

Come on in. The water's fine in the Community Pool.

Jerry Yatsko is the unrivaled bottom-dweller of Chubbuck, Idaho. The entire town can't stand him. His family does not respect him. His wife openly makes a mockery of their marriage. And worst of all, Jerry's son Gabe is well on his way to becoming a full-blown dork.

But everything changes one summer day at the Cronke Community Pool when Jerry discovers a truly powerful weapon — access to a portal that blurs the lines between reality and dreamland. Will Jerry use this tool to punish the town who continually wrongs him, or to protect the people that he begrudgingly loves?

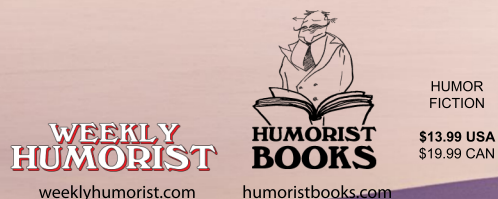
Keith James is a writer and performer from San Diego. He has trained and performed at Pack Theater, iO West, and UCB. *Community Pool* is his second novel, following the acclaimed dark comic fantasy *Greg Maxwell's Inferno*. He also writes and hosts the *Gus Biblowitz: Basketball Legend* audio series. One day, he will die.

COMMUNITY POOL

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A Novel Keith James

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First Printing: 2024

ISBN 978-1-954158-32-0

Humorist Books is an imprint of *Weekly Humorist*, owned and operated by Humorist Media LLC.

Weekly Humorist is a weekly humor publication, subscribe online at weeklyhumorist.com

110 Wall Street New York, NY 10005

weeklyhumorist.com - humoristbooks.com - humoristmedia.com

Cover design by Marty Dundics

Book editor: Brian Boone

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Praise for Keith James

“Like if Kurt Vonnegut wrote for *I Think You Should Leave*. *Community Pool* is a laugh-a-second page turner that I recommend to anyone who has ever wanted to escape suburban hell.”

—**Cory Peter Lane, Business Casual**

“Keith James is effortlessly funny with every line. I started reading *Community Pool* in a coffee shop, but had to pack up and head home so I wouldn’t bother the other customers with my laughter. I’m grateful I was taught literacy as a child. Without that, it would have been very hard to read this book. But I would have taught myself just to read *Community Pool*.”

—**Charlie James, Funny or Die**

To my girls

Daisy, Ivy, and Marley

ONE

Chubbuck. It's in Idaho. It's a city or a town, I'm not really sure. It's on the southeast side of Idaho. Close to Utah. Kind of close to Wyoming. There was a guy who, I don't know when, would load beets and potatoes and other shit onto a supply train that stopped around Chubbuck. But it wasn't called Chubbuck then. It was just a place. Then in 1951, it became Chubbuck. Remember the guy who was loading shit onto the train? His last name was Chubbuck.

But who cares? It's trains and a guy. Who cares about trains? No one.

I don't. I know I don't. There are so many things I have to care about. To be stressed out about. Jesus, fuck. If you think I care about some guy throwing potatoes on a train, you are damaged. You have a brain problem. You have a priorities problem.

You know what I think? If a city gets started in 1951, I think that sucks. I think that means the city is a bad place. If people wanted it, they would have gotten it well before 1951. Every good city was started in the 1800s, minimum.

Chubbuck.

If you want to get to Chubbuck, you can drive. Take the I-15 north or south and get off when your phone tells you to get off. Or the I-86 east or west. I don't care. I don't know where you are coming from.

And if you are reading this and are thinking, "You know, I think I have been to Chubbuck," you haven't. If people say this to me, this is what I say: I say, "Oh, so you've been to the drive-in theater." And they say, "Sure have."

Bzzzt. Wrong. Thanks for playing, shithead. There is no drive-in movie theater in Chubbuck. You got one in Idaho Falls and one in

Rexburg. Not Chubbuck. They might have been trying to be polite by saying they've been to Chubbuck for the purpose of bonding, but, I don't know. You probably haven't been to Chubbuck, so just say that. To be fair, I've never been to either drive-in movie theater. Seems like a waste of time.

I don't know why I'm stuck on "ways to get to Chubbuck," but you can also fly into Chubbuck. Sort of. You fly into the Pocatello Regional Airport, which is on the Chubbuck side of the 86. But that's gonna be so expensive. That's crazy. You are gonna get on a tiny plane in Salt Lake City and fly the worst flight of your goddamn life. For what? You cut an hour off your trip? Stop it. Fly into Salt Lake and drive up.

But I don't know. It all depends, you know? The roads suck in the winter and no one cares. Once you get past Utah and into Idaho, no one cares. The roads suck and fuck you. You're gonna die and that's your fault. You are gonna drive off the road passing Rigby. The hill is too steep coming down and if you are driving a rental, there is no way you have a feel of the brakes. You are going to be in a ditch. No one is going to stop. I might stop. I take that back. I'm not going to stop. Car in a ditch? I'm not stopping. You should have flown into Pocatello Regional Airport. I know what I said before, but you just gotta play it by ear and figure some stuff out for yourself.

But, whatever. That's what Chubbuck is. That's where I am. Fine. Okay.

TWO

At this point in time, I'm poolside. The pool is not mine; I mean it's a community pool so I guess it's mine. Cronke Community Center. There is a pool. Couple little clubhouse rooms. A little park with some trees. Whatever. Cronke Community Center is in Chubbuck.

I'm poolside, lying face up on my pool chair. Sunglasses off. I don't even have sunglasses. If I buy sunglasses I will sit on them, honest to god. What's the point?

It's summer so this place is packed. Kids. Adults. Families. Single men. I don't care. Everyone is walking, sitting, or running around and it's a lot. You have to tune it all out. A few minutes ago it sounded like someone's kid busted their head on the concrete, but I'm tuning that out.

Why? I'm staring at the sun. And I know it's frowned upon to stare directly at the sun. And I'm not dumb, I get why. It hurts. The damage lingers. I should know, I've been doing this all summer. I pick the time when the sun is right over my pool chair, and I see how long I can go. Looking at the sun. That's what I'm doing, that's what I want to do.

What people won't tell you is that you can develop a tolerance to the sun. If you work at it, you can go longer. At first, I was lasting a couple seconds. I mean at first I stared at the sun by accident. But then I thought, look, I'm going to be here all summer, might as well learn to live with the sun. Grow with it. Now I can go a full minute without having to blink or turn away. Today I go 57 seconds. It's a setback, but you're always going to have setbacks. Life beats you down for a bit as a way of saying it's about to get better. That's the god's honest truth.

To be clear, I don't have any personal examples of this truth. Life

has kicked the shit out of me for a straight 58 years. Thorough ass beatings where every part of my spirit and physical body is destroyed. It's caused me to develop big time mental problems that I don't want to unpack because I'm too busy getting my shit wrecked. It's like playing whack a mole, but every mole can whack you back. And, imagine if these moles also say terrible things about you. And let's say you married one of these moles – I'm getting ahead of myself.

Life is going bad and it does not seem to be getting better. I have researched ways to end my life. I have developed a plan of action, and have made arrangements. But, I dunno. Sometimes you see an internet cartoon or some T-shirt and you say, "Wow, there is still a little color left on this painting. There are still dreams to be had."

I look around the pool. I try to blink all the sun spots out of my eyes. Okay, so a kid did crack his head open. Looks like he is going to be fine. Lots of paramedics and concerned faces, but I don't know. I've got a good feeling.

In my left hand I've got a Mike's Hard Seltzer. Aside from looking at the sun, I've invested a lot of my time into the hard seltzer industry. I don't work for a hard seltzer company or anything. No, I just spend a lot of time at the gas station looking at hard seltzers. Hours. Where did they come from?

I'm a Mike's Hard Seltzer guy. I've had every seltzer available and Mike's just does it right. As good as you can, which is not great, but it's the best. I know I said internet cartoons and T-shirts keep me off the edge, but I should also tip my cap to alcohol.

I'm on my eighth hard seltzer. Again, it's a hot day. You have to drink these things fast or else the can gets hot and then you've got a hot seltzer. If you are drinking hot seltzers you have a problem. You have a brain problem. Seltzer has to be cold. The bubbles need to be painful and the coldness plays against the pain of the bubbles. Fire

and Ice. If you have a hot seltzer, there is no relief. You're just being stupid.

I try to limit my movement on the chair because my stomach hurts from the seltzers. It's a very specific kind of hurt I only get from drinking seltzers. I don't think we were supposed to make seltzers hard. We shouldn't do everything we can do, if that makes sense. I love them, though.

I go into a little trance watching the sun reflect off the surface of the pool. In your head you might imagine a sparkle of light on the water's surface, but you would be wrong. Don't get ahead of yourself. No, the pool has got a dull thickness to it. The pool is a publicly-owned property. We do town votes on chlorine levels in public pools. Never enough chlorine. Chlorine can't keep up with the sunscreen and piss and you'd be surprised — I was surprised — leaked breast milk. I've asked around on the internet and apparently its totally normal for a woman to leak at a pool. Kids screaming, crying. Who screams and cries? Babies. So yeah, we're leaking. And there are a lot of mothers at this pool.

If you came to me with decent odds that there is more breast milk than piss in this pool right now, I don't know. God. I don't know. I'd probably turn you down, but I'd think about it.

I trace the water up to where it meets the concrete edge and find myself in the crosshairs of my son Gabe's big fat tits, wrapped up tight in a wet Hard Rock Café shirt he borrowed from his grandmother. Gabe is ten feet away from the edge of my pool chair in the shallow end. He's bobbing up and down and when his tits get near the water they float a little. The Hard Rock Café shirt puffs out when he dips down, but sucks against his breasts when he comes back up. He dips and rocks and contorts his body so that maybe his tits will stop bobbing like tugboats, but he can't help it. It's physics. Gabe is trying to fight the laws of nature. It's a fucked up sight.

Gabe is my youngest child. He is a teenager. Puberty. He's in his

awkward years and I'm starting to think they are all going to be awkward.

Gabe's tits make him feel bad. He doesn't like showing them, so if we're at a place like the pool he wears a T-shirt to cover them up. I tell him, "That's the problem. You're not hiding these tits, you're teasing them." No one in my house agrees with me. I actually have no idea what my wife thinks. She's a pretty hands-off parent. No knock on her. Just reality.

My daughter Samantha jumps down my throat. Big time. She says that I'm not being body positive even though it is actually the opposite. I'm actually the most body positive. I'm the one saying that my son should show his tits to the world. All of Chubbuck knows that Gabe has a set of cans. Boobs. Let's see them!

When I say this? Fireworks. I am Hitler. "Gabe doesn't have to show his body to anyone! His relationship with his own body is most important," Samantha says. Sure. Fine. But settle down, tough guy. All I know is that when I walk into a locker room, I am naked before I am remotely close to my locker. I am nude, holding a newspaper, trying to make small talk. Why? Because who cares? It's a body. We all have one. My body is nothing to brag about. I have a dick like a piece of Easter candy. I am uncircumcised, and I should have been. Someone should have intervened. It's terrible. And I got fucked up pubic hair. But guess what? I'm still here. I'm not dead.

The problem is that Gabe is making this a thing of mystery. Mystery gets attention. And you know, it's strange because – well I should probably clear something up because it could be a point of confusion: Gabe is not fat. I mean, he's not winning any body-building contests but he's not in any health danger either. It's just, I dunno, the guy is busty. I'm not saying anyone should do this, but if you did a slow camera pan on Gabe's body, starting from the ankles and moving up his body, by the time you got to his breasts, a record would scratch. I've said this to Gabe and he has taken it poorly, but

he shouldn't. It's more like, hey, you have one part of you that is strange and bad. It's not all bad. I don't know. There is a nuance to this conversation that I know is required, but I just don't have it. It's like, some pitchers have a curveball, some don't. Me? I am not a pitcher.

But here's the major issue with Gabe's tits and just Gabe in general. We are in a time crunch. This is Gabe's last summer before high school. It's going to be rough. He has no confidence, he's got this curvy body, he still uses his finger to read books, and I think he's gonna get the living shit beaten out of him. If I was Gabe's age and we went to the same high school — it's tough because he's my son and I love him — but I think I'd beat him until both my hands were broken. And I was no big time jock. I was no Emilio Estevez. But Gabe would have been a low enough bar to clear. I would have seen him as someone that, hey, maybe I publicly beat him and who knows? Maybe I go one rung higher on the social ladder. You know? A lot of people are going to see him and think that.

Also, and I think it's something you have to account for...maybe it's low probability/high-risk, but could Gabe's tits set off some type of hormone infused reaction from his peers? Like, you get some bully who gets a couple punches on Gabe, Gabe's tits I don't know, jiggle or something? Then what? What kind of fight is this? I just think, not good. Not good for Gabe.

Part of the issue is that he doesn't have a pack. A crew. A similar species group. I watch a lot of shows where wild animals die. I got these new Bluetooth headphones set up and I go full volume on these wild animal shows. I also watch violent street fights, but the wild animal stuff relates more to Gabe. Sometimes an animal will survive only because their pack is big enough that the predator says, "If I go in there I am going to get my ass beat," or the pack is so big that sheer odds alone are in a single animal's favor to survive.

Gabe doesn't have that. He is not a jock. You would think he is a

nerd, but he can't make nerd friends because he is kind of simple. Not a full blown dum-dum. Not at all. Just like, when he gets older, he is gonna need a job where they give him a list, or write down what he is supposed to do on a whiteboard. So he is not going to have that nerd pack.

He has some weirdo aspects to him, so maybe he gets a weirdo pack, but that's always a gamble. He's always on Amazon buying camo and the camo never fits on his love handles right so it's a major waste of money.

If he's not on Amazon he's on YouTube just watching stuff. And he's got his mouth open for breathing. Watching nonsense.

He — and I say this with love and also disappointment — is a dork. Just a big dork. And dorks don't have packs. They fly solo. Breaks my heart but also makes me upset with him because I feel like he has something to do with this. He could take that shirt off and be fat tits guy for a couple hours and then we'd all move on. He would just be Gabe, a guy who happens to have fat tits. But it's inhabited him. He is fat tits guy forever.

But you should notice when I said "we" as in "we are in a time crunch." Gabe's tits are a "we" issue. I'm his dad. I want to help. And unlike my wife, I'm a hands-on kind of parent.

So. What's the plan? We go to the pool. Every day. We get comfortable with our bodies in public. We show the world that we don't hide from anything. And, we do this as a family. Everyone goes to the pool. No excuses. Every day.

How is the plan going? Not great. Technically, everyone is going. Is it to help Gabe discover his body? No. I will say that with confidence. Everyone is going to the pool for their own reasons. Is Gabe getting comfortable with his body? No. Shirt never comes off. Sometimes there are two shirts. One time he tried to go in the pool wearing a sweatshirt and jeans and I had to get a little stern with him.

But whatever. We go every day. Same car. All together. Pool opens at 10 a.m. We get there at 9:50. Drives everyone crazy. But we have one car, I drive, and I have a very legitimate reason for getting to the pool 10 minutes early.

What are the reasons? Okay. We need five pool chairs. There are five of us. Names and my personal rankings come later, but there are five of us. One chair per person. I'm not sharing my pool chair, and I don't expect anyone in my family to share. Do I expect anyone to use the chair at all times? Of course not. I use my chair almost at all times, but that's because I feel a need to guard the other chairs. The other four don't really use their chairs, but I can only imagine that one time I am not guarding their chairs, and they want a chair and it has been taken? They would make sure that my day was ruined.

Next, I need a spot that is NOT in the direct line of sight of BOTH the lifeguard and the towel kid. I'm drinking alcohol. Can't drink alcohol at the pool. I know a lot of people are sneaking their alcohol inside using water bottles or Camelbacks, but I'm drinking hard seltzer. If you take the seltzer out of the can and transfer it to a water bottle it loses the initial bubbles. That's why you drink seltzer! So I have to drink from the can and I need to hide the can. If I get my alcohol taken away from me, I'll just go home. If I can't drink at the pool what is the point?

It's a lot of pressure on me. Everyone has said they don't need a chair if it means we can leave a few hours later, but I don't think they mean that. I think they are lying. I think they are all lying to me.

Everyone has to be in the car at 9:30 a.m. Everyone consists of my wife Michelle, Gabe, my daughter Samantha, and our neighbor's kid, Ethan. Nobody ever asks, but I can rank them, and I keep the rankings updated.

Starting from the bottom is my wife, Michelle. Michelle, on a

macro level, has destroyed my life. Michelle has sabotaged me. She has publicly humiliated me as a sexual dunce. She gets hopped up on MSNBC and Marvel movies and thinks that every man and woman in Chubbuck is her sexual cabana boy. No one acts like this is not the case. Everyone is on board.

And I'd have a little more dignity if this was happening behind my back. But it's not. Not at all. The whole town is crass with my wife. It's like that one show with the actor and his cokehead friends. *Entourage*. Everyone in this town is the actor guy and my wife — look, people are having sex with my wife in front of my face. I watched one episode of *Entourage*. I don't have HBO. I had a free trial and I used it to watch the pilot of *Entourage*. People are fucking my wife in broad daylight.

And of course, no one stops to say, "Hey, how would Jerry feel if I fucked his wife on his front lawn?" No one stops to say that! A couple of them have said, "Jerry, you just gotta laugh," which seems like the opposite of what you should say to someone. I'm not laughing.

And if people are not telling me to laugh, they are being mean and sometimes physically harmful. Remember those moles that hit me and say hurtful things to my face? They also have sex with my wife.

It's not fair to pin this all on Michelle, but I have asked her, sometimes while crying, why she does this to me. And normally she laughs and says something like, "Nothing I do is with you in mind." For someone who does nothing with me in mind, she does a great job of hurting my feelings.

Michelle loves going to the pool. It was not hard to get her to spend all summer in a public place half-naked. When we walk past the gate where you get your towels, she makes it a point to be a few steps ahead of me. She greets everyone and gives every individual man and woman a slow hug. She also does this thing that she says

is European but it's really just her kissing everyone on the lips. And I'm always a few feet back schlepping our shit so I get this outside look at who my wife is going to "heal."

She calls it "healing". She's not a doctor. She's not a masseuse. She calls having loud sex with people who have kids who go to school with our kids "healing." And I can tell who it's going to be with. Man or woman. During one of the "hello" kisses, she'll get all curious and act like she tasted something she wasn't expecting to taste. So she'll kiss again. And then it's like a whole, "I tasted this in a past life" or some shit and then some guy who feels bad for me is like, "Jerry, let me help you get some of those towels. You look tired," or, "Hey, it's summer and you just gotta laugh."

Then I say something like, "I don't feel like laughing, asshole," and everyone boos. I get booed all the way to my pool chair.

But yeah, whoever she chooses always has a significant other, so you would think that she is ruining homes on a daily basis. Not once! Not once has a relationship been ruined by Michelle! The significant other is always convinced that it is, in fact, healing. Sometimes they get healed, too.

Do I get healed? No. Never. Not even close. My wife has a million reasons why she won't heal me. I have too many soft spots. My blood is bad. My penis has no traction. I'm barely human. Her words, not mine.

But Jerry you have two kids with this woman! My two kids: Both jacuzzi accidents. I came in the jacuzzi because I got scared of a noise in the backyard. To be clear, I was already in the jacuzzi when I got scared. I did not get scared, run to my jacuzzi, hop in, and shoot a rope. Michelle hopped into the jacuzzi to do water-supported Kegels. Pregnant. Couldn't even tell you what her vagina looks like. Couldn't put pen to paper and draw a single lip with confidence. Healing.

Roundabout way of saying that my wife fucks someone new at

the pool every day. I hear the echoes of my wife making ruthless love to another person every time we come to this fucking pool, and that is one of many reasons she is 4th on my rankings.

Next is Gabe. Big difference between 4th and 3rd, but I dunno, I just don't connect with Gabe. And I don't want to. Last year he started telling me about his day and I started crying because I realized he was going to tell me about his entire day and this story was going to take forever. But I'm his dad and when you are a dad you have to hear a million stories you don't want to hear. But I really didn't want to hear this story from Gabe, so I started crying. Through my tears I said something like, "Gabe, I need you to try and speak faster," but it didn't work. It had something to do with an airsoft gun and a website, which from anyone else would be fine, but he's got this big mouth and I can tell it takes lot of energy to get his puffy lips and greasy tongue flapping in the right direction.

Gabe drives me crazy because he sees me getting my body and spirit rocked by life, yet he just keeps flapping his curvy body down the wrong path. My path. He doesn't want to get hard. He's gotta get hard. This whole town is hard. Worse than hard. This town is vicious. Gabe is third.

