

-You don't know what the fuck you're talkin' about.

-John, I'm just tryin to understand.

John walked into the kitchen and grabbed a beer; he quickly turned it up and walked back into the living room. He sat down in his recliner and turned the TV to the weather channel. His wife sat on the edge of the couch, her hands on her knees. She looked over at her husband and edged a little closer.

-I just wanna talk for little bit, she said.

-I done told you I'm not in the mood.

-Well, I just don't know what to do anymore. You hardly ever come to bed –

-Stop it, Gina.

-All you do is pace around down here.

John got up and slammed the TV remote on the scratched hardwood floors. He stood, breathing heavy, staring at his wife.

-Can't you understand when a man doesn't want to talk it means he don't want to fuckin talk.

-But –

-I just want some damm silence.

-Don't be this way... Where are you goin'?

-To start diggin that fucking hole for the shit tank.

-But it's dark out -

John didn't hear the last thing his wife said, his hand was already on the back door and the cold air suddenly hit his face. He walked into a small shed at the corner of the backyard. An old shovel was in the corner. He grabbed it and stood in the entrance of his shed. He took the rest his stuff out of his pocket and sucked it down his nose. He laid his head back and felt the chemicals spread throughout his body like a subtle electrical current. His face became flush, and he walked over to the spot where the new septic tank would be.

Out in the backyard, the neighborhood Christmas lights were not as intense. Their bright colors faded and John seemed like a shadow. He worked his shovel and slung dirt behind him. The metal exploded forcefully into the cold ground and sent loose pieces of rocks and sparks through the air. The new hole was directly under Sarah's window. Her light was on, and the white curtains held an orange glow. John dug until his hands ached and dirt caked along his forearms. He occasionally glanced up at Sarah's window as the cold night turned his breath into a light fog.

Ice

There was a worn out couch with yellow and orange upholstery that sat in a basement. It faced a coffee table that held a beat up thirteen-inch TV. The basement was damp and cool. The old cinder blocks had warped and shifted over the years, and the cool breath of underground dirt moved through the stale air. Tink was curled on the couch. He had an old blanket pulled over his body and head. He had been living in his grandmother's basement for a couple of months after getting fired from the Flea Market for stealing car stereos. He had lived off and on in this basement since he was sixteen. Underneath the covers, he sweated and picked infected scabs off of his forearm and neck. He lay shirtless, his ribs showing through his hardened skin. He placed his hands over his ears to keep from hearing the shuffling of his grandmother's feet.

-Jonathan? An old women's voice boomed from above.

-What, Tink asked?

-Who are those people down there?

-Maw- maw, they ain't no one down here but me.

-Don't you lie to me! I hear women down there all the time.

-You just hearing things. Go back to bed.

His grandmother's feet shuffled along the floor. Tink heard the springs on her bed whine as she crawled in. Pipes in the basement dripped and Tink sat up on the couch and ran his calloused hands over his bald head. He put a shirt on and went to the sink. There was dirty syringe and a spoon neatly displayed on the counter. He got the syringe ready and jammed it in

his arm.

Tink looked at himself in the stained mirror. The skin around his head and neck was yellow. Purple tinged sores had developed around his mouth and the corners of his nose. He turned and walked through the dusty basement to the steps that led to the kitchen.

At the top of the steps, he heard the squeaking bed and the sliding of feet into slippers. His grandmother shuffled into the kitchen.

-You want me ta cook you somethin', she asked?

-I'm not hungry.

-You look like you hadn' eaten in days.

-I have. I just need a little money right now. You got twenty-five bucks?

-Grandson, I let you back in here to hep me out round here. You hadn't done nothin' but sit down there on that couch.

-Can I just have money?

-Only God knows what's goin' on down there – No! I ain't given' you no money.

Tink turned around and stomped down the steps to the basement. His grandmother wobbled over to the top of steps and shouted down at him.

-I hear them women down there, Jonathon!

-Shut up, you old woman.

Tink sat on the couch and turned the TV on. He flipped through the five channels he had and watched part of a static laden *Andy Griffith Show*. It was an episode about Christmas. Aunt Bee cooked something nice, and everyone sat around and ate.