Second is Samantha. Samantha is my oldest. We butt heads every once in a while, but we generally find a way to hug it out. Good kid. First year of college in the books. Grades are fine. I mean, I don't really know how to find her college grades, so I'm sure she is fine. I never had to worry about Samantha. You could leave Samantha anywhere and she would figure it out. She does this thing where she just gives me a thumbs up and it's like, okay, *check*. Most of my parenting of her was getting her to a place where she could flash me that thumbs up. After that, I'm back to my own business.

Her relationship with her mom is terrible, and that's the best part about Samantha. It's awful. There is this chat site that I go on

that gets shut down a lot that talks about women and a lot of it is pretty interesting. These guys say that women naturally can't coexist with one another and if left alone for enough time, would actually eat one another; It's just how their brains are. I'm not saying I believe one way or another but I look at my wife and I look at Samantha and I pray to God that Samantha eats my wife.

Samantha. Good kid. Sounds like she should be first right? I know. But she is very much not first.

First belongs to Ethan. Fuck. Ethan is the man! Ethan is nine years old. He is a fiscal conservative and socially, he doesn't take shit from anyone! Ethan watches Ben Shapiro videos and summarizes them for me while I pace around my garage. Ethan is very much into tactics and strategy. He likes "gaming things out." Normally that means I will offer up ideas and he will tell me they are bad. But that's okay because we're just gaming things out.

No matter what I say or do, Ethan is ready to back me up. A lot of the men — not all, but a lot — that my wife has sex with want to fight me. I don't know why. Maybe they get a load off and want to chase it down with combat and I'm close by. I don't know. I'm not in charge of these animals. But with Ethan around they don't do it. "I'm not going to kill Jerry in front of a kid." Okay, tough guy!

Ethan is a nut. There have been two times where I gave Ethan a thousand dollars and I had zero explanation for why. I just love the kid. His parents are going through a horrendous divorce. They both want no custody of Ethan. Their loss. Ethan does show the classic early signs of being a serial killer, but they're just signs. And so what if the signs become actual scary things? This town needs a serial killer. I shouldn't say that. I'm not even sure I believe that. That's an irresponsible thing to say. Whatever. Ethan is number one!

My big thing with Ethan is I don't want to cramp his style. I let him come to me. So when we go to the pool, I leave him be. Let the

boy cook. At the pool, not at the pool: let Ethan get in the kitchen and cook. Because for the most part, he is going to serve you a dish of something insane. Something that gets you truly jacked up. Most of the time. One time he asked if I would go see a musical with him at a Drive-In and that was a hard no. Too much driving, not seeing a musical. Pass. But other than that, it is certified gold. Dead animals (gold). Things he stole from drunk people at the VFW (GOLD). A love letter he took from a headstone (jury is out on this one, but when they come back, I think it's gonna be GOLD). One time he showed me two dead snakes that were trying to eat each other. Ethan said that he watched them the whole time and that he wants to see more things like that, soon. The kid loves summer.

It's best that Ethan does *these* types of things. Solo trips. When he interacts with kids his age, it's tough. Kids his age don't listen to Ben Shapiro. That's what Ethan brings. He doesn't bring much else for kids. I watched Ethan throw a baseball once and I got a lump in my throat just thinking about how alone he must be if he thought that's how a baseball is supposed to come out of a human's hand. I don't like admitting this to other adults, but I've had to fight some of Ethan's bullies. Ethan is an emerging killer, but not a killer yet. Not ready for prime-time. When he grows into a man's body... watch out. But for now, he needs a little air support. I pose enough of a distraction for Ethan to get away. My strategy is to keep the fight fairly close so it doesn't look like child abuse. It hasn't ever gotten to the point where someone would think I am winning the fight, so I've stayed out of trouble with the law.

These are the four people who need to be in or near my car at 9:30 a.m. They need to have eaten and have made arrangements if they want to eat at the pool. I went to Costco at the start of the summer and loaded up on crates of Capri Suns. I pack everyone one Capri Sun. Even my wife. I pack them in a Fred Meyer's tote bag I have Samantha carry. The Capri Suns don't go in the cooler.

They don't have to. The seltzers do. You can drink a warm Capri Sun and it's the EXACT SAME as a cold Capri Sun.

I have one rule with food and drink. Can't buy from the snack bar. You just can't. They set these prices that require you to be a Saudi prince. Four dollars for a slice of pizza? Do I get to eat this slice off Pamela Andersons tits?! No. And they give it to you on a paper plate, and one paper plate at that. You take one bite and set your pizza down on the plate and the plate disintegrates and now you are eating pizza off your own tits.

Michelle normally has a lunch made for her by someone she knows at the pool. Gabe and Samantha order Postmates. Ethan eats ants. The rule is not airtight, lots of loopholes, but it is being followed, I guess.

The kid with the cracked head is on a stretcher now. He gives a thumbs up and everyone claps. I clap.

"Don't clap, Jerry, he tripped on your fucking sandal!" someone across the pool says. I look down at my feet. I am wearing both my sandals.

"I'm wearing both of my sandals! Don't pin this on me!" I say. A couple people groan.

"Yeah," the guy across the pool starts again, "but I've seen you leave your sandals in the walkway TONS of times. You just got lucky TODAY."

Everyone claps. Unbelievable. I go back to watching the surface of the pool. I watch a thin sheet of grey balance on top of the pool water. It doesn't mix. Just sits right above the water. I don't think it'll ever mix. I actually think this town could pin a murder on me. I don't think I've caused enough unrest in the community where that is on the table, but if we got there, yeah. I would go to prison for murder. Jury of my peers? I would say, "Your honor, let's not even bother."

A guy eight chairs down from me jumps up and breaks my concentration.

“Ooh, sugar!” He rubs his stomach fast and grits his teeth. He looks at me with a goofy little expression. I know the guy. Dave Yearwood. Dave has a kid Gabe’s age. Mouve? Mouth? Name starts with an M. These schools always do these plays around the holidays and Dave would film Mouth with this big VCR camera and he was always smiling at his kid.

Dave is afraid of the digital age. I don’t know why but that statement was stuck in my head for years after I saw Dave using a VCR camera to film his children. He’s afraid. Of the digital age. I’m drunk.

I can tell Dave is still looking at me so I look back at him.

“Bee,” he says.

“Could have been a wasp,” I say.

“I hope not,” Dave says. “I’m allergic to wasps.”

“I bet it was a bee,” I say. Dave smiles and keeps rubbing his stomach. I roll around and grab another seltzer and by the time I turn back around, Dave is back to laying on his chair minding his own business. I call out to Gabe, who looks to have made a pool friend.

“Gabe. Come over to your pool chair.” Gabe does a nervous cough. He does that to clear his throat so his voice doesn’t crack when he yells.

“What’s up, what do you need?” His pool friend, a girl, also looks nervous. Two nervous duds making the water uncomfortable.

“I have a question to ask you. It’s a good one. It will get you thinking and will help you develop as a man.” I wiggle my eyebrows to let him know that it’s good. He looks embarrassed.

“Out of the pool, let’s go.” I make my demand sound fun. He mumbles something to his pool friend and wades over to the steps.

A young man, using the steps to get out of the pool. Insane.

He waddles over. He has no need to waddle and it drives me crazy. Pick your knees up. He had a perfectly normal childhood. Nothing happened to him. He has no need to waddle. He's not fat. There is no excuse.

He sits down. He is still looking at his pool friend. His pool friend is bobbing in the pool, looking back at him. Neither of them are smiling so it's a fucking freakshow.

"Gabe. Look at me. Gabe." I get his attention. Now that I have his attention, I start to think of what question I want to ask him. I said I had a question to ask him, but that was not true. The truth is, I will ask a question. But I do not have one yet.

I sigh. I nod my head. I do these outward things to appear ready to ask a question. I still do not have a question.

Wait. Okay. I have a question.

"Gabe. What's the meanest thing you've ever done to someone?" I nod my head as if to say, *this is off the books*.

"When?" Gabe says.

"*When?* What? I don't know. Ever. Meanest thing."

"Oh. Ever." The rocks in his brain bounce around while I sip my seltzer. The rocks stop bouncing.

"Sometimes I go in the bathroom to, like, poo. And I poo, but I don't come out of the bathroom right away. And that makes Samantha mad because she needs to use the bathroom and stuff."

"That doesn't count. That means nothing."

I get into his space a little bit. "Let's go. Meanest thing."

Gabe coughs. "So, do you remember when I had a fish?"

"No," I say.

"Okay. I had a fish. I got it at the fair. I won it." Gabe smiles for a second, then remembers how his story ends, and the smile goes away. "I kind of didn't want the fish anymore though, because cleaning the tank and feeding the fish was hard. So I stopped feeding it. And it died."

I don't speak. I let Gabe sit in it for a bit. I let some air out of the tension Gabe created.

Okay. Wait a minute. I have a way to make this whole thing be useful.

"Gabe *the Murderer*," I say. Gabe loses color in his face.

"Gabe, you murdered that fish." Gabe shakes his head. But I don't let him. "Gabe, I'm going to call you 'Murderer' from now on. We're gonna get 'Murderer' going for you. Day one of high school, everyone is calling you 'Murderer'. But we have to start today. Tell your pool friend your nickname is 'Murderer'. No--" I grab Gabe's arm.

"--not nickname. You go by 'Murderer.'"

"But I already told her my name. She went to middle school with me. She is my friend. You've met her before."

"Hi, Mr. Yatsko," Gabe's new friend says to me from the pool. I give her no response. I go back to Gabe.

"Tell her you lied about your name being Gabe," I say. I hiccup. I'm too drunk now. Gabe is a collection of two blurred, top-heavy kids. "That your real name is 'Murderer.'" I shrug as if to say, "What's the worst that can happen?" He looks at me with a look that says, "A lot." I look at his pool friend and nod to Gabe to make it happen. Don't let high school come to you. You knock on high school's door and then kick high school's door down. Don't even knock.

Gabe slinks off his pool chair and heads toward the pool entrance stairs. He walks through the pool as if he was told that if he splashes the water, someone would kill his family. He ends up three feet away from his pool friend. They look at each other, but don't talk.

"Gabe," I call out. Gabe looks at me.

"Splash your friend. Mean splash. Let's go." I motion with my hands to create a tidal wave of sorts and send it in his pool friend's

direction. I repeat this motion until it becomes hypnotic and I forget what I am doing. I hear a voice above me.

“Mr. Yatsko. Stop.” I look up at where the voice came from. It’s a young man’s voice. I know the voice. I know the person.

Just below the ball of sun I’ve been training my eyes on is Chase Gastil. Lifeguard. Emerging adult. Dickhead.

Chase’s mom, Lily Gastil, teaches a yoga class right above where the Borders bookstore used to be. I tried her yoga class once because I had a coupon. I was wearing a bathing suit with mesh so I felt I didn’t need underwear, but Chase’s mom said in front of everyone that my ball skin was pushing through the mesh holes and she took away the blanket for my knees because some of my ball skin may have touched the blanket. I said, “I would know if my balls touched the blanket, Lily.” And she said, “But I doubt you would be honest about informing me. I have to keep the yoga community safe.”

Chase and his mom are hero types. Big T-shirt people. Not like the fun T-shirts I described earlier that keep me from killing myself. No. These are instructional T-shirts. T-shirts with a message. Every tTshirt they wear has gotta say something they are doing, or something you are not doing.

And anything that happens in the world, they gotta make it about them. When Kaepernick kneeled before games and made me uncomfortable, Chase and his goddamn mom took a video of themselves *kneeling* before eating dinner *in their own house*. They said it was on behalf of Black guys, but let me tell you what it really was: Chase and his mom want you to know that they like Black guys more than anyone. That they thought of liking Black guys first.

Don’t get me wrong: I fucking love Black guys. This isn’t about me. I love Black guys. But I’m not kneeling before dinner. I don’t play “The Star-Spangled Banner” in my house before dinner.

Nobody said you had to protest dinner. I've seen tons of Black people eat dinner.

Whatever. Chase took a summer job as a lifeguard because guess who loves being everyone's little protector? When Chase announced that he was going to be a lifeguard at the Cronke pool, he said it would help him be in a position to advocate, which is important as someone who is minoring in Women's Studies. Facebook went apeshit.

"Wow, Chase. Incredible!"

"Now THIS is a Man!"

"Take notes, fellas!"

But guess what? I called Chase's school. They couldn't give me tons of details because I was basically a stranger, but turns out, he is NOT a Women's Studies minor. Not yet. It hasn't been fully processed yet. And even if it does get fully processed, it hasn't yet, so technically Chase is lying.

"What am I doing that I need to stop, Chase?" I say.

"You are telling your son to splash water on an underage girl," Chase says, loud. Chase has this gift to say things that are technically true so goddamn loud. Now I've got a dozen people looking at me.

"They're both underage, you dickhead," I say. Not a great point, but it's something.

"You're not underage, and you're in a position of power. And you are using your power to inflict harm on an underage woman," Chase emphasizes all the words that make me look like the bad guy.

"Way to go, Jerry," someone calls out from the other side of the pool.

"He's not gonna splash anyone. I'm just trying to get my son to be a bad boy." Sometimes the words in my head get said out loud

and they sound awful. I put my hands up as if to say, “I’m done sparring with you, Chase.”

“You can’t have alcohol at the pool, Mr. Yatsko,” Chase says.

“I know. I’ll let you know if I see any,” I say back. Before he can say anything back I lay down on my chair and turn my back to him and pretend to be asleep.

I just don’t get it. I don’t get how I enter a confrontation with a 19-year-old and I end up pretending to be asleep, sipping hard seltzer from a can I am holding with my forearms. If this was a nature documentary, I would objectively look like a rancid, lame, piece of shit animal. Bottom of the food chain. But I’m not. I have a car and a house. Every single article I read about what the average person is confirms that I am pretty close to the average person. A whole life of just getting your ass spanked, and crawling on my hands and knees to salvage some mediocrity. And for what? This? Goddamn.

I steal a peek out of my right eye. I see my wife across the pool sitting on a pool chair. Not her pool chair. Not the one I fought for. It’s some other guy’s chair who looks incredible. Fully cut. Abs with the lines that direct you to the penis. And it’s insane, because he looks stressed. Absolutely beside himself on how he can keep my wife on his chair. He’s making jokes, giving her food, rubbing her back. But she’s gonna get up whenever she wants to. If she doesn’t pick him, that’s it. She’s not going to stick around to pad his ego. She’ll go find the one she wants to “heal.”

But one thing is for sure: She’s not choosing me! Between me and abs guy? I’m well behind. And he may not even be in top half of men she can choose from at this pool.

Despite Chubbuck being a shithole, every man in this town is full blown diesel. They have to be, if they want a chance with Michelle. It’s literally survival of the fittest. And best smelling. They

all have garages with power tools and they all have guns and can have detailed conversations about gun safety.

I can't talk about gun safety, but I have a garage. In name only. My wife and our neighbor Ken Hardee agreed that his garage was too cluttered and that he should use our garage to store his things. So Ken dropped all his shit in there, and I'm not allowed to touch anything unless he is around. But when he is around I am not allowed in the garage, because he says I got myself "a one-man garage."

Ken is a great example of what I'm dealing with. Ken is tall, built, but not like, supermodel built. He's thick. His body has a clear use. Lifting, destroying, hugging. All his pants are that dynamic, worker-fabric that have all the little pockets and places to snap tools onto — I don't know, I don't know how these fucking pants work. And they cut the crotch area to make it look like he's smuggling a goddamn pringles can. I bought the same pants but the crotch must have not had that cut because nothing looks smuggled.

Aside from Ken's tools and hog, he knows a lot of stuff about everything. Practical information. Ken could come over at any time and tell me more about what my house needs than I ever wanted to know. He could tell just from looking at my grass that we were running a three-inch diameter corrugated drain and we should be running PVC and it should be no smaller than four-inch. I said, "Bullshit, if you are right you have to take me to go get ice cream," but he didn't hear me because my wife told me to not go outside, Ken was busy.

He is apparently funny because he makes my wife laugh all the time. When I try to tell him and my wife a joke they both don't laugh. I don't even get a look from them. They both look toward some horizon and pretend that the part of time when I was speaking was a glitch. God, there is an insane amount of power in not laughing at something.

I look at Ken, I look at me, and I can't help but feel like shit. I'd feel better if Ken was just one of one but he's not. It's like every guy I run into in this town runs the scoreboard up on me and leaves me feeling like a huge asshole. I can't help but think that there has to be no god because if there was, you would have to imagine at some point someone would throw up a flag and say, "Come on, this isn't even a game anymore. This is just sick."

Chase is going to be another Ken. Gabe won't be another Jerry, though. He'll be worse. The projection he is on, he will be worse. The Chases of the world will clap Gabe's tits together with such force that the sound alone will leave Gabe deaf. Even though Chase openly speaks about body positivity and respecting personal boundaries, I know their type. The moment everyone's back is turned they reveal themselves for what they are: guys who want to fuck my wife and cause physical harm to good men like me and Gabe. And your back doesn't even need to be turned. In my experience they prefer an audience.

God, I've put myself in a terrible spot. Not just in life, but now. On my pool chair. I can't roll over because Chase will keep pressing me on having alcohol. But if I pretend to be asleep, I will eventually fall asleep. Once I fall asleep I basically put a billboard on my back saying, "Free Pool Chairs. Come Leave Me and My Family Fucked." And people on the outside looking in would probably say that Chase has already forgotten about me and has moved on, but what if I said that Chase ensured that I would be in this situation? That this was his plan? To make me lose my alcohol and pool chairs and make me the laughing stock of the community pool? I have no proof of this, but I also have no proof that Chase's hands are clean.

I fall asleep because the sun and the hard seltzers have fully kicked my ass. The falling asleep is not uncommon. I am drinking a lot and the summers get pretty hot at the pool. It's kind of a good news/bad news story. Bad news is that I am an alcoholic. It's some-

thing I have not really said out loud because it's fairly new, but this summer has caused me to have a big time dependency on alcohol. At my age, it is really concerning that I am putting this much stress on my internal organs, and I really have no plan on stopping. In fact, it's probably quite the opposite. I will most likely ramp up my alcohol usage to battle my increased tolerance. Really bad. Scary. Oh well.

THREE

Good news is that when I am asleep, I am not awake. Being awake is really hard for me because it's basically like being alive and most people that know me personally are actively rooting against me being alive. So being asleep is kind of like not being alive.

Key words being "kind of". I think my body has physically acknowledged that my life is no good and downright traumatic. So when I am asleep, my body wants some type of consciousness available to me so I can live a life that is not dogshit. But I don't know.

So when I am asleep, I am up. Full blown lucid dreaming. One hundred percent control over my dream environment.

In my dream environment I am in full control over, I work in an airport deli kitchen. To be very clear, I am not in a customer facing role. Not at all. If I was, I would be looking for another job, quite frankly.

People ask me why I don't fly or be a king or something. I'm like, why don't you fly? No one actually asks me about my dreams, but still. I'm not flying. Not trying to be a king. I want a low stress, positive work environment.

It took a while to get there. Lots of trial and error. Found some nice jobs with good people, but man, it's so much PowerPoint and PDF everywhere. I'm not learning that.

Also, I've got kind of a rat shit imagination so if I get myself into an issue, I have a hard time dreaming my way out of it. So I gotta keep it simple.

In my dreams I work at the Pocatello Regional Airport which is like four miles from my actual house in Chubbuck. I work in the back kitchen where I make the pre-made sandwiches people buy when they wait for their airplane. They are the sandwiches you get

that are already damp. They come damp. You don't have to do anything. I make them damp for you.

It's a tiny airport so I have to make maybe 15 sandwiches a day. My boss in my dream works from home because she has two kids and can't swing day care. I get three calls from her: one in the morning, one at lunch, one just before my shift ends. They all have to do with the status of the sandwiches.

Right now I'm dealing with the morning call.

"We're throwing away a lot of ham right now," Marge says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Let's try and change the output. Throw more ham and cheese out there."

"I disagree," I say. "Respectfully, of course. We are right in the middle of summer. Ham is a winter meat. People are looking for turkey and we have to get them what we want."

"Sorry, Jerry. Might need to go ham for a few weeks. Rather give a customer ham than the dumpster ham. Good ham."

The stress of this nut-busting phone call wakes me up. I'm on my pool chair and there is thick sunblock being poured on one of my love handles. I look behind my love handle and some kid with a "Go Hard or Go Home" shirt is holding a sunblock bottle like it's his dick and is squeezing the bottle as hard as he can. I do not know this kid. This kid could literally be anyone. What the fuck. I look at him like, "Why?"