Tink had been tapping his boots against the stone floor of the basement and counting each time his heel thumped. He got up and walked over to the sink and rummaged through empty crystal stained baggies. He took each bag and licked every inch of it.

-Jonathon! Jonathon! I need some help.

Tink looked above him and stood for a moment in the dirty light of the sink. He casually walked up the stairs and into the bathroom where his grandmother lay. There were feces on the floor and some of it had stained the bottom his grandmother's gown and oozed down her legs.

-I tried to make it to the bathroom, she pleaded.

He picked her up and propped her against the door frame of the bathroom. He drew a bath and helped her ease down into the warm water. He washed her back and neck and down the back of her legs. After she was clean, he dried her off and guided her to bed.

-Thanks, grandson.

-Now can I have that twenty-five bucks, he asked?

-No. You just don't get it do you?

-Get what? I just wanna borrow some fuckin' money.

-Get out you ungrateful.....

Tink stormed out of her bedroom and went down to his basement. He paced around on the stone floor, and looked out windows that were even with the ground above. He looked closely at brown blades of grass and the insects that crawled around in the dirt. The shrubberies in front of the house were dying, and their grey roots hung limply to the moist ground. He

stood at the base of the window and watched the grass and insects until he couldn't see anything but darkness.

-Jonathan, his grandmother screamed.

-What is it this time, he asked?

-Come up here and eat some supper.

In front him at the table was a plate of dry turkey, mashed potatoes, and green beans. His grandmother sat across from him and spilled food down her chin. Tink picked at his food. The turkey was overcooked, and she had used sugar again instead of salt for the mashed potatoes.

-You need me to go to the store, he asked?

-No. I think we got evr'ything we need.

-Does the car need any gas?

-No, Nothing needs to be done.

-Well...can I have that twenty-five bucks anyway?

-No, Jonathon, you need to get a job. Learn some responsibility.

Tink stood and kicked his chair back. He threw his fork on the table. His grandmother's old bones jumped. He stormed out of the kitchen and went out into the backyard. He lit a cigarette and took a long drag.

His grandmother's back yard was fenced in with old wooden planks. The fence had been painted numerous times. Patches of white and yellow scattered the fence and rusted nails poked out of rotted wood. The night was cold and the wind sharp. Tink could see the stars

through patches of clouds. He followed a blinking object through the sky and watched it until it went behind tall trees and out of his line of sight. He saw his grandmother through the window above the kitchen sink. She hobbled to the table and back to the sink. Her arms shook as she held each plate. Tink lit another cigarette and listened to the wind as it ran between cracks in the wooden fence.

His grandmother came to the backdoor of the kitchen. She squinted and placed her dry hands above her eyes and tried to shield the glare of the kitchen lights behind her. The darkness in the backyard was thick.

-*Jonathon!* She cried out.

-What? Tink asked.

-Where you at? You need to come on inside.

-Why can't you leave me alone for once?

-They's a funny smell coming from the heater. I just tried to light it.

Tink walked into the main room where plastic covered couches were angled facing a mantle. On the mantle sat a tiny, fake Christmas tree that had small decorations and annoying little lights. Below this mantle sat a rusted old kerosene heater. The coil inside was black with constant burning and he kneeled down at the base of the heater. She stood behind him with the light of the kitchen at her heels.

-Problem's fixed, he said.

-What was wrong with it?

-You turned the gas on and didn't turn the pilot light on.

-What does that mean.

-We coulda blowed up or passed out and died.

-Grandson, I just don't know what I'd do without ya.

-Blow yourself up, I guess.

Tink's grandmother shuffled to her recliner and laid her feet back. She covered herself up with a blanket and turned the TV on. Tink shook his head and let out a deep sigh. He went back down to the basement and sat on the couch. He held his boney shoulders and rocked back and forth. He got up again, paced around, and sat back down. He counted how many times he did this routine and watched the circle his footprints made on the dusty stone floor. He became hot and sweaty, and then he shivered with cold. He heard his grandmother's recliner folding up and her bare steps across the floor. He cut his eyes towards the door at the top of the steps.

-There's some squirrels or rats in the attic, she said.

-Dammit, you're just hearin' stuff.

-No I'm not. I know when I'm hearin' rats.