"The sunblock is like cum," he says. I look up to the lifeguard chair Chase is sitting in. I look at Chase like I'm a basketball player not getting a call. In this case the call would be some form of sexual assault.

Chase gives me a no-call. Whatever. I'm getting sunblock cummed on. Once I disassociate, it feels nice. I fall back asleep.

I get back in the dream as the call is wrapping up. Marge and I agree to disagree on the reasoning, but not on the execution. She is

the boss. So we're doing ham. "As long as it's not roast beef," I say. Marge grunts, which is basically a laugh, and we hang up. Okay.

Today is going smoothly. We are running low on mustard so I am spreading it pretty thin. If it was winter, I would be more than okay with a thin mustard spread. Thin mustard, thick mayo. That's how you make sandwiches for winter. When it's summertime, you have to cut back on mayo. Too thick, too creamy. You need the tang of mustard. It's gonna keep you fresh for a hot day. Especially a hot travel day. And it's summer in this dream, so, I'm making the wrong sandwich.

What's great about working in a back room kitchen is you can unravel. I do all the prep myself, and there are no windows into my area, so I can really emotionally explode over the fact that my sandwiches are not where they should be, taste-wise. I pull the prep boards off the make tables and throw them at the wall. I kick doors and say some really dark stuff. I don't get to do a lot of this in real life, so I make time to go into a blind rage whenever I can.

At this point I am pretty close to the climax. And yeah, I am erect. Penis-wise. It's pretty confusing, but the more I scream and fill my mind with hate, the harder I get. And that gets me more angry, because anyone could walk in and see me rock hard breaking stuff and then I am canceled. I get canceled, then I lose my airport job?

Sure enough, I hear someone walk in. I try and find a dish rag to throw over my engorged stub, but it can't find enough meat to hang on and falls to the ground.

Most of the time when I see or hear people in my dreams, it's pretty blurry. But I can see this person pretty clearly. And thank God.

"Ethan! My man!" Ethan looks pretty confused but also ready to debate. God, the kid never lets his guard down. And why should

he? The world wants to be out to get him, but he's out to get the world! He will kill someone at some point.

"Jerry? What are you doing here? Why are you not at the pool?" Ethan says, looking around my kitchen.

"Ethan, work is how we prove our worth," I say. "I have no worth if I sit at a pool." I say this because I didn't know I could swim at a pool in this dream. I want to ask Ethan where the pool is and if we can go, but it's my dream and I should really know this shit.

"Are you hungry?" I ask. Ethan clicks his tongue and rolls his eyes back. "I could certainly have something to hold me over before I find an anthill," he says. I know this is going to beat my ass on the backend, but I give Ethan all the sandwiches I made so far. An even 10. Ethan eats them without breaking eye contact with me. In real life, Ethan and I have had multiple conversations where we both agreed that people drop their guard when they eat. If you are eating, you lose track of who can eat you. So Ethan and I trained each other to not lose focus while eating. He is good at it and I am bad at it.

After his sandwiches he asks if I have anything to drink. I say no, that I don't prep drinks I prep sandwiches. He says if this is a sandwich place then I must have drinks. I say that it's not a sandwich place, it's a sandwich prep place. It's very different. Ethan walks out of the kitchen without saying goodbye.

The phone rings. Fuck. Midday phone call. I prep myself to get shit on for saying I am at midday with no sandwiches. I pick up the phone. It's a man's voice, yelling. Yelling far away.

FOUR

I wake up. The yelling is close now. The sound of this voice is literally skull fucking me. Nothing, nothing will ever prepare me for the absolute misery of waking up after binging hard seltzers. We should not drink these. My body feels like syrup made from broken glass. I am swollen, yet hollow. Completely stretched to my physical limits, but completely out of touch with my body.

I reach for my cooler. I hate to say this, but it's seltzer time. Despite this feeling, it is still summer, and I still want to party.

"JERRY." The voice hits me again. A man's voice. I look up. His head is covering the sun so he's got a dark shadow over his face. My wife is right next to him, looking down on me. Her face is a childish pout, like someone ripped her off the playground and forced her to do her homework.

I am still pretty drunk so I let my eyes adjust for a few minutes. Takes a while to get the engine revved up these days. Focusing on a single object when drunk takes a frustrating amount of time. Frustrating for everyone. The man who is yelling at me keeps yelling at me. I hear Michelle calling me a loser and defective. Sticks and stones, Michelle. But in all honesty it does hurt and I would like the name calling to stop.

The man comes into focus. Just as I expected. I'm looking at the thin, chiseled, perfectly seasoned face of a complete lunatic. A powerful lunatic. A lunatic that requires me to give a history lesson to explain.

Chubbuck is about two and a half hours from Salt Lake City, and an hour and a half from the border of Utah. So when Brigham Young took over after Joseph Smith and led hot, successful Mormons into Salt Lake City, there were other people who ended their journey early. Still hot, not as successful. They all settled in

eastern Idaho, where Chubbuck is. Why stop? Who knows. Why does anyone stop walking? They are tired? Bored? Scared? It doesn't matter.

Well, one family of quitters, the Richards, did well in eastern Idaho. They thrived. And they made a bunch of asshole children who made other asshole children, and then at some point some poor woman let Myles Richards roll out of her vagina and that is who we are dealing with right now. Myles has turned Chubbuck into his town, in the same way that Willy Wonka turned that candy factory and all the little, fucking... look, the guy is bad. He is bad like Willy Wonka is bad. Willy Wonka is a bad guy. I don't get how you watch that movie and not see that he is a complete monster. And that's kind of the same as Myles. It's like, hey, what the fuck, why is this guy not in jail? But everyone is like, I want to be his friend and eat his candy. And the candy in Myles' case I guess is, not to be crass, his penis? Everyone wants to fuck Myles Richards.

And Myles knows this! But, and this is the real mojo, they can't. Myles is a Mormon guy. And Myles only fucks his wife. So he's better than everyone. He's the walking son of God.

My only problem with all of this is that Myles Richards definitely fucks my wife. And everyone knows that. But it's like, how can you know that he fucks my wife AND only fucks his wife? Willy Wonka.

"Jerry, you are a walking disgrace," Myles says to me.

"I'm not walking. I'm laying down, Richards. Get a clue." Myles looks at Michelle. Michelle is annoyed.

"Jerry, shut up and listen to Myles. I don't have time for this." Michelle gives me and Myles a sharp look. Myles looks hurt.

"What's wrong, Richards? Michelle isn't healing you today?"

Myles shoves his foot towards my crotch. Before I can move my hips, he has one of my testicles between his big toe and assistant to the big toe. Goddamn, what a move.

“ARGH, FINE,” I say. “WHAT.”

His toes release their grip. He crouches down in a catcher position next to my face.

“I need to talk to you about your daughter.”

I glance over at my wife who can’t stop shaking her head.

“Why?” I ask.

Myles’ voice goes just above a whisper.

“It appears your daughter has taken interest in one of my children,” Myles says.

I shrug. Whatever. I’m sure Myles’ sons are awful monsters, but Samantha is a smart person. She’ll be able to figure them out quickly.

“Myles, they’re kids. Let’s all drink a hard seltzer. Take a nap.”

“I don’t drink, Jerry.”

“Then take a nap. When you wake up they will probably be broken up.” I close my eyes.

My chair jerks to the side and the top half of my body smacks the pavement. I look up to see Myles wincing. His foot that kicked my pool chair is starting to bleed. Myles wears sandals with the little strap for the heel. Very strange. Sandals with a strap for the heel are for children. He crouches down again.

“Jerry. My daughter is not going to be publicly engaging in lustful behavior--”

“--you mean my daughter.”

“Yes, and my daughter.”

“Myles, Samantha isn’t your daughter. Michelle, what kind of mind game is this? It’s not even lunchtime.”

“Jerry, I swear to God--” Michelle starts. Myles clenches when Michelle says “God.”

“--Michelle, please, don’t speak like that.” Myles looks at her with soft wet eyes. “For me.”

Michelle smiles at Myles. It’s a smile that I can only describe as

an “I’m sorry, Daddy” type smile. The smile vanishes when she turns back to me.

“Jerry. Your daughter is a lesbian. She is trying to make Myles’ daughter a lesbian.”

Huh.

“Huh. Is it working?”

Myles grabs one of my ears and crumples it in his hand.

“FIX THIS JERRY,” Myles hisses.

“Denver is going to Brigham Young in the fall. If she continues like this with Samantha, she won’t be able to attend,” Michelle says.

Whatever. So they are lesbians. I take a deep breath and make it look like I’m thinking, but I’m not. It’s insane to name your kid Denver.

“Myles, I have to be honest. I’ve got a real busy summer. I don’t know if Michelle told you, but this is the summer of bodies. We are trying to feel good about our bodies. Gabe’s body. My body. The whole family. It’s about bodies. It’s not about being lesbians.”

Myles cringes when I say the L word. I keep talking.

“This isn’t my family’s lesbian summer. If you came to me at the beginning of the summer, I don’t know. I might have been more help. Maybe Denver takes a gap year and we settle this lesbian situation in a couple semesters.”

“Keep your gosh darn--” Myles gets me up out of my chair and before I know it he has me by the back of the neck.

--voice DOWN.”

Wow. What a grip. Who would have thought you could be choked from someone squeezing the *back* of your neck. You would think you need some front neck real estate to make that happen. You would be wrong. With enough strength, any part of the neck will do.

I’m blacking out, but I have enough time to put my hands up and show Myles that I have yielded. He throws me back on my pool

chair. He throws me too hard and I land on the head rest part and fly over the top. Big noise and anyone who wasn't already enjoying a pool time public humiliation is now looking in our direction.

This makes Myles more pissed off. He comes around the side of the chair and drags me back onto the pool chair while setting it upright. Michelle is now sitting on her pool chair (impossible to do without my hard work) with her head in her hands. I don't want to ever hear again that she doesn't use her pool chair. She's clearly using it.

Myles gets me situated. He wipes his face. "Jerry," he is speaking softly. "Your daughter can be whatever she wants to be. She can be a good, clean, Chubbuck kid, or she can be a common whore you find on the garbage heap. I don't care. But my daughter is a Richards. She is a child of God. She will have a husband and she will be married in the temple for time and all eternity. She will not be some big T-shirt wearing, tattooed, feminist living in some dump in Los Angeles."

A couple of those things go over my head. He gets very close to my face.

"If your daughter continues with her pursuit of Denver, I will make her life miserable. And remember Jerry," he looks out across the pool to all the people, watching.

"She's your daughter. So they would all be happy to help."

He pats me hard on the back. "Fix this," he says. "It's time to grow up."

I feel a hot flash go over my body. Not in an old woman type of way. More like when you burn your hand on a hot pan, and the anger has to go somewhere.

"Myles, I'm confused," I say. He turns around.

"Lesbian wedding. Both brides. Which one of us is paying for the thing?"

And just like that I'm back out of the pool chair. Myles has me

by the collarbones which sucks. If you are getting picked up by your collarbones, you aren't about to be invited to a birthday party. There is no gentle way of lifting a grown man by his collarbones. His fingertips are wrapped around the bone and touching one another.

I am upside-down in the pool. You are probably thinking: Weren't you just standing, behind held by your collarbones? Yes. I was. But in a fraction of a second — a fraction — Myles threw me so hard into the pool that I broke the surface and went completely upside-down. Not only did this happen, but somehow in the throwing of me into the pool by my collarbones, he managed to catch my ankles. So he has me, upside-down, by the ankles, in the pool.

I try to go completely limp. Maybe he will think I am dead. I open my eyes. The world is a milky blue green, with a peach-colored figure moving closer to me. As it gets closer, well, I see a pair of tits. The tits lower and Gabe's eyes drop down to meet mine. Gabe looks at me. His drowning father. I try to signal with my eyes that I am dying and he needs to save me. He swims a few feet away from me. He does a little barrel roll, but keeps eye contact with me. What the fuck. This sucks: Gabe is pretending to be a manatee. I know he is trying to be a manatee because he is doing this thing with his eyes that he learned from watching a documentary about manatees. The kid loves manatees, and I may die because of it. I never go in the pool with him so he is probably thinking this is his time to show me his manatee impression. If this is true, wow. Gabe truly lives on the corners of civilization.

Fuck it: I take it in. I take Gabe in. His movements. His mannerisms. If I wasn't dying, this would be super peaceful. Gabe has a natural grace that I am now realizing. It's like his body naturally wants to turn and drift underwater. And the water doesn't fight him. He really is beautiful. I also think he is a moron, and that is my last thought before I black out.

FIVE

I'm in the back office of my dream world airport sandwich job. I'm sitting across from Marge. She's pissed that Ethan ate the sandwiches. We had no sandwiches for the day. She had to come in, and find a sitter for her kids. Even though this is my dream, she is making good points, so I'm taking it. I can't really understand the words she is saying out loud – it's like a low humming noise – but I gather what she is going for in my brain. I let her down, plain and simple. Turns out the sitter took her two kids to get ice cream and the ice cream set off a diabetes thing in her youngest kid. He had a diabetes episode, however those play out.

I only get a warning, thank god. If I had to find another job I would have some awful nights of sleep. Dreams about resume building have me waking up anxious.

Marge asks me plainly if I've thought about getting together with her and helping raise her two children. I say that of course I've thought about it, it intrigues me, and I think I'm close to saying yes. Marge grunts and asks me to pull out my hog. I pull out my busted Easter candy penis and rest it on my wrist. She grunts and says our parts may not work.

"I got thick sides," she says pointing down to her vagina. "Your stuff may not get past the sides." None of what she is saying is judgmental. Just two people trying to get their parts to line up. Nothing bad about that.

"Are the sides soft? Could I be on top and push them down?" I ask.

"No. Rock hard. Does your stuff get bigger?" she asks.

"Three times wider, but bigger length? No."

Marge makes a face. "Parts may not work. Might be a show

stopper.” Marge hits the back office table with the side of her closed fist. I can tell she wanted to hit it a little harder. Marge wanted this. I’m not going to say I let her down because my body is my body. You can’t ask a SmartCar to be a Ford F150. But it still feels bad not being able to give someone what they want. I want to suggest that I put my balls on top of my Easter candy to add some inches and top girth, but it’s a workplace. I know I pulled my penis out a few minutes ago, but there are some things you don’t say to your boss. And I don’t know where the line is, and if you don’t know where the line is, don’t cross it.

We wrap up the meeting and I’m back to making sandwiches. It looks like a shipment came in: turkey and mustard. I have all the condiments I need to make season-appropriate food.

I’m rolling, baby. I’m at roughly two sandwiches per hour. It’ll be close, but I might be able to make the sandwiches, clean up, and get out of here in around eight or nine hours. I take a quick second to just think about how, even in this dream, I’m in the greatest country on Earth. If you work hard and stay hungry, you can have four to five hours before bedtime that belong to YOU.

I hear the door into the kitchen slam open. Jesus, it’s Ethan again! He is painting hard and his shirt is covered in vomit. His eyes are bulging out of his head. He looks shocked, but almost offended by what he is looking at.

“Ethan, I can’t give you any more sandwiches, bud.” I say that, knowing that I am lying. I would give him blood even if it meant slitting my wrists. Ethan is looking me up and down, and back to where he came from.

“You drowned. You passed out,” he manages to get out. “That’s what I figured,” I say.

“But I saw you—” Ethan keeps looking at the door.

This is clearly some kind of dream therapy thing where my brain is trying to process something. Okay, so: Myles took me by the

collarbones and threw me into a pool in front of, well, basically all of Chubbuck. This makes me feel like an inferior man to Myles. Ethan is, like, the guy I need to impress in my life. This dream Ethan is, like, what? Some kind of signal to me that what just happened in my real life is the last straw? The last public embarrassment I can endure? I have no idea.

I'm watching this Ethan look around the kitchen, coming back to look at me every couple seconds or so. Is he waiting for me to say something? To like, figure out the lesson my brain is trying to teach me? To heal? No. This is not what I do dreams for. Dreams are not for healing. They are for avoiding.

Before I can address him, he steals one of the sandwiches I made. He runs to the door he came in from. I'm so overwhelmed by how much I love Ethan that I clap for him as he robs me. Ethan has once again fucked me. I make my way over to a metal filing cabinet and pull out a stolen items report. I have to itemize every ingredient in the sandwich, estimate the amount stolen, list the possible suspects, and what I believe the punishment should be. I would never rat on Ethan, so I put myself. For punishment, I say "We should kill thieves," forgetting that I put myself as the suspect. But I mean it. Thieves should be killed. If it takes me being killed to set a precedent, so be it.

I make my way back over to the stolen item filing cabinet. I feel a small rumble in the building. Then a very large rumble. My feet start to vibrate. A second passes. I feel a shock run over my entire body.

SIX

I wake up.

I am on the concrete looking straight up at that beautiful sun. I feel dull pain all over my body. Next to me is a yellow package with some wires and pads sticking out. In between my legs is Michelle. She is kneeling and hovering over me. I can feel her breath on my legs. She is a horrendous person but feeling her breath on my leg hairs makes it all seem worth it.

She is holding a taser. “None of us knew how to use that thing,” Myles says, pointing to the yellow package. “Michelle really stepped up.” Everyone starts clapping for Michelle. She closes her eyes and really takes it in. I clap too. Fuck it. I’m too tired to understand what side I should be on. Sometimes it’s just nice to be a part of the group.

I see Gabe and stop clapping. “Gabe. What the fuck was that, buddy?”

“What?” Gabe says.

“I’m drowning and you do manatee stuff around me?”

“Did you see my manatee stuff?”

“I did, Gabe. I saw it because I was drowning. Why didn’t you save me?”

Gabe coughs. “I thought you wanted that to happen.”

“You thought I wanted to drown?”

Gabe nods at me.

“Gabe, if you thought I wanted to drown, you were going to do manatee stuff around me and not stop me from drowning?”

Michelle steps in. “You have no right to be confrontational with Gabriel.”

“Yeah Jerry, you have no rights!” Someone across the pool says

and just like that, the argument has gone from “Can I be stern with my son?” to “Do I have rights?”

Myles kneels down next to me. “Jerry, your daughter is a lesbian. Your son wants you dead. Your wife is my wife. How you react in these moments is very important.”

I can’t even say what I want to say before Myles shakes his head. “Jerry, Dave Lester and I spoke. As prosecuting attorney for Chubbuck, he doesn’t think you have a case against me for what occurred this afternoon. He will not prosecute. I drowned you fair and square.”

He rubs the inside meat of my leg. Doesn’t do it for me, but I get how other people like my wife would like it.

“Go find Samantha. End this sinful affair.” He grips my inside leg meat hard. “I could drown you any time I want.”

“Double jeopardy,” I say. I said that too fast. I don’t think double jeopardy was the right thing to say, but Myles is nodding his head in agreement.

I don’t want to be drowned again. That really sucked. Waking up to my wife in between my legs like she was about to be intimate with me, only to find out she was tasing me? Bad.

And, I don’t know, there is something about everyone watching another man drown me. Like, where do I go from here?

It is also sad that my family unit is publicly in shambles. My wife has no qualms tasing me. Gabe danced around my lifeless body. It’s tough. And the one person who hasn’t done anything wrong and seems to be having a really cool summer somehow is the bad guy. That person is Samantha. I would argue that I have done nothing wrong, too, but, man. I dunno. Bad day at the pool.

I do a slow walk to the Cronke Pool Teen Center. My body is fucked. Between the seltzers, the drowning, and just plain getting old, I am fucked. But I also need the time to think of what to say to Sam. Man, what a mess.

The Cronke Pool Teen Center is an old janitor closet with two bean bags and a Nirvana poster. It has not been updated since it was founded. It was founded because teens were doing hand jobs in the pool area and the loads were clogging up the pool drains. One load through a drain is no problem. But you take a full pool day of loads and you have a plumbing problem. Kids are going to do hand jobs, but they need to do it away from plumbing. The Teen Center is just that: a dark room with no drainage.

The Teen Center is spooky. The Teen Center also doesn't fit a lot of teens. It was meant for one janitor. We whiffed bad on the Teen Center: most teens don't use it, so we are still having drainage problems. We added a Kurt Cobain poster as a last resort. No bites. The teens avoid the Teen Center.

Except for Samantha. Samantha likes the Teen Center. She understands that the Teen Center is for Teens and that she is a Teen, so that is where she is supposed to be. I've seen this bumper sticker from time to time that says, "Well-behaved women rarely make history" and that's fine, but we made a Teen Center and you should use it. Samantha is well-behaved, she uses the Teen Center, and she is a lesbian. That's history.

I open the door of the Teen Center and there they are. Samantha and Denver. Nothing sexual: they are sitting on separate bean bags looking at Samantha's phone. I'm addicted to screens so I catch a quick glimpse of what they are looking at. Camp sites. They are lesbians.

"Big blue sky out there," I say, referencing the general concept of Outside.

"Hi Dad," Samantha says.

"Hi, Mr. Yatsko," Denver says. I nod at them. I'm not seeing anything wrong here. Just two kids trying to be lesbians. But I don't want to get drowned again. These two have their whole lives to be lesbian, to not be lesbian. They can stop and start. This is different

from me being drowned. I can be drowned a limited number of times. How many times? Not many.

“Girls, I’m bummed out that I have to be here--”

“Dad, why are you red and bleeding?” Samantha is looking at my taser welts. Now that the blood is back and moving again, my taser welts are leaking something crazy.

I casually wipe my legs. “Trouble with the missus,” I say.

“You mean Mom? Mom did all of this to you?” Samantha’s not happy, which is great. But this isn’t the right place for her to kill my wife.

“She was helping me. I drowned. She tasered me to wake me up. It was all above board.”

Denver puts some of her hair behind her ear and looks down at the bean bag she is sitting on. “Did my Dad drown you?” Denver asks.

I don’t have to answer. Samantha looks away. Denver starts to cry. I wish that I wasn’t a guy that people could so easily drown, but I am. I wouldn’t even know where to begin to fix that. But it shouldn’t fall on me, the guy who is being drowned. I think Myles should go to therapy. I think everyone in this town should go to therapy. Until then, I am cornered. Cornered until what? Until I just lay down and let everyone do whatever they want to me like I’m some wet bag of shit? My gut tells me to never lay down, to never back down, but the rest of me is on the fence. Does it have to be fighting, or laying down and dying? Can there be some middle ground? If I was on a battlefield, I wouldn’t surrender, but I also wouldn’t run into a bunch of people trying to kill me, you know? The ideal scenario would be to find a cave or a rock or a dead guy to hide behind, and just see how it all plays out. And then once it’s over, you get a good look at who won, find a dead body wearing their outfit, and then join the winning team. That would be great. I would love that.

It's hard, though, because on my battlefield, the battlefield of existing, the other side is like, "Let's fucking kill Jerry Yatsko." And on my side, it's just me. So I can't sit and watch. I am forced to participate. And what the fuck do I get out of this battle? I just want to live in my house, drive my car, watch my son grow up to be a rockstar bad boy, enable Ethan to be his best self, and general happiness for Sam. And Denver, why not.

I take a deep breath.

"You guys can't be lesbians. At least not together. I got drowned because of lesbianism. Denver--" I point both of my hands at her. "-you are going to Brigham Young and you know how they feel about lesbian stuff. Samantha, I don't know how your school feels about lesbian stuff but I don't have a lot of time to sift through the paperwork to figure it out."

They look at each other. "This is real Romeo and Juliet stuff," I say. "But I need you to actually stop, because my life is at risk."

Denver and Samantha are holding each other's hands and not even looking at me. I can tell they are grasping the situation. They know Myles can kill me and the city will back him. I'll just be some guy that had too much to drink at the pool.

"Take the next few hours to wrap this up. Samantha--"

Samantha looks up at me.

"--If you need a water from the snack bar or something, just let me know. I can go with you to get a water. Denver, you seem like a nice girl, but I'm not paying for your water. It's just how it is."

Denver rubs my daughter's hands. I don't think she wants a water. I don't think it's the time to say this, but if she asked for a water, I probably would have found a way to get her a water. Her and Samantha might share a water. Actually, I don't think they will because of the talk we just had. Before this talk, I bet you they would have shared a water.

I can't take how sad the Teen Center is right now. I now think

the Kurt Cobain poster is in very bad taste. You get teens all sad and worked up and then you show them a poster of a guy who killed himself? Come on. Get a different poster.

I leave the girls and head out to the pool area. I make a quick stop over to the snack bar.

I have a tense, complicated relationship with the woman who runs the snack bar. Her name is Joann DiAmico and her life is almost as shitty as mine. She used to be an acupuncturist but she lost her license because she didn't actually have a license. She made it up. She went to the public library or wherever you can get on a computer and watched a couple videos on what acupuncture looks like and she duped us. We don't get stuff like acupuncture in eastern Idaho so this was huge. A no shit acupuncturist. And it's Joann. She made money hand over fist. We all went to her and she would stick whatever type of needles she could find in us. Everyone would leave her house feeling like shit and bragging that they just got acupuncture therapy. She got caught because some kid had a grandparent who lived in Los Angeles and he got to see real acupuncture during their spring break. Joann had to make a big public apology, which I understood. I mean, she really did some crazy shit. Joann hurt people.

I went to Joann a couple times after the apology. Her prices were down so it made it easier to fit into my budget. Also, and it's really embarrassing to say this, I just liked being touched by someone who was not actively trying to do harm to me. I mean, she was doing harm. She'd take a thumb tack and put it right in my spine. But before she would put the tack in, she would run her fingers on my back to find the perfect spot, and that was nice. It was a healing touch. I don't think she was actively trying to cause harm. We all want to make money and we can convince ourselves of anything if the money is good.

Now Joann runs a snack bar at a community pool. She is

fucked. Her food sucks and she knows it. You can tell she has no confidence in the things she is providing. And the prices. I've talked about the prices. So yeah, there is tension. On one hand, I think she is jerking me around with how much she charges for her dogshit pizza. On the other hand, I miss her touch. And I can't say that I miss her touch. You can't say that to people. You can't. If you do that you have brain problems. So instead I just complain about her shitty snack bar.

I approach her snack bar. I put my hands on the busted metal counter and I keep it all business.

"Joann, I miss your touch." Joann has her back leaned up against the refrigerator.

"Jerry, you have to stop saying that," she says. She's right. I do say it a lot. I know I said before that I don't say it, but I do, and it's embarrassing. I'm embarrassing. And lonely.

"Joann, I'm sorry, but I do. Mea culpa." Joann rolls her eyes. She also smiles. Not a polite smile, but an actual good smile. Joann has a beautiful face and blonde hair. She is also kind of fat, which I love. Her hands are like little pillows. Could be a medical condition but that's her issue and not mine. To me, those hands are pillows.

"Samantha may come by. I'd like to pre-order a water for her. Nothing else. She's going to be emotional so don't try and take advantage of her."

"Did something happen with her and Denver?" Joann asks. She looks concerned.

"How did you know about them?"

"I haven't seen those girls apart one day this summer. And, I don't know. You can just tell." Joann sighs. "It's too bad they had to grow up in a place like this."

"Yeah, Myles and my wife suck." I shrug. I keep it short. I can't get on my soapbox and say who should grow up where. I need to solve this water issue. If Joann wants to talk about me and her

running away together or something similar to that, then fine. But if not, I need to solve the water thing.

“How much is the water?” I ask. Joann moves closer to the counter.

“You actually don’t need to pay for it. If you get a Cronke Pool Card, the first purchase is free. In this case it would be a water. So it’s a free water.” Joann smiles. God, Joann is full of shit. But it’s different than everyone in this town. She’s not trying to kill me. She’s just trying to take a little blood. I know that she has a history that involves damaging my spine, but I can look past that.

“What’s a Cronke Pool Card?” I ask. I can’t help but smile.

Joann touches my forearm. “I think you’re going to love it. It’s similar to a credit card, in that there are rewards and you can earn points--” I can feel her hot breath on my face. She ate some of her pizza. Couldn’t help herself.

--and payment on the card can happen monthly. And interest doesn’t kick in until the second month.” We’re just dancing in each other’s eyes. If this is what being signed up for a high interest credit card is, I want to be signed up for every high interest credit card on Earth. But I keep it cool.

“I’m going to need another meeting before I can commit,” I say.

“I understand. I could use your wife’s Cronke Card for the water purchase. Or do you want to pay with cash for now?” And just like that I am crushed.

“My wife has one of these cards?” I ask. Joann nods. “She uses it for champagne. Or chocolate milk if it’s someone who, you know, doesn’t drink.” Joann knows this hurts me and that doesn’t make her feel good. She moves over to the fridge and grabs a bottle of water. She shows me the bottle.

“If Sam comes over, water is on me.” It’s a nice gesture. Hard to see the nice gesture because I’m just thinking about so many things that are not nice. My wife opened a credit card for a community

pool. She uses the card for drinks for the people she has sex with at the pool. I specifically told my family to not engage with the snack bar.

“Mr. Yatsko!” someone calls out. It’s Ethan. He is running towards me holding a sandwich. His shirt is covered in vomit. The type of life he leads is pedal to the medal, Jon Belushi kill yourself speed, but with a conservative bent. He is running to me and only me and that is so cash money. I don’t know what to say, so I say, “Hollywood, baby,” and I mean it.

He reaches me. “Mr. Yatsko, look.” He shows me the sandwich he is holding. I’m waiting for that cool-slash-concerning Ethan twist to kick in, because right now I am looking at a sandwich. He looks pretty jacked up on this sandwich. I am nervous because Ethan likes making edible things inedible, then tricking people into eating the now inedible thing. Ethan has gotten me to eat a lot of stuff that can’t be digested. Again, he’s a fuckin’ main number one alpha type guy.

“Pretty cool sandwich, Ethan,” I say. “Should I be ready to chow down, or should I let someone else chow down, if you catch my drift.”

Ethan is not amused. “You made this,” he says. He points a little finger at me.

I look at the sandwich again. It looks good, but, I dunno. That looks like a professional job. I shake my head.

“Love to take credit for this, but I can’t. That’s a pro’s work. Also, I made a feta wrap at home this morning. You know my policy. I would never want to say you are wrong, but... sorry bud.”

Ethan looks like he is in a stone cold panic. He looks like a fucking mess. I’m starting to think his little vomit shirt is not so rockstar.

“Ethan, you got a tummy ache? What’s that vomit about?” I try to keep it light.

“You fed me! You fed me sandwiches. You fed me all your sandwiches. And, and, and then you drowned. And then, you – it’s a kitchen--”

Man. Ethan is a certified mess. A complete shitshow. This is tough. He is clearly having a mental breakdown. He is rock star, but it’s like, sad rock star. And everything I remember about sad rock star movies and real life stuff, when they get down like this, you have to give them alcohol.

“Ethan, I have one black cherry seltzer left. It’s my favorite flavor. I want you to have it.” I put my hand on his shoulder. He’s not budging. He grabs one of the sandwiches and hands it to me.

“Take a bite, Mr. Yatsko. Please.” He wiggles the sandwich in my face.

“Ethan, I need you to take a bite first. You seem to be in a lot of mental pain, but I can’t let you prank me.”

Ethan takes a quick bite, never breaking eye contact with me. He swallows, and opens his mouth to show me the food is gone. Okay fine. I pull the sandwich up to my face. The spot where he bit from smells like cigars and dirt. I take a bite.

“What does it taste like, Mr. Yatsko?” He asks me. I don’t have to think about it much.

“It tastes like a seasonappropriate turkey sandwich.” I shrug my shoulders. Ethan steps closer to me. “When has anyone made you a season appropriate turkey sandwich?”

I don’t have to think much, but I also don’t have much to say. The only person who can make a season appropriate turkey sandwich is me. These are my sandwiches. But they can’t be.

Ethan is nodding at me. I am shaking my head.

“I couldn’t have made these sandwiches today, I mean. I was sober when I made the feta wrap. I came here. I started to party a little--”

“You fell asleep--”

“--I fell asleep. Then Samantha was lesbian and I said some stuff to Myles--”

“You drowned--”

“--Yeah I drowned and then I got woken up, then I told Samantha to stop being a lesbian, then I went on a date with Joann at her place of work, and now I’m here with you.”

“You fell asleep. You drowned. I saw you make sandwiches. You fed me sandwiches. I saw you asleep. I saw you drown. I--”

His panic rises and then clears as if a person could shoot panic out of them like a load. He looks at me, ready to deal some logic.

“The first batch of sandwiches didn’t taste very season appropriate.”

I answer before I can really think about the question.

“Yeah but that’s because we ran out of ingredients and forgot to put in the order--”

I stop. No. That’s not even--

That’s something else. That’s a dream. That’s my dream. That’s--

That’s--

That’s--

That’s--

That’s--

That’s--

That’s--

That’s--

The world is super confusing and I am having no clear thoughts. If I was ever holding a sandwich it fell to the ground what feels like ten hours ago. I feel Ethan’s hands on my forearms.

“Mr. Yatsko, you have to follow me right now.”

I am not walking. I am being guided. Led. I am being led through the regular pool people. I can barely see faces, we are moving so fast. If I had one of those fitness trackers it would be loving me right now. All I’m catching are smells: the sandwiches,

sunscreen, pool smell; someone has a pine nut hummus and I could not be more jealous.

Ethan opens the metal gate. We leave the pool area and move through a grassy park area. This is where Ethan finds bugs and eats dirt. This is Ethan's playground. This is where the magic happens.

We are moving through frisbee games and dogs grabbing sticks and we finally get to this big tree. Big thick tree. Tall, too. It's not a Sequoia, though. Looks nothing like a Sequoia. But Jesus, this thing is thick and tall.

I look at the leaves and the small red berries falling of the tree. I shake my head. Pepper tree. Absolutely terrible trees. They kill every other tree that wants to grow around it. And you can't kill them. The roots go down far and move out. A regular pepper tree can have roots that end a football field away from the trunk. This is the biggest pepper tree I have ever seen. The roots must touch everything in Chubbuck. Maybe beyond Chubbuck.

Right where the trunk sets into the ground there is a big hole. Big enough for Ethan to walk through without bumping his head. All things being held even, my height is regularly hovering around 6'7". I'd smash my abdomen right on the top lip if I were to try and walk through that little hole. I don't think that's what we are going to do, but I'm intrigued. The hole is dark. Black. Maybe someone came in and threw a coat of paint on the inside of this tree for some type of special effect.

But standing in front of it, how I feel, I dunno. It's like, have you ever driven by the hospital where you were born? And like, it's just a building, you know? But it's not. Whatever.

Ethan turns around to look at me. "Come walk with me through the hole in that tree."

There is a palpable tension in the air right now, but this is absolutely a rock star moment, and I am glad to know Ethan. Ethan and I are about to plow straight into a dark tree hole.

We both walk toward the tree. He hops right into the hole and sure enough I smash my abdomen right on the top lip. I talk a big game, but sometimes I am as stupid as people in this town say I am. But I collect myself, bend over, and shuffle into the tree hole.

It is black. Pitch black. Nothing. It also feels like nothing. I put my hand up by my face and can't see it. You would think that I would be very tense and ready for some type of combat, but I am not. I'm actually very relaxed. For all I know, I'm part of this black space. I'm black. Not a Black guy, but black. It's nice. Not thinking about it too much, I think it would also be great to be a Black guy. Seems like it could be fun. With anything, there are probably some things that you don't realize until you get there, but I think being a Black guy would go well for me.

I hear Ethan call out for me. "Mr. Yatsko? Where is your kitchen? Where are the sandwiches?"

"You brought me here, so you probably know better than me, bud."

He seems far away. "Ethan, buddy, I think we should get out of here," I say.

"No, Mr. Yatsko--"

--Bud, let's go. We thought you had a big metaphysical breakthrough. We thought you transcended reality. But I think maybe you just got a concussion and forgot you made sandwiches or something. Now we are in a tree and I'm a little concerned."

"Mr. Yatsko, I swear. I came in here. I saw your big metal kitchen. You were making sandwiches."

"Bud, I'm not fighting you. I think maybe you had a lucky guess. Maybe it wasn't even lucky. I'll give credit to you. It's solid dream guessing. But I gotta get you and I out of this tree. Come towards my voice area."

I start making a series of beeping noises at the same volume. It is what I assume echo-location is. I've never tried echo-location

with Ethan. I tried it with Gabe once. I thought maybe there was another form of communication he would excel in or something. I beeped at him for 10 minutes. He started beeping back to me. He didn't get it. Huge waste of time.

But once I started beeping I could tell the geometry of the darkness started to shift and Ethan's presence was coming closer. After 20 seconds I felt him grab my hand. I take him by the hand and shuffle backward in a perfect line. I don't normally pull any shenanigans when I walk. I walk forward. No funny business. So I figured if I walk backward the same path I walked forwards we'll get out of the tree. So we shuffle backward for a bit of time and we are out of the tree in a couple minutes.

I'm looking at Ethan. Poor kid. He probably smacked his head trying to do something cool and now he's confused. He probably wandered around Chubbuck trying to find his way back home, stumbled into someone's house and started making sandwiches for me to try. And he's so goddamn good at debating that whoever owned the house probably got made to look like an uninformed asshole. I mean, that's Ethan. That's his brand.

But the whole concussion thing is tough. At some point, every man in America has to deal with the reality that we have lasting brain damage. We go to the grave early, covered in piss because we can't keep it together. Ethan is human.

"Mr. Yatsko, I know what I saw." Ethan says, trembling.

"I know, bud. Let's just get you back to the pool area." I put my arm around his little shoulder and we start walking back. Ethan is lost in thought. Or lost in the idea of trying to make a thought. After a couple more blows to the head, he'll be like me and have to remind himself to blink and swallow. Best part about not automatically blinking is you get to decide when you've had enough looking at something. I'm not super great at drawing connections anymore,

but I think this has something to do with my constantly increasing sun staring records.

Ethan stops walking. "You were asleep two times today."

"Yeah, bud. I was. That's some good memory. Passing out is a kind of sleep, but I think we should look at this as a big win for your brain." I turn around and keep walking. Man, if Ethan is going to be doing low-bar conversations like this, this summer is going to suck. How many times did I sleep? This is what we talk about now? Jesus.

I realize that I am not holding Ethan's shoulder anymore. He is gone. Right when I think to turn around and check to see if Ethan is behind me, I feel something hit my head. It must have hit me hard because I am falling straight to the ground and I don't really have a say in that.

SEVEN

O kay. I'm back in my airport kitchen. I don't even get to punch in when Ethan is right next to me, panting.

"This is your dream, Mr. Yatsko." Ethan says. He has a good energy about him.

"I hit you in the back of the head with a rock. You went to sleep. I went back through the tree. I'm here now." Ethan is looking around the kitchen. He's got some juice now. Lot of juice. Lot of pep. Dream Ethan is clearly not concussed.

"Ethan, I could probably talk to my boss and see if you can get a job here or something. I mean, you are nine, but I don't think we have super locked down child labor laws at this airport."

Ethan doesn't bother to look at me. He's pacing around looking at every corner of this kitchen. "I'm not going to work here. You are not going to work here anymore." He stops moving. He looks at me.

"You still don't get it." He gets this look that I've seen tons of times on hundreds of people who look at me. It's a frustrated, twisted look that can only mean I am somehow fucking something up for them.

But with Ethan its different. I'm not some shitty painting to walk away from, I'm a puzzle to be solved. He gives me that look and then goes right back to digging for whatever he is digging for. Something that I will understand and make him able to be freed from whatever prison I accidently put him in.

His eyes go wide like a quick flash of lightning, then go back to that dead logic based stare. He's got it.

"What is something here that you can't ever find when you wake up?"

My first thought is "a sense of purpose" but that's hard to measure and is pretty sad. We are two fast paced Hollywood show-

stoppers right now so I want to keep that vibe. So I think about a second thing.

I got it. I walk to Marge's office. I look inside. Empty. Empty as in no Marge. I'm not trying to say that Marge makes a room full. Marge is great, but that would be an intense thing to say about a person. Marge's computer screen has a Google search page up.

"Make sexc wlrk with shrt dck fat pussy lipss"

Man. She wants me bad. But I go into her side desk drawer and after some digging I find a small tin can. Exactly what I am looking for. I come back to Ethan.

"These are Sour Altoids from the early 2000s. They are a mix between a mint and something fruity and sour. I get one Sour Altoid if I do something that Marge likes. I haven't picked up the pattern for what is good or bad, but I'm getting them every so often so I must be doing something right."

Ethan looks me in the eyes. He makes sure I am paying attention.

"Sour Altoids. From Marge's desk drawer. Sour Altoids. Sour Altoids, that came from Marge's desk drawer. Got it?"

"Yeah, I mean I'm the one who told you all of this so I get it, I think."

Ethan grabs the Sour Altoids from my hand, turns around and bolts for the door. I reach out to grab him and miss. Shit. Marge is going to lose her shit if those are missing. And I'll never get rewarded for doing anything good anymore. Jesus. I love Ethan, but he has destroyed three of my dreams and put my airport job in serious jeopardy.