Back upstairs, Tink crawled into the attic and pretended to look for rodents. A certain object caught his eye and he moved some old boxes out of his way. He found his aluminum little league bat. He remembered hitting home runs and having his team greet him at the plate. He sat in the attic for a few moments and tried to remember what the infield grass smelled like.

-Jonathon, you found any rodents up there?

-No Maw-maw, just a bunch of boxes and dust.

-I coulda swore I'd heard something.'

-Why don't you go sit back in your rocker and watch the news.

Tink held the bat in his hands and felt the leather grip. He gripped the handle like a ball player should, knuckles first. He climbed down from the attic and stood in the kitchen, the stove light partially covered him. He walked over to his grandmother, she was still covered in her blanket and her head was laid back. He approached her with the bat at his side and stood over her.

-Jonathon, you scared me. What is it?

-Nothing.

-Did you hear about that girl they pulled from river? Just heard it on the news.

-No, no I didn't.

Tink got in a baseball stance and gripped the leather handle. He cocked his elbow and held the bat high in the air.

-What are you –

The aluminum bat hit squarely on her forehead, and the sound echoed through the house and out into the cold night.

Sunday Coming Home

Jake glanced at the dark rushing road through a hole in the floorboard of his truck. The road was long and straight and he looked up and could see Christmas lights miles before he came to the outskirts of town. He kept his eyes focused straight ahead and watched yellow lines appear and disappear at the edge of his high beam lights. The flatness around him was in stark contrast to the rigid mountains he drove down from. As his truck rumbled through the dark and edged closer to town, Jake squirmed in his seat and pulled at his tie. He gripped the steering wheel with sweaty hands.

A few miles outside of town Jake came to an intersection. There was a Hardees, an Enmark, and a deserted gas station with cracked windows. This area was untouched by Christmas lights. There were scattered cars parked near the Hardees, and teenagers roamed around their trucks and gawked at motorcycles. Jake wheeled into the Enmark and parked beside a gas pump. On his way into the convenience store he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. It was a young girl sitting on the curb in front of the store. She had a medium size duffle bag beside her, and although her hair was different, Jake knew who she was. He cautiously approached the young girl and stood over her.

-I know you, Jake said.

-I'm Sarah. We were neighbors for a little bit.

-What's the bag for? You goin' somewhere?

-I've been thinking about it. Why are you so dressed up?

-I'm headed to see a friend.

Jake took a cigarette and popped it in his mouth. A thick veil of smoke curled across his face. He lowered the pack towards Sarah and she took one.

-What you got that bag for if you're not sure you're leaving? Jake asked.

-I don't know. I guess I thought I'd rather have it just in case.

-What about Christmas?

-My *parents* don't know it's Christmas.

Jake sat down on the curb beside her. The lights from the gas station covered them both. Evening had faded and a cold wind blew through the gas station. Jake sat close to Sarah and looked at her hair. She stared off into the night and Jake noticed her partially black hair and small curls. Sarah turned to Jake, and her hair moved over her face.

-Where you been, she asked?

-I was up in the mountains for a little while.

-What did you do up there?

-I found a place, got a job. What's happened with your hair?

-I changed the color a couple of months ago. Took out the curls. What about *your* hair?

-I cut it.

-Your cheeks look flush, too.

They each shifted their seating position on the cold hard curb. The curb was covered in stained drink spills and layers of gum that had become a part of the concrete.

-So, where you headed off to? Jake asked.

-I don't know, maybe I'd just like to take a ride.

Jake stood up and walked over to his truck. He pulled trash out of the front seat and threw it in a nearby trashcan. The floorboards of his truck were caked in dirt and mud. Deep rusted places exposed jagged holes in the undercarriage. Thick layers of dust had spread over the dashboard and crept into knobs on the radio and created a film over the instrument panels. Jake strolled into the convenience store and paid for his gas. Sarah stood and picked up her duffle bag as Jake walked out. She followed him to his truck.

They pulled out of the gas station and drove toward the center of town. The Christmas decorations got thicker as they entered the center of town. They rode by the spring park and looked at the large cardboard replicas of generic Christmas characters with dim spot lights positioned in front of them. Jake gripped the wheel again and beads of sweat dripped across his forehead. Sarah looked over at him and handed him a handkerchief.

-You knew that girl they pulled out of the river, right, Sarah asked?

-I did. Her name was Carol Ann.