I try to get back to making sandwiches, but everything disappears. I wake up.

I'm lying on my back looking at the sky. My stomach hurts. Not my tummy, which is the inside of your body, but my stomach. The outside. I see a brick laying on my side and put it all together. I hear

some crawling to my other side and Ethan's face pops up in my eyeline.

"What do you remember of your dream?" He says.

"Let me get a second, bud. I think something is really busted inside me. How hard did you throw the brick?"

"As hard as I could. I had to wake you up."

"Okay. Did you try waking me up another way?"

"No. But you're up, correct?"

"Touché." I spit up a little blood.

Ethan's in no joking mood. "What do you remember of your dream?"

"Bits and pieces. I remember going to a computer and seeing that someone googled 'Why is Jerry's dick so big.' I know that's inappropriate but I thought it was super weird and interesting."

"What does Marge give you if you've done a good job?"

Oh shit. I totally remember. And my face must have said it because Ethan said nothing. He reaches into his pocket and puts whatever he pulled out into my hand.

I look at the tin can and see the label. The letters were a little warped. But barely noticeable. I open the tin can and pull out a little candy. It is sour and fruity but also kind of minty. I love the taste but could also understand why Altoids stopped making them.

"Good job," Ethan says to me.

Huh. I have a no shit dream portal. I would be amped out of my mind if I was somebody else but I'm not. I'm me. I'm a meat and potatoes kind of guy. I have pool chairs and hard seltzers and all of that is here. And honestly, I think bringing back Sour Altoids is like playing God.

"Ethan I don't think I can stand up just yet. Can you run to the pool and get me a hard seltzer?"

I turn to look at Ethan. Ethan is standing over me with a brick raised over his head and--

Okay, I am back in a dream. I turn to look at the door because I assume Ethan is going to pop through.

He does.

“Ethan, buddy, you gotta find another way to make me go to sleep. You can’t keep throwing bricks at my head.”

Ethan doesn’t care. I wish he would care about this, but if he started caring about this he wouldn’t be Ethan.

Ethan is less impressed with my airport kitchen than he was the other three times. “This is your dream. You control this.”

I stop him. “Hey, respect Marge, bud. She’s a single mom who is doing her best. And I’m constantly fucking up. More so lately.”

Ethan is up in my grill now. As much as he can be. I’m six feet, seven inches. “You made Marge. You made this. This is your dream.”

I look around. Huh. Now that I really take a second look, every part of everything I am seeing is somehow related to something I’ve seen before. The kitchen is similar to this kitchen I see on this Netflix cooking show all the time. The pictures on the walls are from this hotel I stayed at in Idaho Falls when my childhood house flooded. Every cooking utensil is from a SkyMall catalog I keep in the bathroom.

Marge, now that I’m really having a moment to really think about everything, kind of looks like Joann? Like Marge is kind of a repurposed Joann? Like I got some crazy repressed sex stuff with Joann? Or maybe I project Marge onto real life Joann?

I mean, all these questions are great, but I haven’t made a single fucking sandwich. I’m behind, and pretty soon I will be fucked if I don’t get moving.

“Ethan, I may need you to put on an apron and help out. I’m far behind, and you threw two bricks at my head. One in the front and one in the back. My brain has got no shot. The least you can do is make a few sandwiches.”

Ethan steps in front of me and the make table. “You don’t have to do any of this. You created all this. You can create so much more, Mr. Yatsko. Think. About anything. Anything you have ever wanted. You can make it here. Think.”

I am looking at him and the make table. Sandwiches got to be made, but Ethan has a point. If this is my dream I created all of this. I even created the pressure of making sandwiches. It makes me kind of God-like.

I think for a little bit. I think about things I want. Something gets really clear in my head and before I can even put effort into thinking super hard about it, I feel it in my hand. I rest it on the make table.

Ethan quickly turns around. “Ethan,” I say holding a bottle. “Have you ever had Famous Dave’s Chipotle Mayo?”

Ethan looks at the bottle and looks at me. “Every time I try to get this at the store it’s gone. I’ve been trying ever since they put it in bottles and started selling it at stores. I’ve had it in the restaurant. But I bet it’s better in the bottle because when you go to the restaurant, you gotta be at the restaurant and find parking.”

I stare at the bottle. “Damn,” I say. “I can’t believe I have a fucking bottle of Famous Dave’s Chipotle Mayo.” I unscrew the bottle and break the safety seal. I get out some fresh bread and throw some of the Chipotle Mayo on one slice. I make a standard sandwich stack on the other slice of bread. I rest the Chipotle Mayo slice on top of the stack. I press a little so the Chipotle Mayo shows on the side. Then I wrap it up, put it in a plastic container and set it in the display refrigerator.

When Marge sees that our sandwiches have Chipotle Mayo now, she is going to forget all about the ways I wronged her.

It’s crazy, but Ethan looks upset with me. Normally I take a five-to-10 minute break between sandwiches, but I figure I should roll into the next one fast, as to set a good example for Ethan.

“Mr. Yatsko. You could change the world. You could change your life. You are invincible. You just have to think about it.”

“I hear what you are saying, bud. And I can see it from your perspective. From your perspective you probably think, what, I can dream up a big house and then get that house out of my dream and now I have a real no shit big house? That would be great right? No, it wouldn’t. Even a pre-built house with no mortgage has expenses. And upkeep. Also, you want to get a house like that insured? You want to pay property taxes on that big dream house? This is what dreaming does, Ethan. There are consequences. But this,” I point to my bottle of Famous Dave’s Chipotle Mayo, “this is harmless. And good.”

“Mr. Yatsko, you could get really strong and beat the living shit out of people.”

“Like my next-door neighbor Ken?”

“Yeah.”

I stop making my airport sandwich. I’ve decided to get really strong and beat the shit out of people. I’m going to get super jacked and have Ethan wake me up. If all goes according to plan, I will be jacked, and then I will take an Uber to Ken’s house and beat the living shit out of him. And then I’ll make him move all his shit out of my garage. And then I’ll beat him again.

Then, I dunno. I’ll probably go back to the pool and hang out for a bit. Between two Uber trips, two fights, and cleaning my garage (anytime anyone moves something out of a garage there is going to be dust. I am blocking off a solid hour of sweeping dust after Ken moves his stuff.), I’ll probably want to unwind. I mean just that is a full weekend.

I’m pivoting. You have to do that sometimes.

“Alright, Ethan, stand back. I’m about to become a killing machine.”

I close my eyes and really think about strong bodies harder than

I ever have before. After some debate I settle on Tom Holland's Spider-Man body. I almost went with Michael Phelps. Google how much that man eats in a day. If he can't kick Ken's ass, he could eat him. But after that, I'm stuck with Phelps' body for everyday stuff. Phelps looks like a freak. I'd feel like shit.

No. You go with Tom Holland Spider-Man body 10 out of 10 times. First, he is Spider-Man. Watch one Spider-Man and tell me he is not kicking Ken's ass. But then after that, I'm just some like, guy with abs? I throw on a t-shirt and I'm good to go. I can be casual. But I'm also fucking Spider-Man.

When I open my eyes I can tell I am about 11 inches shorter. Doing the math, my thoughts must have worked: Tom Holland is 5'8" and I am 6'7". I am Tom Holland's height. I also feel much lighter and I can feel my abs.

Just to be sure. I close my eyes and think for a little bit and when I open them I have a dry-cleaned Spider-Man costume in my hand.

"Ethan, lay this next to my body and then wake me up. Don't hit me with a brick though, okay? Let's take this killing machine on a little test run."

Ethan bolts out the door. A few seconds later the kitchen disappears.

EIGHT

I am up, choking. It appears that Ethan stuck a handful of dirt down my throat to wake me up. I feel bugs. Rocks. This is terrible. I look at Ethan. He's got a frown on his face.

"You got the Spider-Man costume?" I ask. He nods. I grab it and go to the bathroom to change.

I get into the smallest stall and get butt naked. Maybe it's the excitement of everything but I don't feel 68 inches. I feel about 79 inches, which is what I normally am. Also, the costume doesn't fit. The only thing that is wearable is the mask. My head is normally the size of a 68-inch guy. But once I put on the mask I have trouble seeing downward out of the eye holes and now I can't find my underwear or shirt. I think in the frenzy someone may have come in and stole my stuff. Damn. Oh well. You just have to put your head down and keep moving.

Before I bust out of the community park bathroom to kick ass I catch a look at myself in the mirror and, well, I do not have a Tom Holland body. I just look like regular me with a Spider-Man mask. I'm just butt naked Jerry Yatsko with a Spider-Man mask. But I keep with the plan, with slight modifications.

Am I going to Ken's? No. I'm not 100% confident that I am a killing machine. Need to be 100% to throw down for two Uber trips. But I am going to fight someone. Could be anyone, but I need to see that I have the acrobatic and raw physical strength of Tom Holland's Spider-Man. I'm not stressing about what the body looks like. A lot of what is great about Tom Holland's Spider-Man is that it's more about his heart that wins him his battles, and maybe that part carried over.

I come to the community pool in a dead sprint. I slip a little on the wet concrete and the pool gate has a latch that I forgot about, so

I bang my knee on that gate door pretty hard. I'm a fucking mess. But I haven't lost confidence. When you put on the mask, you are Spider-Man. Whether you like it or not. And I like it.

I know where I want to go to test my strength. Next to the teen center is the IT Closet. There is no IT at this pool anymore so that closet has become the place where my wife hosts her daily healing parties. I can already smell the champagne and strawberry KY lube that I thought I bought for myself a while back. Turns out I was buying it for someone else.

I kick open the door. Light door, man. I don't know why you would ever make a light door. Go heavy. Anyways, the light door opens and there is my wife. Healing. I don't know how both of them are still holding their champagne flutes with everything going on, but it's demoralizing. I hold drinking glasses with two hands when I drink. And the times that I've had sex, I was not even considering taking a drink. But these two, flutes in hand, in each other like something else. And there's a real playfulness and earnest connection between the two of them that makes me want to let a car back over me multiple times.

So the guy who is being made love to by my wife is a little bit of a celebrity. Kind of. Honestly it's hard to explain how much of a celebrity he is without it sounding insulting. Currently, he runs a fairly decent sliding glass door repair business right on the edge of town. But you probably know him better as the first rhythm guitarist for Daughtry back in 2007. He left the band after a couple months because he saw my wife in the crowd at a show in Salt Lake City and wanted to devote all his time to trying to get with her. Thirteen years later, he did it. Even though he is fucking my wife right now in front of my eyes, I am going to respect his privacy. We'll call him "John Doe".

He finally notices me. "Michelle, Jesus, get Jerry the fuck out of here. I'll go soft if he stays." Michelle at this point has had enough

of me. She slips off John Doe and starts working toward me. I get into my Spider-Man stance. I feel some of my pubic hair unknot when I squat down and it catches me off guard.

So, I guess I stand corrected: There is one server in the IT Closet. Can't make out the hardware manufacturer because John Doe threw it pretty hard at my face. I wait for the Spidey Sense to kick in. It does not. That server trucks my head. I stumble back but stay on my feet.

Looks like I'm going to have to be on the defensive. I quickly do a Spider-Man back handspring, hoping to catch the wall. From there I might take a running start along the wall, and spring kick off the wall and catch John Doe by surprise. Who knows.

Right from the get-go I see that's not going to happen. My back handspring ends with me folding my neck against the ground and my entire body weight collapsing on one side. I hear a big pop in my neck and my legs go pretty numb. I know I'm butt naked except for the mask, but I try to shoot a string of web from my arm outside the room towards a cement pillar that holds up the awning that surrounds the pool. I figured, what the heck, maybe I get a string and I escape.

No go on the web-shot. All that comes out of me is a hollow, tuba-like fart. At this point, John Doe, who is fully butt naked, straddles my torso. I feel his half-erect dick flop down on my stomach. He then proceeds to really punch the shit out of my face. Other than the costume, I think I didn't get much Spider-Man in me. Eventually, everything goes black.

NINE

I am back in the airport kitchen and that doesn't surprise me. John Doe had seven or eight clean shots to my head. I'm surprised he didn't kill me.

I use my mind to dream up a whiteboard so I can start writing some shit down.

Can't change your body

CAN get items out of dream (Spider-Man costume, Altoids)

I hear the door open behind me. Ethan comes up by my side.

"They put your body in Pool Jail so it will be hard to wake you," Ethan says.

Pool Jail is an interesting. Pool Jail is the container where they at one point kept all of the water aerobics equipment. It's about six-by-three and sits on the ground by the vending machine. Pool Jail was established early this summer when, if someone got a little out of hand, they could be put there to cool off for a bit. In general I think things like Pool Jail are good. It's like, let's keep the courts and cops and lawyers out of some stuff. Let's all work together and establish norms and consequences.

So far I am the only person who has been put in Pool Jail. I don't think it's a coincidence, but again, I'm not against the spirit of Pool Jail. I think every community area should have some type of jail or prison system close by or on the premises. What I don't like is the execution of Pool Jail. I mean, point number one is, hey, how about we see anyone else go into Pool Jail? We (really me) need to see that this system was not designed for one man. My other critique about Pool Jail could easily apply to regular jail in that it is hard to cool off in Pool Jail. Emotionally and physically. They close the lid and leave the container in the hot sun. You are not cooling off, you are practically baking. So when you get let out, you come out even more

upset, and guess what, people don't like your new attitude and you get thrown back in there.

Also, it feels like Pool Jail is based less on what you did, and more about what people feel about you. It's a popularity contest. All the most popular people at the pool never get put in Pool Jail, but I get put in Pool Jail all the time. And sometimes I fall asleep and wake up in Pool Jail. Again, if we had some structure and understanding of how a guy ends up in Pool Jail, believe me, I would be the number one fan of Pool Jail.

Last, it's hard to breathe in Pool Jail. They cut small holes in the container, but they cut them on the bottom, so even if you get your mouth on the hole, you're sucking concrete.

"We'll handle that later," I say to Ethan. I point him towards the whiteboard. He looks at it, nodding.

"At no point did you gain anything that resembles Tom Holland's body from the *Spider-Man* movies?"

"Absolutely not," I say. "But, I mean you saw, I had the Spider-Man costume."

Ethan moves to the board. He writes something else.

Time in dream! = time in reality

"I put my phone on stopwatch before I entered the tree last time. When I was speaking with you, I was also counting in my head. As I suspected, the time spent in the dream was longer than the time in reality. By a significant portion. We can use this to our advantage."

I take it all in. It's big stuff.

"Nice thinking, E-Man. By the way, when you count in your head," I say, "Do you have to picture the numbers to keep focus on what number you are on? Or do you just say the numbers in your head?"

"When I'm in here?" Ethan asks.

"Either-or. Just in life I guess. And if you say the numbers in

your head, are you actually saying them? Like do you hear your voice?”

Ethan puts his hands up and shakes his head a little bit, like my question was a dish he had no appetite for.

Ethan stares at the whiteboard, and back at me. I look at the whiteboard. It’s all interesting stuff. If I was with anyone less motivated than Ethan, I would just dream up some hard seltzers whenever I ran out of hard seltzers. Maybe dream up a Bluetooth speaker. I’d have to borrow someone’s phone to play music, but man, it would be worth it. Music off a Bluetooth? Get out of here.

But we’re trying to do something bigger. “What if we just had everyone we wanted to fight come in here?” I ask. “Then I could just dream up something that could beat the crap out of them. Like a bear.”

“What if the bear attacks you, or me?” Ethan asks.

“I would dream that the bear was our friend. And that we’re actually all bears.”

I close my eyes. Ethan claps his hands next to my ears. I open my eyes. We look at each other.

Phew: I almost made us bears. Ethan sucks his teeth.

“I want to avoid bringing people here because then our weapon is your brain and I don’t like our chances,” Ethan says. “I want to keep this space as a brainstorming session area. And, because of the time relativity, our brainstorms have more value. They last longer.”

Ethan is right. Once someone comes in here to fight, that would be a lot of pressure on me to think correctly. And I haven’t done that yet, in life. Also, it’s nice to have a place for just Ethan and I to chill as men. Once the chill spot becomes the fight spot, it’s never the same.

Ethan goes back to looking at the board. He puts his hand on it. He breathes deep. “We can’t change your physical appearance. But

can we change your mind? Can we change what your mind knows how to do?"

He nods at the whiteboard. He turns to me. Before he speaks, he slightly jumbles his head around, like he has to physically move the words in the right order. "Make a DVD player."

I close my eyes. When I open them, I rest an XBOX 360 on the sandwich make table. "An XBOX 360 can play DVDs." Ethan grabs the XBOX 360 and plugs it into an outlet the make table shares. It works. "I'm not sure if we have internet access here. And I don't know how you would dream up the internet."

I shrug. I have no idea how the internet does stuff, or what it is.

"I have to run to my house to get the DVDs. It may seem like a long time for you in here, but it will take about five minutes, tops."

"What DVDs?" I ask.

"Instructional ones," Ethan says. "I'll be back." And he sprints out the door. Silence, except for the hum of the make table surging with power. I look at the XBOX 360. Man, Gabe used to play games that looked so fun. Guys shooting guns or punching innocent people. But, you know, when you are a parent you have to say that video games are bad and that you should feel bad for playing them. So it's just one of those things that as a parent you can't do even though it's in your house and would bring you happiness. And now that it's in my work place? In my dream? No, I'm still not going to play with it. Do you think Bill Gates plays with an XBOX 360? No way José.

With Ethan gone, I have some time to knock out some grade-A sandwiches. I dream up some more Famous Dave Chipotle Mayo. I even dream up a dill sauce I had once at some farmers market in Boise. The sandwiches look outstanding. Someone is going to come off their plane so pissed about being emergency grounded in Pocatello, but when they have one of these sandwiches they are going to think they landed in a major metropolis. They may even go

to the baggage claim looking for their bags, because they may think they got to their destination!

I'd love to take a bite but that's against the rules. These are not my sandwiches. I'm an employee. If I want one of these sandwiches I can buy one with an employee discount, but I can't eat it in front of airport guests. It's an ambiance thing, and I respect it.

Could I dream up one of these sandwiches? Of course I could. But I would like it less because I didn't work for it. Hard work is better than any dream I will ever have. The feeling of busting your ass at work all day to come home to a microwaved meal you bought with your hard work money? Wouldn't trade it for anything. Honestly, my hope in life is to be lying on my death bed, covered in my own piss and shit and people are moving around from room to room making phone calls to figure out what to do with my body, but I'll have some grandson or granddaughter there and I'll get to tell them how hard I had to work to get all the things they see in my house. Just imagine all those guys who don't really have jobs and ride around on their speedboats all day. What are they going to do on their death beads? Talk to their grandson or granddaughter about me, the guy who worked super hard so they could have all their speedboats? That doesn't even make sense. Those guys are suckers.

With minimal breaks, I get through these sandwiches in a little over a full work day. I break down the kitchen area, do a deep clean, and send Marge an email letting her know that I am taking my Good Boy Altoid for the day. Still no Ethan.

So now I'm just standing here. I did my job. I normally wake up before this point. Like any hardworking person knows, when the job is done, so is the dream.

But this is different. I gotta stay. I have to stay, in the doneness of it all.

The kitchen is a boring place when I'm not working. I don't want to touch anything because I just cleaned the place.

I try going on Marge's computer for a bit. The screen is confusing, and when I want to do anything other than send Marge an email, the computer screen swirls around and changes color. But the light coming off the screen, the burning on my eyes, it's like, yeah: This is a computer.

I look out of Marge's office into the kitchen area where I just was. It's dark. But, and I swear I'm not imagining this, there is a door on the back wall I've never seen before. Not the door Ethan leaves or comes in from. A different door. I can't describe the color, but, gun to my head, I would say the color is important-colored. This is an important door. Without words, it is speaking to me.

I lean back in Marge's desk chair. I look the door in the distance up and down. Before I can think I say, "Time to go home."

I have to pee first. For that I go to the bathroom. I have to pee a lot at work. Most of the time I wake up from these dreams pretty wet and raw from pee. I mean, it is multiple rounds of pee from pee breaks, a one hour-lunch break. But you can't hold in your pee at work. You have to go.

The bathroom at work is basically a carbon copy of my Nana's bathroom. It's got the furry toilet seat cushions that trap the piss of whoever was there first. The bathroom floor is carpet, which is not great for a work environment, but great for an old person's home. Everything smells like ancient piss and my Nana, who also smelled like piss. Everything smells like piss but I'm a sucker for nostalgia. The moment I feel the need for some sign of her, pictures cover the bathroom walls. It's pictures of me and her.

She liked me. I got the stupid idea that every woman was going to treat me like my Nana did. Every girl would play badminton with me and tell me how good I was at finding trash in the forest. That didn't happen. No one plays badminton. For a while I thought she

invented badminton until I saw two Japanese guys playing it at the Olympics.

I look at every picture and I go back to every memory and sometimes it feels like the bathroom changes to be not my work bathroom but my Nana's actual bathroom which makes my heart hurt, but once I get to the last picture I'm ready to wash my hands and leave. I loved my Nana, but I would spend a week with my Nana, tops. At the end of the week I was ready to get home. My Nana was great, but lots of things are great. Today I dreamed up Famous Dave's sauce. I did not dream up my Nana.

I wash my hands and leave the bathroom. I see the important door again. Perfect. I walk toward the door, and the door moves closer to me. The room kind of collapses. I'm concerned about the make table getting damaged in the collapse. I'm going to open that tomorrow and there is going to be a huge fucking mess and what am I going to say? The space occupied by the kitchen got smaller when I looked at a door? Marge is going to beat my whole ass.

The door is right next to me. I touch the door. I don't even have to open it. The world assumes it has been opened.

I am outside.

It's the outside area of Pocatello Airport. Small hills with dirt and black rock. It is what I know, but not, I guess. Instead of brown and endless blue sky, the hills and rocks are shades of purple and blood red. The sky is this endless pink that makes me calm and sad. It all looks like this one poster at the credit union I get my checks from. It is purple and red and pink and it says, "EXPLORE IDAHO." I don't like the poster. It's not Idaho. It's trying to make Idaho something it's not. I get real upset when I'm at the credit union and I voice my frustrations. The manager says it is art. I get it. But it's also a lie.

But in this context, it's not. A lie. It's here and it's real and even though it makes me sad it is beautiful. When I turn my head to look

at other stuff, I can see the edges of where the world isn't built yet, but only for an instant. There is nothing except for what is in front of me. Good. Cool. See it to believe it.

I--Jesus Christ--shift gears on my motorcycle? In all this head turning nonsense I didn't stop to look at my own body. Turns out, my body is wrapped around a full blown Hell's Angels-style hog. I'm head to toe in leather. I can't tell what my jacket says on the back, but if it is my dream, it probably says Sons of Anarchy. Sons of Anarchy is a motorcycle club in a show I like. They do terrible stuff to people and they are racist but they are the good guys and I would die for them. And, brother, you probably would die because the stuff they like to do involves death. In the pilot episode they waste no time letting you know that the main character has a big ol' wiener. Once you watch the show it makes sense.

I'm racing my hog down the 86 highway that splits Chubbuck and Pocatello. I'm heading toward a sun made of yellow and orange pixels. Looking close at my hog, it is also made out of pixels. I pass a cactus. It is made of pixels. So I didn't play video games as a parent, but I did play video games as a child. I played at an arcade and god I loved video games. They were the best and I felt small accomplishments and challenges and I guess in some strange sense it felt nice to interact with art, to live in someone's computerized dimensions. But, you know, we become parents and when that happens no one really should be playing video games.

A big gold coin is in the other lane, 20 feet in front of me. I change lanes. I capture the coin. More coins appear. I capture them. I don't know how I am capturing them, but I hear a little noise every time my bike touches them. I'd love to bring one of those gold coins back to my regular life. Gold is a solid investment. Recession proof. I reach out to touch one of the gold coins with my hand and not my bike. I'm doing maybe 102, 104 miles per hour? Slapping solid gold with my outstretched hand at that speed goes poorly. My

hand goes clean off and I drop my hog on the highway. No sound except for my screaming and the sound of shit slapping against the inside of my leather biking pants. By the time I'm done skidding on the pavement, it looks like I have a newborn-style blowout. Shit and gravel running up my back. I take off my jacket. It does say "Sons of Anarchy" and it also says "Prospect." I was right. I wish I wasn't: the life of a gang member is tough. I know this because I've watched *Sons of Anarchy*. And if I'm in the Sons of Anarchy, they are not going to like that I shit all over my gang uniform. "Prospect" means that I am almost in the gang, but not yet. This may work in my favor: because I am a prospect, they may almost expect me to shit myself. I don't know.

I turn to look at the damage I caused behind me. A trail of fire. It looks extremely cool. The fire is cooking my poo on the highway road and it smells awful.

My bike is ruined, but I don't get a lot of time to acknowledge it. I'm already going. Not walking, not flying. It's just a type of thing I can only describe as going. I am going now.

I look down at my body. Nothing. No shit-stained gang outfit. No blood, no severed limbs. Nothing. I guess when you go, you are gone. I head up the freeway ramp that takes you on Yellowstone Road. I normally head left to go into Chubbuck. But I go right. I am going into Pocatello.

I am going home, I say inside my own head. Which is strange. I don't live in Pocatello. I could never. There is a whole world in Chubbuck. A big food chain and I am some stinky ass worm that sits right at the bottom. But whatever eats everything else in Chubbuck would be the first to get eaten in Pocatello. They are just better. They smell better, they look better. They have schools that want their children to learn. They encourage their children to grow and leave. I knew a Chubbuck guy who went to the strip club right next to the Pocatello courthouse. He saw a naked

Pocatello girl there. Two weeks later? Killed himself. His wife says he went crazy. Saw a Pocatello naked body and knew he would never see something like that again. Wife didn't blame him. No one did. We just all reminded ourselves that Pocatello is too good for all of us.

But in here, I live in Pocatello. If I see a naked body, no big deal. It's just a body.

I'm going down the perfect streets of Pocatello. I see a Red Lobster and a Roadhouse Grill in the same parking lot as a Super Walmart. Everyone is able to park in one parking lot and go to all three. Tucked in between the Super Walmart and a FedEx Kinkos store is a Jamba Juice. Goddamn. This is how the other half lives. A guy in Pocatello can wake up, grab his keys, drive a few minutes, and end up at a whole store whose job it is to make you a smoothie. How do they even get work done? Truth be told, I don't really like smoothies. Have a milkshake. But the fact that it's here is enough. Every 10 seconds I'm seeing another strip mall. Another combo of stores to fill out a weekend. Fred Meyers, Outback Steakhouse, Applebee's. Albertsons, Pei Wei, Café Rio. I mean, what the fuck? Why did we ever bother to think about Heaven? If you want a meal outside your home in Chubbuck, you either eat at the pool snack bar, or you knock on someone's door and ask them if they are cooking something. Sometimes the guy at the credit union has a snack he brought from home and if you ask enough times he'll give you a bite.

I blow past the local college and up the side of the Portneuf Valley. The purple rocks are covered with cool green snow caps. No shit magical trees are alongside the road. Perfectly fluffed with snow and glowing orbs of light. I'm getting an incredible Christmas vibe. I'm ducking through Christmas trees and muscular toned deer and when I start to feel myself slow down I look to see that I have full legs and arms. I am wearing Gap, head to toe. I look great. You

get a big guy like me, and you allow him to wear flannel and boot-cut jeans? Stop it.

My perfect body reaches the ground. It's a soft concrete. It's my driveway. My driveway has two street entrances that form a U in front of my house. I shouldn't have to say anymore: I am rich. There is tasteful concrete everywhere. Smooth, but printed with some type of pattern. The angles into storm drains are small yet effective. There are bushes that I know I have never watered or thought about, because it is someone else's entire job. The windows into my house are the size of entire walls. The gutters are fine. Gutters are hard. I'm not going to ride anyone's ass about the gutters but I can see where they took some shortcuts.

I walk up the driveway. There is a pressing fear at the bottom of my stomach. None of this is as real as I want it to be. The airport kitchen was essentially real. It felt containable and controllable. This? Man, this all feels above my skillset. It all feels like it could go away at any time. Like, this house could become a lizard. Anything I look at, if I look at it a certain type of way, could become a lizard. I look down at my fingers. I pick my least favorite finger (index), and I think about it in a lizard type of way.

It's a lizard now. Goddamnit. My lizard finger is biting my other fingers. It is aggressive. It is choosing to attack. This is why I can't bring people in to fight me. I have no critical thinking skills. You turn your finger into a lizard. What do you think it's going to do? I close my eyes.

Finger. Finger. Finger.

I open my eyes. The lizard is gone. There is a finger where a finger should be. I don't recognize this finger but, it's like, enough fucking around. I start to go again. I go inside my house through an absolute beauty of a front door.

I close the door behind me and there is a satisfying, expensive click on the door system.

“Papa!”

Papa is me. I know it is. A young boy runs around the corner of the entry hall that spits out into the center of my shit hot mansion. Marble pillars. Breathtaking views. Art, like actual art, is on the walls. There is nothing on the walls that says “Bless This Home” or “Love Lives Here” because we don’t need it. We don’t need to be blessed. We don’t even need love. We are rich.

My son looks ethnic. But it’s ambiguous. I call out to him. When I do, my voice is different. It’s not mine. It, like my son, is also ambiguous.

“Besos para mijo,” I say. And I give him some ethnically ambiguous kisses on his face. He is my beautiful hijo. I would kill for him. He has a fire in him, just like his papa, who is me. I know all of this even though I am seeing him for the first time.

“¿Dónde esta mama, Chochi?” I ask Chochi. I don’t know what the fuck Chochi means but I said it. Based on the voice I hear out loud when I speak, I’m starting to get an idea of who I am right now. I go to a mirror that is resting on a marble side table just off the front door.

And yeah. I knew it. Jon Seda from *Chicago PD*. Jon plays Antonio Dawson, a by-the-book detective whose arm you really gotta twist to engage in serious police brutality. But it gets twisted every episode because in every episode, there is police brutality. That arm gets twisted enough that you start to think, “I think this Antonio Dawson likes engaging in police brutality.” And if you don’t want to watch police brutality, too bad, Antonio Dawson is also on *Chicago Fire*. Great show. Everyone is sexy and could die at any time. Chicago seems terrible.

But I’m Jon Seda. I mean, I’m me. But I’m Jon Seda. Most importantly, I’m a father to Chochi. I take his hand and I let him lead me to his mama.

I can’t help but notice how fucking thick the baseboards are on

this house. I love it. Big, Jesus, I want to say beige, baseboards. Not recessed, no; these baseboards are the main attraction. I bet if I turned the corner too fast coming into one of these bedrooms, and I stubbed my toe, I would die.

“Mijo, mira the baseboards,” I say.

“I know papa,” Chochi responds. It’s not sarcastic or off putting. The kid is saying, yeah, I know these baseboards are top notch. Chochi is my dream son and I feel he is beating out Gabe in the power rankings. I wish Gabe could meet Chochi. Chochi is a blueprint for how a son should be. Gabe is being who he wants to be, and I’m not saying that’s wrong. I’m saying he’s wrong. Gabe, the person, is wrong. If Chochi said, “Papa, I want to be me.” That’s not only good, that is right. Gabe shouldn’t be some big titted graceful swimmer. It looks great, but so what? What happens when he doesn’t have access to water? Gabe is limited. Chochi is unlimited.

The hall spits out into the kitchen slash living room area. Huge open space. Exposed rafters. The house goes from marble to exposed wood pretty quickly. That’s not great. I know this is my dream, but I’m thinking maybe they expected people to wind their way into the kitchen slash living room, not to go directly to it from the main entrance. No one told Chochi that. Chochi led my ass right to the kitchen slash living room. Massive aura shift.

I see the woman who I am assuming is Mama. My wife. Esposa. She is making a beautiful meal I saw on Food Network once. Tamales. Guy Fieri loved them. Gallup, New Mexico. Home of the Tamale. I’m not saying we are in Gallup, but my wife is making the tamales I saw Guy Fieri eat in Gallup.

Looking at my wife, it’s clear that my wife is Marge. Who is Joann. But she is also ethnically ambiguous like me and Chochi. We’re like wonderful melting pots with cool spices and flavors and nothing is boring. There’s a real jazz about us. Electricity. I’ve never been on a cruise but I’ve heard some of Michelle’s lovers say that

going on a cruise is like stepping off a boat and trying on a different culture. When I say it sounds terrible, but when I heard all the other guys say it, it sounded fantastic.

It feels like that, but instead of being the one on the cruise ship, it's like we are the ones who live in the place where the cruise ships go. The cool stuff you see is ours, you know? It's great.

"Marge, I thought you were a single mom trying to keep it all together?"

Marge looks away from some sizzling pan. "I thought I was, too. Things changed, papi."

Yeah, things sure did.

At some point, Marge takes the food out of the sizzling pan and we have a beautiful, exotic meal for the three of us. We are surrounded by tons of plants that are real and I can look outside to see snow falling. We are on top of a mountain range, looking at another mountain range in the distance. There are clearly problems with the house that need to be resolved, but I have the emotional support from Marge and Chochi that is necessary to take on projects like this. And it's me taking on the projects. I can look at Marge right in her face and eyes and I know she has no intention of passing this work off to some neighbor or guy she met on some website. This is my work. Success or failure, it comes down to me. I mean, I'll probably hire people to do the actual work, but the first meeting where they walk around and do the estimate? They are talking to me. I'm not locked in a room or given money to go see a movie. I matter.

Before we eat, I turn to Marge. "Was I in *Selena*?"

"The movie?"

"Yeah."

"No, Jerry. You were not in *Selena*."

Before I can make myself more clear, I stop. Yeah. I'm Jerry. I

call my kid mijo and my wife mami, because that's just who I am. I'm not Jon Seda. I'm something greater.

So we eat, and I do the dishes (not the pots or cooking items, just plates and cups). We want to all watch a movie, but we can't really come to a consensus. We realized that, hey, we might just want to talk as a family. Nothing serious. Just some light-hearted conversation. I guess we are limiting screen time as a family. I guess it was my idea.

Ethan doesn't show up. I kind of forget about Ethan and everything else and go deep into my family life. Chochi and Marge. When I say deep, I mean length. I guess I also mean depth in terms of profound moments, but I'm really talking about length.

I pretty much do a solid two decades with Marge and Chochi. If I said it was all good stuff I would be lying but man, you could not ask for two better people to be in your foxhole.

First, we actually kept the marble and wood design. We spoke to an interior designer and she said it's kind of a fire and ice thing. Marble cools things down while exposed wood adds a spice to the house. She said yes, the transition is jarring, but it's only because the two are not blended enough. So we threw a marble backsplash into the kitchen and then got some walnut chairs in the entry room. Marge wanted maple and we had a big blow up about it, but it turns out what she thought was maple was actually walnut. Blame falls entirely on me: I kept saying walnut, but I never showed her what it was. I assumed everyone in the house knew their wood. And after two decades with Marge, I know that Marge is a visual person who doesn't do well with names.

I watched Chochi grow into a full-blown man. I coached his Little League games, got him a tutor for math one year, saw some stuff on his computer and disciplined him, everything. I watched Chochi graduate college and not know what to do next. I got to tell him that when I graduated college there were tons of jobs so that's

probably what his experience is too. We got to argue over that. At one point he told me that sexuality is fluid and then he told me the next day that he might sign up for improv classes. He worked through all of that and married a girl named Jennifer from Bakersfield. Marge and Jennifer butted heads all through the wedding. Hard stuff for Chochi. I wanted to help Chochi but I got so goddamn mad when I was told the rehearsal dinner we were paying for was for all out of town wedding guests, not just the wedding party. I really made an ass of myself when I kept shouting “SHOW ME THE FUCKING BOOK OF RULES YOU LIVE FROM” at Jennifer’s parents. It ended up being fine. Also, this is still my dream, so money is not as tight as I think it is.

The wedding was a park wedding which blew my mind. Marge and I are treated like terrorists because we interpreted the rehearsal dinner requirements differently, meanwhile you dropped a hundred dollars to get a park permit? I’ll never forgive Jennifer’s parents. But that’s weddings.

Pretty soon after the wedding, Chochi and Jennifer had a kid, which made me a grandpapi! Cute kid. Loves pointing at a cloud and saying, “Cloud.”

But I don’t want to talk about him. I want to talk about sex with Marge. So Marge still has that big vagina and I still have a busted piece of Easter candy. Can’t change that. Tried! Dreams can never be too good, I guess.

But after a couple years, we found ourselves a workaround. Before this dream stuff, I read a tantra book front to back multiple times at a Barnes and Noble. Never bought it. Spent two solid months making myself available to read this book. Spent full hours at Barnes and Nobles reading the tantra book chapter by chapter until someone kicked me out. Pretty soon it was physical violence as soon as I stepped in the store. And it was all for nothing. I went back to Michelle and told her all this great stuff, and what does she

do? She teaches everyone else about the tantra I learned. I learned the tantra stuff for me to use on her. Not for her to use on the greater Chubbuck community!

But because I read this book so much, I could recreate it in the dream world and read it again. And Marge could read it, too. Chakras are everywhere. You just gotta find them. And we did. Big time. I had to buy Chochi a full surround-sound system for his PS5 so he wouldn't have to hear me and his mother giving each other the good stuff. When you hit three chakras, the sounds that come out are violent. Disgusting. Not in the moment, of course. But if you're a nine-year-old trying to get an online gaming session in, there is no time to hear your parents making those noises. I guess I kind of changed my stance on video games.

I really never went back to work. Just sex with Marge, meetings with contractors, and the occasional sports thing with Chochi. When Chochi made his own family, we replaced sporting events with babysitting their kid.

Big, full life. Then, I dunno. I woke up one day and said I had to go to work. So I did. And I ended up back at the airport kitchen and Ethan was there.

"Were you here long?" I ask. "Just got here," Ethan says. He is holding two armfuls of DVDs.

"Ethan, I've got a beautiful sunken living room where we can watch whatever you brought," I say. I honestly forgot why Ethan is here. It's nice to see him, though. I thought about Ethan having a playdate with Chochi, but then I remembered that Chochi is in his late 20s. Also, I dunno about Ethan and Chochi. Ethan is great but he's also the kind of guy that, you could argue, is bad at his very core. Not saying I won't hang out with him. But having my son Chochi hang with him? Tough call. I lean toward no. I actually lean toward not telling Ethan anything about Chochi. God, huge development on my part. It's been a crazy two decades.

Ethan looks at me confused so I spill the beans. “I am a grandfather, Ethan. Grandpapi. My son is named Chochi. He’s ethnic. I also have a wife who is ethnic. I’m also ethnic.” I catch my reflection on the make table’s stainless steel. I no longer look like any cast members from *Chicago PD*. “I was ethnic, until you showed up.” I didn’t want it to come out like I was mad at him for me not being ethnic. But I was.

Ethan still looks confused. He mumbles some of the things I said to him. He looks around the kitchen. He sees the whiteboard — oh God, that whiteboard — and his confused face goes away.

“Time,” Ethan says. He takes a quick breath. He drops the DVDs on the make table. He picks up one DVD and puts it in the XBOX 360.

“What movie are we watching?” I ask, hoping that it is something light.

“You are watching an intro to Wing Chun DVD my dad bought. He bought a whole series. Twenty-four DVDs, each with six hours of content. The packaging claims that you will be at black-belt level by the end of the series,” Ethan says.

“Did your dad finish all the DVDs?” I ask. Ethan looks at me, cold. “If my dad finished these DVDs, do you think he would be getting divorced?”

Those are facts.

“You are going to watch all of these. You will do all the training. When you wake up, your brain should know how to do all the moves because you trained in your mind.”

I saw *The Matrix*, so I agree with Ethan. This will work.

I spend the next two weeks doing non-stop Wing Chun. Between the DVDs and occasional sparring partners, I get a good sweat in and break down a pretty complicated martial arts style. I also make a couple friends along the way. One of my sparring partners, Chris, actually grew up pretty close to Jennifer in Bakersfield.

He says it's not that crazy because Bakersfield is pretty small, but I dunno, I've never even been to Bakersfield. It's crazy to me.

Ethan doesn't like me having friends. He keeps telling me to kill my sparring partners. When I ask why, he says something along the lines of, "It's important to know the full extent of your powers." So, I guess that's death. I kill Chris. But get this: I actually called Jennifer and asked if she knew Chris, and she didn't! So Chris maybe just knew of Jennifer and got excited when I said I knew someone from Bakersfield. Hard to say, I didn't get to follow up on this because I snapped Chris' neck two revolutions' worth. A 720 degree spin. Chris is dead and is never coming back.

So after two weeks, all my new friends are dead, but I am a no shit Wing Chun master.

Ethan looks at me up and down. My shit looks tight. I mean, I know none of the physical stuff will translate when I wake up, but I let Ethan drink it in anyway. I also point to my head right around where my brain would be as if to let him know, "It's all up here, baby." Ethan nods.