-You know she came to my house that night, Sarah said.

-I didn't know that. What was she doing there?

-She was lookin' for you.

-What did she say?

-Not much. She had cut her hair really short and she looked real skinny.

-My dad found her the other morning, just floatin in the river, she said.

Jake nodded his head and took out another cigarette. He cracked his window and a

line of smoke migrated toward the cold air. He gave Sarah another cigarette and they sat and bounced on the springy seats with the rough tires of truck wobbling the cab. Sarah looked down at the floorboard of the old truck and turned to Jake.

-Why are there holes in the bottom of the truck?

-I bought this at a junkyard and put a new engine in it. It runs.

-Where are we goin' anyway?

-I been thinkin' about this place I used to go to as a kid. I'd like to see it again.

The truck rumbled on, and the exhaust pipes echoed through the early night. As they drove down Main Street they saw people in Santa hats and ringing bells for the Salvation Army. The townspeople made a special effort when Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday. Jake and Sarah looked at the Christmas lights. The light ricocheted off of their eyes and filled the cab with faint shadows of red and green. Jake took a left at the end of Main Street and drove towards the old mill. The mill had mostly been carried away and left a view of a thick clump of pine trees that was mostly bordered by pavement.

Jake pulled into a clearing and turned his truck off. Without the headlights beaming, they would not be able to see the old stones scattered along the ground. They got out of the truck and walked in front of the head lights. Their shadows were long and slender. The stones were old and the names and dates faded. Sarah ran her hands along the rigid square edges of a headstone.

-What is this place, she asked?

-The mill found this old cemetery when they was clearin' land to build on. They

discovered that some of the graves were Revolutionary War soldiers.

-I've never heard about this place.

-The mill decided to leave the trees and build around it.

They walked around stones of many shapes and sizes. The names and dates on some of the large markers could be made out in the truck's high beam lights. Sarah walked around the perimeter of the cemetery. She walked carefully and stopped at each head stone. Jake stood mainly in one area and looked all around him and up at a canopy of pine trees.

-Why did you bring me here? Sarah asked.

-I don't know. I always thought it was peaceful.

-Guess this was a good place to hide.

-What about you? Any good hiding places?

-Not really. I like to walk around the neighborhood.

-Do you want me to take you home?

-No, not yet.

They walked back to the truck. The spring squeaked as they jumped in. Sarah reached for a seatbelt, but her hand flailed in the dark behind her. She looked out of the mud-spotted window and sat back and waited for Jake to start the truck. With the lights on, the battery drained.

-I think we're gonna have to sit here for a minute in the dark, he said.

-In the dark?

-We gotta keep the lights off a little bit to see if the battery will recharge itself.

-Can I have a cigarette, Sarah asked?

-Here ya go.

They sat in the dark and smoke filled the cab and fogged the windows. The night was quiet, and they listened to the tall pine trees sway in the wind. Jake started to sweat a little, and he cracked a window and let some of the smoke seep out. The air cooled his forehead, and he laid his head back. Sarah jammed half a cigarette in the ashtray.

-I thought you was goin to see a friend?

-I can see her some other time.

-Was she a close friend?

-I used to think she wasn't. Let's see if this truck'll start.

Jake turned the key over, and the truck sputtered to start. He backed out of the clearing behind the torn down mill and headed out to a main road. There were still some broken bricks scattered about the cracked parking lot, and Jake wheeled his truck around like he was driving through a field of land mines. The truck bounced on pieces of concrete and exited the old mill, and Jake took a right out of the parking lot.

-Where are you taking me this time, Sarah asked?

-I though we'd go check out some lights.

-Christmas lights.

-It is Christmas.

-I know. You just don't seem like the type of person to look at Christmas lights.

-So.

-I mean we just left a cemetery and now you want to look at decorations.

-Pretty much.

-Where we goin'?

-It's just this small mill hill across the river.

They found themselves at the intersection beside Bi-Lo. Jake took another left and headed straight to the edge of town. They came to a bridge that had been newly renovated and widened. They both looked out of the window and followed the dark river as far as their eyes could. The truck's knobby tires roared loudly as they crossed the bridge.