"It's time to wake you up," Ethan says. Before I know it we are back in the airport kitchen and he is running through the exit door. I figure I might have time to go home and towel off, maybe show Marge my new Wing Chun body. If we get through all the xhakras quick enough, I can put a phone call in to Jennifer and let her know Chris is dead.

Everything goes white. There is a terrible sound.

TEN

I wake up, still in Pool Jail. Bad news: I am almost up to my nose in piss. My mouth is not fully submerged, but the current of piss moves over my mouth. The piss does nothing to mask the smell of shit. I must have shit in real life when I shit in my dream. I was in that dream for over two dream decades. It's not two actual decades in real life, but it's enough piss, shit, and cum to throw me for a fucking loop.

The heat alone could have been enough to make me uncomfortable. Not to mention the sound coming from outside the prison. Chaos. Shouting. An alarm is going off. Sounds like a fire alarm, but I can't be sure. The only thing that makes me think it is a fire alarm, is I hear some guy trying to gather everyone up for a fire evacuation. Man, do I feel for that sorry sonofabitch. Fire drills are tough. Tough for me, at least. Which directions are for the group, and which ones are for just me? Also, every fire is different. I don't get why we evacuate to the same spot. What if that spot is on fire? I'm glad I am in here, and not with those sorry fucks!

I swallow a small cup's worth of my own piss. I am choking now. Before I even put thought into it, I do a close quarters Wing Chun punch against the roof of the Prison and it snaps clean off. Fresh air. Everyone is too busy trying to get in the right line single file to notice that their number-one convict is on the verge of escaping.

Nice to know that my Wing Chun punch still has some power in this world. But I dunno. Wing Chun is not about hitting the tops of coolers. It's about people.

I see some people shift in line as Ethan moves between bodies to get to me. "You punch out?" Ethan says. I nod. Ethan nods back,

but like me, I can tell he is not fully ready to trust that bit of information.

“Where is the fire?” I ask.

“There is no fire. I pulled the alarm.” Ethan says. I slap my forehead. Jesus Christ. So, what? All the rules are out the fucking window? Ethan is showing no remorse for this, which is terrifying. I get the dead animal stuff. He’s blowing off steam. But you pull a fire alarm when there is no fire, how does anyone trust anything? I almost think that, for the sanity of the community, someone should start a small, manageable fire so people don’t think all this shit was for nothing.

Ethan can sense my frustration, “No other way to free you. If they saw you break out, and your Wing Chun doesn’t work, you would go right back in and we would have no other moves to make.”

He makes a good point. “We have to make sure you have Wing Chun capabilities. We have to find someone able to spar, but not someone who could inflict significant damage,” Ethan says. He pauses. He nods to himself.

“Gabe,” Ethan says. “It has to be Gabe.”

“No. No dice. If my Wing Chun is hot I could kill him,” I say.

“If it’s not Gabe we have no one else. I’m sorry, but Gabe is the guy.”

“Stop, Ethan.” I say it with a little pepper. A little heat. Ethan looks at me with a new look. I kind of like it. “Just give me a second.”

I do a computer-style rundown of everyone I know at the pool. I watched a lot of movies with Marge that do rundowns. Doesn’t have to be computer-style. Can be a montage of getting a group of people together. Just anytime where people are being accounted for and stats about their skills/weaknesses are put into bullet form. Marge and I love that shit.

Bam. Got it. “Ethan, we gotta go get Dave Yearwood.”

Dave was the guy who got stung by a wasp earlier today. He said he was allergic to wasps, so I said it was probably a bee. But here’s the thing: I knew it was a wasp. I didn’t want to freak him out. Glad I didn’t freak him out. I need him to spar with me now. If I had told him it was a wasp he would have run to the hospital. Then what? Exactly. This is good. And he’ll be great because he’ll be so fucked up from the wasp sting that I’ll be able to work my moves on him. The guy said he was super allergic to wasps. Why would he lie about that?

Sure enough, Dave Yearwood is ten feet from where his pool chair is. He’s trying to crawl toward the fire evacuation spot but he’s having a hard time. I mean, the guy is dying. He’s got a big wet spot on his stomach, around the sting. That tells me he tried to suck it. He must have done a half decent job because he is still alive, but, I dunno. I wouldn’t suck on my own stomach. It’s inappropriate. It’s unnatural. I saw Gabe suck his on nipple once while he was waiting for a video game to load. It was terrible. I went to bed. It was two in the afternoon and I went to bed.

“Dave,” I call out. “Dave, we gotta spar. Get up, you disgusting pig.”

Dave is mumbling something. “Speak up, Dave,” I say.

“I...need...help,” Dave says. I look away for a second to gather my thoughts. A lot of people say it’s good to ask for help. I actually think the opposite. So to hear Dave say this is pretty annoying.

“Dave,” at this point I’m kneeling over him with my hand on his back. “I have a way that you can actually help yourself. A way that is not foul and disrespectful.”

I think that reframe worked because he is crying and allowing me to talk. We go over some specifics about what I need (sparring partner) and I let him say what he needs to make the deal happen (not to die). I tell Dave that I have a couple EpiPens rolling around

the front seat of my car — which is true — and if the sparring goes well I can give him one of the EpiPens for below retail value to help him out with his wasp sting. He says that I said he got stung by a bee, which I didn't. I said it *probably* was a bee. Do you hear this guy? I swear, I can't wait to punch Dave in the fucking head.

Ethan helps me drag Dave out by the dream tree for our sparring session. Dave doesn't stretch, which is dumb. Stretch, fellas. He actually can't stand very well, which makes me nervous.

"I need someone who can at least stand," I say to Ethan. Ethan agrees. We start openly discussing where to put Dave. I think Dave must have gotten it in his head that if he doesn't spar, we won't give him an EpiPen — which is true — so he climbs to his feet and puts his dukes up.

"You have to bow first, Dave," I say. Jesus, I'm fighting a fucking barbarian. Dave bows, then comes at me with full rage, anaphylactic shock arms swinging everywhere.

Although the points were kept by Ethan, I don't think they were necessary: Dave Yearwood got his ass kicked. I have Ethan run to my car to get ONE EpiPen, but honestly I don't know if it is going to be worth it. Dave might die from the beatdown he just took. It's hard to hold back once you see an opening in your opponent. Dave literally let his guard down.

It's pretty clear that my Wing Chun is shit hot. So I guess, what, I just beat the shit out of my neighbor and take my garage back?

Yeah. Sounds like that's the full plan. After that, I'll just keep my Wing Chun on standby until it is needed again. I'm not entirely sure what doors this is going to open for me. In fact, I think it's going to forcefully close some doors. I don't think many people are going to fuck with me anymore, but I also think I'm not going to get invited to party. I don't want to get ahead of myself, but I think about how far I could go as a social media influencer. Idaho Wing Chun Guy. I just don't think it will last.

But who's to say? You have to get on social media first. Then, who knows? You might get lucky, catch fire, and build a strong fan base. But are those your friends? Do I even want friends? Jesus fucking Christ no one said this shit was going to come up when you learn martial arts.

I guess I've just been standing, doing nothing, while these thoughts are going through my head.

"Are you calling an Uber or not?" Ethan says.

Right. The fighting of my neighbor. I call one.

We get a great Uber driver. New to Idaho. Student at Idaho State. Thought Idaho State was Boise State which is a more common mistake than you think. He's pretty bummed, but I got to talk him off the ledge. If you go to ISU, you keep expectations low, but you still get an official college degree. He didn't seem convinced of my logic, but whatever.

We get to Ken's place. I say bye to my Uber driver and pop out. I find a dry patch of grass on Ken's lawn and I have Ethan stretch my hamstrings and hips. I can do my shoulders and neck; I can also do my hammies by myself, but there is something about another person stretching your hammies that gets me feeling right.

While Ethan is getting me loose, I take a look over at my garage. The door is still open, meaning that Ken is within the vicinity. I keep the garage closed because I don't want to encourage anyone else using my garage. But when Ken is around, he keeps my garage open.

I nod my head in anger. Yeah, it's "Ken's garage" right now. But not much longer. I'm going to beat the living shit out of Ken. I'm going to drag his mangled body all over my garage. He is going to show me what all the tools do. He is going to talk slowly and be patient with me. He's going to come up with a lesson plan and there will be a project at the end of it. And when I finish my project, I will show it to Michelle and she will know that I am in charge of the

garage, and if she has any other suitors that want to take pieces of my property, they will suffer.

And then, I don't know. The fantasy has a severe drop off. I am doing my best to avoid the existential hollowness of it all. I keep saying to myself, think of the thrill. The thrill of violence. The justice. THE JUSTICE.

I spring up, hoping to get to my feet. But I only get to one knee. Wait. I see something move in my garage. Very slight, but I saw something. Game time, Ken. I head for my garage.

I am moving with the tactical low center of gravity form that I saw in a commercial about joining the Marines. It works, because when I get up to the garage the shifting noises are still happening. I put my back next to where the wall would meet the garage door and hide.

I still can't see who it is, so I make a quick assessment. It's not Ken. Ken would never sneak around my garage. Also, Ken is big and smells good. I would have seen and smelled Ken.

It must be Ken's son. Spawn of Ken. Ok. Here is where things could get dark, and I could lose my appearance as a good guy.

If it's the spawn of Ken, I'm ready to Wing Chun kick him into my wall. It sucks but it has to be done. Ken is now handing my garage off to his son. That means I can't hand my garage off to Gabe unless he wants to share the same situation that I currently have. No. Gabe must have a life where he is the master of his own garage. And I am the one who must give it to him.

For spawn of Ken, I will say that he caught me off guard, that I didn't know he was a child. That's what I will tell the authorities if the authorities have to get involved. I will make all the right faces and say the right things. I'm almost positive that if the case gets outside of Chubbuck I would walk free.

With that assessment, I spin around to the open garage. I have

my Wing Chun kick cocked and ready to go. I see the target and I'm ready to drop.

Just below my raised leg I can see the outline of a small body. It is not the spawn of Ken. It is Samantha. She has her back turned to me. She is trying to pull out Ken's camping tent from one of the storage racks.

I drop my loaded Wing Chun kick and rest both feet on the ground.

"Hey Sam," I say softly. This scares the living fuck out her. She jumps forward, but jumping forward is jumping right into the storage rack. She hits the storage rack hard. Lucky for her, the tent pops out when she hits the rack and falls to the ground.

She turns to face me. Her eyes are wide, and her mouth is open. After a few seconds, she is silently crying. She slumps down and puts her head between her knees. I get down to her level. Your kids are always your kids, and they seem to always be crying and you just gotta sit there while they do it. So I sit with Samantha.

"Did you go get your water from Joann?" I ask.

"Yeah," Samantha says.

"Good." I let some time go by. Samantha is not crying anymore, but she's not making eye contact. Her head is in between her knees, and she is looking at the ground.

"Did Joann say anything about me?"

"No." Samantha says. God, why the fuck not? I was just with Joann.

"So you just got the water and left?"

"No."

"Okay," I'm trying to be patient but god almighty sometimes teenagers are so useless.

"What else did you do with Joann?"

"She told me that Denver and I are meant to be together. And

that our love is a fairy tale, and she knows it. She told me that we should do whatever we can to stay together.” Samantha sniffs.

Man, Joann is coming out of nowhere with this shit.

“Is this why you are grabbing a tent?” I ask. She nods.

“So you are going to be a lesbian who lives in a tent?”

She goes into a high pitch whine. “I don’t know, but I love her! And she loves me!” Just like that she is back to crying. I pet her head.

Damnit. This got away from me. Two minutes ago I had a fleshed-out plan for a pretty cool, if not fantastic summer, starting with fucking up my next-door neighbor. But, bam, blink of an eye: I have a runaway lesbian daughter.

I’m looking at the tent, wrapped in a little vinyl bag, and I can’t help but feel a little dumb. Based on everything going on in my life, why didn’t I grab the tent? This place sucks. I could have grabbed the tent and left. Everyone would have probably liked that I left. Ken would have probably given men the tent if he knew this was an option.

I guess, I dunno. Jesus, this is depressing: I guess I just think that it’s going to get better. I know I get my dick slapped and my shit wrecked, but there’s a part of me that thinks the beat downs will stop and people will maybe start to like me. In the meantime, I stay for Gabe and his fat tits. I stay for Samantha, so she doesn’t get killed by my wife. I stay for Ethan because he fucking rules.

“You can’t just run away with a tent.” I say. “If you run, you will have to keep doing that. Denver’s dad is going to want Denver back.”

“Well we can’t stay,” Samantha says. “If we stay, we have to be something that we’re not. Even though people hate you, you get to be you.” I don’t say anything back because she’s right. I mean to be fair to myself, I pay an incredible price for being myself in this town, but I get what she is saying. What a mess.

This isn't a Gabe situation. I can make Gabe take off his shirt, so he gets comfortable with himself. I can't make Chubbuck take off its shirt to get comfortable with Samantha.

Wait. "Wait," I say to Sam. For what? I don't know. But there is a seed, somewhere in my head and it feels like it could be something.

"Samantha, go find Denver and go back to the pool in an hour. But not the pool. Go to the park. Find the biggest fucking tree in the park and wait."

"For what?"

"For someone to get you. You'll know it's from me."

Samantha leaves the garage. I look down. I don't know if I grabbed it or she gave it to me, but I am holding the camping tent. Gripping it.

ELEVEN

I am in an Uber with Ethan heading back to the pool. I've got a new type of focus about me. The driver wanted to do small talk and I said, "I've got a lesbian daughter in a crisis," and that was that.

I should mention, I did beat the living shit out of Ken. I left Samantha with a whole new perspective on what my purpose was, but I dunno. I was so close to Ken's house, and fuck Ken. So once I got done with Samantha, I made a hard left to Ken's house and kicked his goddamn door down. I throttled him right in front of his children. I didn't even get much Wing Chun in. It's easy to forget but I am 6'7". I have a massive wingspan. I reached over his kitchen island and grabbed him right off his fucking barstool. Then I just shook him. I shook him for a solid 10 minutes. Had my hands under his armpits, lifted him up off his feet, and shook him. Shook him good. He was out after six minutes, but I wanted an even 10.

The only Wing Chun thing I did was scream "Wing Chun" in his son's ear as I left. His son is going to think that what I just did was Wing Chun. It wasn't. That was pure adrenaline after a painful conversation with my lesbian daughter.

I can't help but feel irritated by my interaction with Ken. That's all it took? Just getting my hands on him? He had my ass kicked and licked for two solid decades. He commandeered property from me. General sex stuff with my wife. He pretended to not have a sense of humor when I was around. I mean, I've got pretty heroic shit to do right now, but I'm going to sort shit out with Ken once I am done. First, I'm going to shake Ken again. I'm going to tell him to come over because I would like to apologize, but I am going to shake him in front of Michelle. Then I'm going to have him clean the garage. Not clean it out, but clean it up. Tidy the garage.

Because, admittedly, I like what he has done with my garage. It's hard to have a concrete vision for a garage space. What Ken doesn't know is that I am keeping everything in the garage for myself. He's gonna throw a huge fit and then BAM, he's getting shaken again. I'm actually going to shake Ken once a month. We're going to get Ken on a shake schedule. It'll be nice.

Michelle is going to see all of this and be so pissed. She'll be at brunch with all her friends and say, "Jerry has realized his strength and purpose and now he is taking back his power," or whatever her and her little rat friends say.

But none of this is happening today. Could be today, if I finish fast, but probably not. I need to create a safety zone for my lesbian daughter and her girlfriend. That takes a crazy amount of curation. I mean, I have to assume it does. I'm not super confident I have a grasp of what the day-to-day of a lesbian is. So I'm supposed to just freestyle curate a wonderland that also serves as protection for my daughter and her lover? No chance. No fucking chance.

No, I'm going to need someone who has a keen insight on what Google has told me are called "marginalized communities." What do these communities eat? Where do they sleep? Where do they blow off steam? I've seen my daughter eat a bagel, but did she want to? Was she just doing it because she was in my house? In her perfect world, are there bagels? I don't know.

I don't think Ethan knows. I haven't discussed it with him. It's a pretty quiet Uber ride back. I can tell he is bummed out by how much time I spent with Samantha. He also probably wanted my ass kicking of Ken to be more dramatic, more Wing Chun oriented. Also, when I looked up "Marginalized Communities," Ben Shapiro popped up pretty quick. And it wasn't because Ben is their number-one fan. And, look I'm not a big politics guy, but I don't think Ben has a lot of lesbian fans.

No, I need someone else. I have the Uber driver take me to the

parking lot where Chase Gastil's SmartCar is parked. I know he is there because this is his lunch break. I normally use his lunch break to try front flips into the pool or to sit in his chair for a few drinks. He uses his lunch break to film himself telling everyone how they are doing everything wrong and how they didn't consider something he just thought of and how by not considering it they are problematic. He's a real jackass but he knows a lot of dances and graphics and he can zoom in with his phone at the right time, so I get why he is leading conversations about civil rights.

And yeah, there he is. He's got a good dance going. Working up a sweat. He is pointing at nothing every so often, but I bet when I see the video, there are going to be words or insults where he is pointing, and it's going to crush.

Ethan starts up. "Let's talk about next steps."

"I know, bud. Lot of moving parts. Next steps. I have to play my cards close to my chest on this one, but you are going to really like it." I say this knowing that he is not really going to like it. But I think I can talk my way out of this one. "Life is chess," I sometimes say.

"If you don't tell me, I will not help you, and I will actively work against you," Ethan says. Fuck. Life is chess and Ethan is a little Russian computer.

I can't lie to Ethan. But I can will myself to believe things are true even though they are mostly not, and I can believe things are going to happen that probably will not happen. So if you believe something is true, even if it's not, it's actually not a lie. It's a pretty neat trick I learned from most organized religions.

"Okay. I am going to lure Chase into my dream. And I am going to fight him."

Ethan gives me a real "Okay, liar" type look. But I feel good about this one. "Chase is the lifeguard, correct?"

"Correct," Ethan says.

“And the lifeguard is in charge at a pool setting.”

“Correct,” Ethan says.

“Now let’s say hypothetically--” I use a classic Shapiroism and Ethan has to fan his face to calm down. “--I physically dominate the lifeguard. Who is in charge of the pool?”

Ethan looks at me like I am stupid, not knowing that I set a logic trap so demoralizing that I could be up for Lil Shapiro’s Logic Grenadier of The Month.

“It’s still the lifeguard,” Ethan says.

“But who is in charge of the lifeguard?” And just like that, Ethan knows I am the running for Lil Shapiro’s Logic Grenadier of The Month.

“Why take him into your dream?” Ethan asks. “Why not beat him in the real world? Why not show your dominance to the larger community? It would be more effective.”

“Effective. Yes. What is effective?” I say. I am stalling. I have no fucking clue. Damn it. How does he take my logic grenade, sit on it, have it explode on his asshole, but come out stronger?

“Wait,” our Uber driver says. “You’re going to fight that teenager? You’re going to go to jail, you creep.”

“Exactly!” I say looking at Ethan. “I can’t fight Chase in real life because I’ll go to jail! How do we take over if I’m in prison?”

I forgot our Uber driver was still in the car, but thank God. Sometimes Ethan and I get so wrapped up in high level logic riddles that we forget that you can’t punch kids in the face.

Ethan nods. “And we also have decent proof that physical changes in your dream don’t carry over to real life. Not perfect proof. But decent.”

“What the fuck?” our Uber driver says. “Are you giving this kid drugs?”

Our Uber driver is suspicious now. We gotta get this plan locked down.

“So yeah. Gotta take him into the dream,” I say. I leave a 30% tip so the Uber driver knows to keep quiet.

“I have to be there, too. To supervise. This is venturing into psyops, my swim lane.”

“No.” I say. But why. Why. Why. Why. Why. Why. Why.

“If you come in, he’ll know something bad is about to happen to him. He knows you are an incredible power. A cerebral power,” I say, gassing him up. This isn’t a lie. Most people have come to realize that wherever Ethan is, some dark, uncouth shit is happening.

“I thank you for the tip, sir, but you have to leave my car. Please. I can’t be near this anymore.” The Uber driver says all of this with his eyes closed. It’s fair. He asked for none of this. I mean, he entirely asked for all of this when he signed up to be an Uber driver but when does anyone ever factor everything into a decision.

Ethan and I pop out of the car. Chase hasn’t noticed us. I motion to Ethan. It’s a “fuck off” kind of motion, but it’s nice. It’s like, “Go Away, but Remain in My Heart.”

Ethan takes a bit of time, but relents and heads towards the pool. Never in my life did I imagine having to juggle Ethan’s needs with anyone else’s. I dunno, this day kind of got away from me. You have a couple drinks, a couple dreams, have some conversations, and then, yeah. Things change.