Jake turned his bulky truck into a small neighborhood. The houses were close together; there were little strips and patches of grass around and in between them. As they entered the village it seemed as if every house was covered in hundreds of bulbs of white, green, and red lights. There were small chain link fences in front of some houses covered in lights that were colorfully positioned to spell "Merry Christmas." Every yard had a lavish plastic design of Santa and his reindeer.

One family in particular had a tiny track circling their yard. Santa floated by on a makeshift sleigh, and the reindeer were attached directly to the track with small wheels of different color. A string of lights draped over the reindeer and blinked red and green, and although someone had ripped Rudolph's nose off, the other lights were enough to send shadows across the entire yard.

Another yard had a large plastic Santa with a trash bag hurled over his back. He spun on a swivel, and his robotic hand waved up and down as cars passed by. People wrapped lights

around the columns of their porches and stapled them to the side of leaf filled gutters.

Everywhere Jake and Sarah turned, bright lights of white, green, and red, flooded their eyes.

Jake had to squint in order to keep his truck on the road.

There were many cars crammed into this small circle of brilliantly lighted houses. Jake and Sarah sat in the truck with the radio off. The truck was inching along and everything seemed like a ride at Disney World. Christmas music belted from different houses, and some families stood at the foot of their yards and sung carols. Sarah sat with her head against the seat and felt the cool wind massage her forehead. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jake handing over a cigarette. She raised her hand and waved it away. She focused on the Christmas music, although it was multiple songs playing at the same time, and some coming from old record players, it steadied her heartbeat.

Jake smoked his cigarette and looked from house to house. He slowly passed one house and saw a family standing in their front yard. They were huddled around a large barrel that someone had built a fire in. Their faces were lit up with conversation. In the middle of this crowd, a young mother held a small boy. The mother's hair was thick and long, and she wore jeans and a dirty tan leather jacket. Her child wore a small Dale Earnhart jacket with a hood that covered his feathered hair. He wore miniature hiking boots that dug into his mother's hips. Every time he extended his small hand towards the flame, his mother pulled it away. The fire danced yellow and orange around the rim of the barrel, and its reflection left a deep imprint on Jake's squinted eyes.

He turned his head and peeked over at Sarah and saw how the light shone on her

forehead and hair. Her face glowed, and he saw her lips partially moving along with the rhythm of a selected carol. The decorations on her side of the road were much the same. Bright lights scattered the mill houses and silver tassel was laid upon anemic trees. The line of cars started to speed up and they approached what everybody came to see.

At the back half of this circle, every car had stopped and looked at an entire family dressed completely in lights. The lights were bright and bulky, and the people walked around as if they were in a space suit. They waved at everyone and nodded their heads every time someone shouted "Merry Christmas." Sarah and Jake looked at this family dressed in light and then turned to each other.

-Where do they plug all that shit in, she asked?

-They probably got extension cords that run to the house.

As they drove by the light people, they came up to the truck and mumbled something about Christmas. Their arms waved up and down, and their feet dragged along the ground. The light bulbs were wrapped tightly around their bodies and blurred together. The children that wore the suit of light spun around with their arms spread wide. A whirl of bright light jumped around like lightning bugs. Jake and Sarah nodded their heads and shielded their eyes from the intense light.

Once out of the neighborhood they both had to adjust their eyes to the darkness. Jake drove back across the bridge and traveled towards Main Street. The entire town was lit up even though it was close to midnight. The lights in the park flickered on and off as they drove down the empty street. It was a clear night and Sarah had her head pressed against the cold

window. She looked up at the stars, barely visible from the intense light of where she was. Jake turned his hobbled truck down 'G' street and took out a cigarette.

-I'd like to have one more of those.

-Sure.

She took one and placed it in her mouth and coughed a little as she exhaled. The windows started to fog.

-I learned this in school the other day. The earth is spinning so fast, that you can't even tell it's moving.

-That's interesting. Jake said.

-I know, it's kinda cool.

Jake rolled his window and threw his cigarette out, and Sarah did the same. They went straight for a while and at the bottom of a hill bounced over some railroad tracks that jutted up in the road. They approached the top of the next hill, one that had a steep drop. Before Jake got to the top, he gunned the gas pedal and accelerated rapidly, and as they reached the crest of the hill, they felt lightness in their stomachs and their bodies came off the seat for a brief second.

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97

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