I let Chase finish his dance. The moment he stops dancing and walks over to his phone to stop recording, I’m up and at him.

“Chase!” I call out. He turns around.

“Just listen for a second,” I say.

“All cis-white males like us need to listen, and for more than just a second, Jerry.”

“Oh fuck off, Chase. No one is here. You get no credit for saying that.”

“You never know who’s listening,” Chase says. He stops. “But that’s not the point.”

“Fine. But I actually need your help. And I know it’s not the point, but you’ll look really good. You’ll get to help some gay people.”

“I mean, okay, but--” Chase is clearly trying not to cum in his pants. “--How do you know these gay people? Like, this isn’t a trick or something?”

“No. It’s not a trick. But I’m gonna need to use the back seat of your car.”

“Why?”

“I need to go to sleep. But once I go to sleep, you need to run to the park and go into the opening at the bottom of the tree trunk.”

“Jerry, what the fuck are you talking about?”

Goddamnit. I slam on his car.

“Chase, just open your fucking car so I can sleep!”

“Jerry, this prank sucks. You are an idiot. I don’t even get the prank. Is the prank that you get to sleep? Is the prank to get me to run to the park? What is wrong with you?”

“IT’S NOT A GODDAMN PRANK YOU LITTLE SHIT. I NEED TO SLEEP SO THE TREE WORKS.”

“You need to sleep so the tree works? Jerry, fuck you.”

“Chase, Jesus Christ,” I look up at the sun for answers. “Chase, if you do exactly what I say and it ends up being a prank, I’ll say the N-word for your TikTok. I’ll say the N-word and you can lecture me. You can burn me. You can cancel me. You can drag me. But--” I step toward Chase. “If this is real, and you realize that it’s not a prank, you can’t tell anyone about what I will show you.”

“Got it.”

“Okay. Open your car. Do you have a shade thing?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay put that on before I go in. And then, could you leave your phone or something so I can listen to a podcast?”

Chase looks like he is going to react, but I put my hands up in a way that says, “Calm down, but also, I’m not backing off my request for your phone.” He gives me his phone. I look for a podcast while he gets his car set up nice for me.

He gets the car settled for me and I climb in. I don’t make it through the intro of *The Bakari Sellers Podcast* before I fall asleep.

TWELVE

C hase clearly didn't sprint over to the tree, so I take off to my dream house and see what's going on with the family. I do some tantric sex with Marge, we whip up a strawberry walnut salad. We learned pretty quickly that you can hardly whip up a strawberry walnut salad. It's time consuming. We do a FaceTime call with Chochi and Jennifer. Their kid is at summer camp and that seems to be going well. Conversation doesn't really go much farther than that.

We hang up and I do let Marge know that my child and her lesbian friend are going to be coming soon, and that my child is also lesbian, and they are lesbian together.

Marge makes it clear that she doesn't want to be anywhere near a gay person. I know this is my dream, but I'm so blown away by this sudden heel turn that I can't get my arms around it. She is laying into me about homosexuality and how it's wrong at a biblical level. At a biological level. She starts going off on research she found about gay people's skulls and, damn, Marge is a full-blown homophobe.

I tell Marge pretty plainly that we gotta get divorced because Samantha is a lesbian and the things she just said it's like, come on. I write a letter to Chochi saying that mom and I are getting divorced because of some irreconcilable differences, but guess what? Before I can hit send, I get a call from him and he is SCREAMING AT ME, saying how I could have possibly thought it was okay to have a "pair of she-faggots" sleep in our home. Damn, Chochi! What the fuck?

So I go from strawberry walnut salad and FaceTime, to scrambling for a divorce attorney. Each one tells me that "I'm so fucked," even though this is my dream. At some point I say fuck it and leave my house. I head back to the airport kitchen.

Chase is there. He is confused as fuck. But fuck him. I bet this will do serious damage to his concept of reality, and you know what? I don't care. I need him for one specific thing and then once that is done, he can fucking kill himself.

I don't mean that. I don't mean that. But Jesus! What a bad day.

"Chase. You are in my dream." Chase can barely make words he is so freaked out. He cries.

"Chase, I'm going to kick you in your chest if you don't get your head straight. This is my dream, okay? I'm asleep in your car right now. You ran into the tree, and you are in my dream now. You are here to help me. This is what I need: I need you to describe things that gay people like. I need you to describe them slowly, and with solid detail. And if it's any difference, they are lesbians."

Chase, to his credit, snaps out of it. Unfortunate: I wanted to kick him. My day is sucking so hard and it would have been nice to kick the living shit out of this asshole. Kick him right in his bread basket. Kick him so hard he hits the wall and farts.

Chase starts by describing a rainbow flag. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. I make a tie-dye pattern flag and he says that's wrong. They have to be straight, solid lines. Fine. A few more tries and I get the lines in order. Okay. We've got a gay flag.

Next, he describes some shirts he saw at Target. They all have the rainbow on them and say things like, "Pride AF" and "Love is Love." Okay. So we have a couple T-shirts and a flag.

I'm looking at these things and I'm thinking about Samantha. I remember when she was in fourth grade, she wanted to do a book report about bees. Loved bees. The teacher was like, "The book has got to be a biography." She freaked out. Michelle was all pissed off and picked up a book about George Washington and made her read it. She cried and cried, and I was like, "So what if she does her report about bees?" Michelle told me to go fuck myself. You know what I did? Nothing. I was afraid of Michelle. Samantha did her

report about George Washington, and she got a good grade, but I swear to god she was never as happy as she was before. Bees.

I think of a little something for Samantha.

“Chase, I’m gonna wake up now. Get out of here, and go get Ethan, then tell Ethan to get--”

“There is no way I can let people see me talk to Ethan--” Chase rolls his eyes. I Wing Chun punch him in the face.

“You will TALK to ETHAN. You will tell him NICELY that he needs to ESCORT SAMANTHA and Denver into the FUCKING TREE.”

Chase nods his swollen head. I am having a hard time catching my breath because I’m so pissed off. Why? Why can’t you say one sentence to Ethan? Why can’t you just be nice?

Nice. The world vibrates with the thought of nice.

I look at the rainbow flag, the shirts from Target, and I look back at Chase. “You don’t know shit. I don’t either, but I’m not making little fucking videos telling people how to live, and how other people live.” I wipe my face.

“Yeah,” I say, “You don’t know shit. Go get Ethan.”

Chase runs out of the airport kitchen. Man, I am deeply concerned about punching Chase in the face. Chase is well liked. Revered in some circles. If this was a chess game, I basically stuck my queen up my asshole with my first move.

I would love to go back to my dream home and take a nap on our sectional couch. But in the middle of a divorce? Close my eyes in the vicinity of Marge? The homophobe? Not ideal. Man, 20 or so years with Marge. I mean, yeah, dream years. But the whole time, she was a big homophobe lurking in the shadows. This is a huge learning moment for me. I’ve got to get better at asking questions. I would have never married Marge if I knew she was going around calling people faggots. I know Chochi was the one who said it, but where did he learn that from? Not me.

To be fair, I was already married when I met her. Literally came into the house and was full-blown married. And I was the guy from *Chicago PD*. Lot to process. You become the sexy hardass from *Chicago PD* and your first question is “Hey, is my house a den for homophobes?” No it’s not.

You know what? Fuck it. I’m having one of these airport sandwiches. I’m having an airport sandwich with Famous Dave’s sauce. I don’t care. You think I’m going to lift a finger to help Marge? No. I’m not. I’m eating all the airport sandwiches. Who cares? If it gets back to Marge that there were no airport sandwiches today, too bad. Don’t marry your sandwich maker and then also be a monster. I’m also going to take some Good Boy Altoids. I’ve been nothing but good.

I eat my sandwiches and go through Marge’s shit. I find the Altoids and I eat them all. They ruin my sandwiches. Backfired all over me. The tastes are so bad I puke.

When I get back out into the kitchen, I see Ethan, Denver, and Samantha sitting patiently. Ethan is trying to very casually show his little muscles to Denver. Denver is lesbian, Ethan. You are wasting your strength.

I clap my hands and rub them together, hoping that eliminates the need for me to explain what is going on.

“Where are we?” Denver asks. I drop my head. Fine. I say this is my dream. I am asleep in Chase’s car.

“Chase the lifeguard?” Samantha asks.

“Yes. He let me sleep in his car while he and I worked on stuff.”

“Wait,” Ethan stands up. “You didn’t fight Chase?”

“No. I mean, I sort of did. I punched him. I wasn’t supposed to fight him, was I?”

“Yes, that is explicitly what you told me you were going to do. You said you were going to beat the lifeguard and take control of the pool.”

Samantha jumps in. “Dad, what the fuck?”

“Okay, everyone sit tight and stop talking for a second, okay?” I put my hands out and start waving them downward. Gotta get these kids seated!

Okay. They are seated.

“Now, it is clear that I both lied and did not tell the full truth, okay? That’s on me. But I am trying to play chess five moves ahead, and I don’t really know how to play chess.”

I shrug.

“So, Ethan. I did not take Chase in here with the intent to fight him. That was a lie. I lied to you. I did punch him though. Punched him good. By the way, how did his face look when he left?”

“Normal.”

“Okay. That is interesting, because I think he had a broken face and brain damage in here. Good to know.”

Ethan looks like a pissed off school shooter type, but I have to keep moving forward.

“Second, girls. I said come over to the tree, and you did. Good job, girls.”

“We almost didn’t go in because Ethan kept asking Chase why he needed to escort us,” Samantha says.

I give Ethan a look like, “Respectfully what the fuck, big guy?” but turn my focus back to Samantha.

“As I said at the top, this is my dream. I’m in control of a lot of stuff here. It’s pretty great. If you want to come in my dream, you have to go through the tree. Ethan found the tree.”

I clap my hands together again, like, cool, we are done. Denver speaks up again: “Where are we right now?”

“Uh, we are at the airport. It’s based off the Pocatello airport. This is where I work. I make sandwiches.”

“Oh,” Denver puts her hair behind her ears. “Do you, like, like your job?” Denver asks.

“Huh? Uh, yeah, I mean. It’s good.”

“Yeah, I mean if you’re the only one back here it seems pretty chill,” Denver says.

“It is chill, Denver.” I laugh. “Well, sometimes. I never really know what kind of ingredients we’ll have in stock.” Denver politely laughs. My heart swells so big I swear it’s gonna explode. What a good kid.

I hear a hard pounding on metal. I look over. It’s Ethan having a tantrum on the make table.

“What is this nonsense? This is nonsense. What are we doing here? What are they doing here?” Ethan barks. I sigh.

“Ethan, these two girls love each other. It’s called being a lesbian. They are in love and Denver’s dad is being a fucking dick and my wife, my non-dream wife, is on Denver’s dad’s side, so they gotta stop being lesbians. Okay. But, you know, we got this place.” I motion around the kitchen.

“I mean not this place. This place can be anything. But this place is safe. So, you know.”

I point at my daughter and Denver.

“Lesbians.”

Everyone is in disbelief for different reasons probably.

“I had Chase come in and try to make the place more friendly for lesbians. I’ve got a real blind spot when it comes to lesbians. You are the first one’s I’ve met.”

I point to the gay flag. “We got a gay flag over there.” They see it and nod.

“Also got a couple gay T-shirts lying around.” They nod again.

Fucking Chase. Poser. Makes me look like shit with his dumb ideas.

“But again, it can be anything you want. So just, like, say it and I’ll try my best to imagine it.”

Denver and Samantha look at each other. They're fidgeting and smiling. Samantha pipes up. "What about a tent?"

"Man, what is it with the tent?" I immediately change my bad attitude. "Okay, tent. One tent."

I start thinking about a tent. What pops up is the most meat and potatoes tent that exists. Orange tent. Perfect little triangle. A wild bear could run trains on this thing but, fuck it, we'll just avoid dreaming up bears.

I do a little fatherly touch dream.

"Sorry it's not the tent we saw in the garage. But I also dreamed up a weighted blanket."

"Cool, Mr. Yatsko," Denver says.

"Yeah, they are pretty cool. I've heard a lot about them and have done some research. They are pretty helpful for sleep stuff. Something about the weight. But it's great."

Denver nods.

"Cool," I say. "Anything else?"

"What about, like, I dunno. Is it possible to be outside?" Samantha asks me.

"Oh yeah. Sorry. This is dumb. Yeah, like, 'we're going camping at my Dad's work.' Sorry, sweetheart."

I do some quick imagining. Last time I took the kids camping was at the Tetons. Great little weekend. Michelle hung back because there was a Daughtry concert, so it was just me and the kids. Made hot dogs all weekend. No one went to the bathroom because of all the hot dogs. By the end of the weekend we were all pretty irritable because our bodies were in tough shape, but I think it was a great memory overall.

My imagining of the Tetons sucks pretty hard. Two or three grey triangles and a couple of poorly drawn trees. Oh, you know what? This is actually Gabe's drawing of the Tetons that he did for school. The sun has a smiley face. Gabe liked the Teton trip.

Tent is set up. The girls are piling into the tent. I feel Ethan's eyes on the back of my head, but I'm just trying to get through this nice moment, you know? Like I know Ethan is going to tear me to pieces for lying and not sticking to our plan, but plans have to change sometimes.

"Hey Samantha, come here," I say. Samantha walks over to me. I'm nervous, but I'm keeping it pretty cool.

"I saw Chase make those T-shirts, and, I dunno. If you want the gay shirts, they are yours, but, I dunno."

Samantha nods.

"But I got you something else." I close my hands, then open them and it's exactly what I wanted. It slowly leaves my hand, flapping its little wings. It flies just above Samantha's nose, buzzing softly.

"It's, uh, remember that book report you wanted to do? In like, fourth grade?"

"Fifth."

"Yeah fifth, sorry. Well. I dunno. It's nice. It's not going to bite or sting or anything. I made sure of that."

Samantha's eyes are watering up, and so are mine. "It's for you," I say. She takes the bee and drops it on her shoulder. I give her a thumbs up, and she wraps her arms around my waist.

We stay like this for a bit. "Hey," I say. "Get back to Denver. I've got some stuff to work out."

Samantha smiles and nods, then runs to join Denver in the tent. I turn around to face the eyes that have been slapping my skull.

Ethan's face is red. His brow is furrowed. But for me, it's the thick tears are running down his little face that hurt.

"This isn't what we wanted, Mr. Yatsko."

"I know, bud. I know. I really fucked up. I have to be honest, bud. I forgot about our plan. I saw something and I had to do some-

thing about it, but then I remembered our plan, and that plan kind of got in the way of this.”

“We could have been all powerful. We could have controlled Chubbuck. We could have ventured into Pocatello. Boise, maybe. But,” Ethan is staring at Samantha and Denver’s tent.

“You decided to do that.”

“I dunno, bud. Being all powerful with this dream stuff? To do what? Kill people? Hurt people?”

“To be the dominant ones! To be the ones who dominate us! My logic and your strength! We would be the dominant ones!”

“We’d be mean, bud. We’d be no better than Myles and Ken and my wife. And yeah, sometimes that’s a lot of fun. Like when I punched Chase in the face, or beat up Ken in front of his family? That was a lot of fun. Sure, if you want to have a summer where we have some laughs and we beat up a few dads at the pool, okay. If you want to film it and put it on the internet? That’s okay, too. But I can’t be some world domination guy. I’m a dad.”

“You are not my Dad,” Ethan says. It’s logically sound and it stings. But it’s one of those things you say that when you say it, you don’t realize that it also stings you as well. It’s like when a snake bites a rabbit but it accidentally bites itself too. It sucks.

Ethan just snake bit himself pretty bad. Fresh new tears crop up and he sprints out of the kitchen, But not through the normal door. The important door in the back. Huh. Well, I think if that was an argument, I did pretty good, but if that was some other type of interaction, I did pretty bad. A child cried. I mean, Samantha cried, but that was good crying.

I turn to get another airport sandwich, when I feel this massive slap to the front of my head.

My real life eyes open.

THIRTEEN

The front of my head slap was a real life slap. The hand belongs to Myles. Goddamnit, that hand is big. He is straddled over me in the back of Chase's car. He continues slapping me.

"I'm up! Jesus, Myles."

He keeps slapping me. He is putting all the extra sauce into these slaps. They are clapping my face well. I eventually come to my senses enough to flip over, then donkey buck him into the backs of the front seats.

I worm my way out of Chase's car. I'm met with a lot of people. My wife, John Doe, the guy my wife was fucking. Anyone who wanted to leave the pool to kick the shit out of me, so basically everyone who was at the pool.

I know I'm going to get outnumbered. I know my Wing Chun won't have me beat 70 people. So I make a mental note of a few people I will hit before the crowd overtakes me:

John Doe . Wrong day to fuck my wife. John Doe smells like sunscreen and latex. He is getting the first punch.

Myles. I know he is getting out of the car. But right after I throw a punch into John Doe's collarbone, I am going to kick Myles right back into Chase's car.

Doug Padalecki. Doug is just a dad, you know? He's got big love handles and strong arms and he's a walking corpse. He threw down on my wife early this summer and that was his peak. Probably for life. I've heard the guy say it, so I'm not making stuff up. Chase is right behind Doug. This is unfortunate for Doug, because I probably can't get a clean shot at Chase. Also, I know I punched Chase in my dream, and I rationalized it at the time, but now with all these witnesses, punching Chase seems like a bad idea. But I can

punch Doug really hard. Doug's head can go backward and hit Chase. It's going to be great.

The fight begins. John Doe throws a fist heading right for my throat. I parry and counter with an open palm to his collarbone. Snaps like a twig. It's great. Collarbones are great. You have to have them and if they are broken, life really sucks. John Doe heads to the back of the pack.

I have a little indecision on who to go after next on my list. Myles is having a harder time than I thought getting out of Chase's car, so I go after Doug. I waited too long. Doug is a little too far away from Chase. But man, do I want Chase. So I actually forgo a back kick to Myles and push Doug back into Chase. Then, man, I just punch Doug. I punch him hard. Doug's head snaps back and cracks right into Chase. Chase is rocked. Chase goes down. But Doug. I feel bad for Doug. You shouldn't have come to the front of the Violence Mob, Doug. What were you thinking?

After Doug and Chase go down I lay my body on top of theirs and let the mob get their kicks in. After 20 seconds I am out like a light.

I wake up back in the Tetons. I smell smoke. I feel badness. Everything is on fire. The tent is burned to ash. The sun is now red and the face is angry. There is no sign of Samantha or Denver.

I'm having trouble catching my breath, but I am also forgetting to breathe. I know that I don't need to look around. They are gone. I hear a familiar buzzing.

Cold water hits all of my shit and I wake up.

These assholes have me strung up to my pool chair. All the way from my feet to my neck. I'm right in the sun. The sun is absolutely working me right now. My back and head are all sore from the absolute beating I got. Jesus.

My head is locked in tight, so I can't really see anyone around

me. But people are around. Everyone is around. But I can't see faces.

"Hey," I call out.

"Shut the fuck up, Jerry," someone yells back. Fine. What am I going to do?

Myles' face appears in my sightline. I see him reach over to grab something. When he comes back up he is holding his sandal. He slaps me on the chest and I can do nothing about it. The sandal is a little damp and the little chunks of concrete stuck at the bottom are slashing my chest. He's letting me have it.

"Come on Myles," I say. "Enough. This isn't productive. You're working too hard in the sun."

He stops. He gets his face next to mine.

"WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER?" Little bits of spit hit my face.

Oh. Shit. Yeah. Damn. Okay. Damn. Damn, that's a problem. Well it might be a problem, I don't know.

"I don't know," I say.

"That's a lie. He does know." Guess who said that? Fucking Chase.

"Jerry directed me, the weirdo boy, and two teenage lesbians into a tree cave. He asked for it to be a secret."

There Chase goes again, making everything I do sound disturbing. I can't see but everyone sounds pretty horrified. I think Myles is pretty upset because now his sandal is hitting me in the face.

"Myles, MYLES. Jesus! I didn't do anything bad. No sex stuff. Not from me at least."

"WHAT?" Myles says.

"They might be doing it to each other. The girls. I don't know."

"What are you TALKING about? What, tree cave, sex stuff... Jerry, I'm going to murder you."

A couple people start clapping.

"Myles, look: The tree cave is how you get in my dream. After

that, you are in my dream. I'm in control of the dream. The girls are in my dream. So is Ethan. That's all."

Myles wipes his face with his hand, and with that same hand, he punches me square in my shit. I'm out.

I am back in the dream. Still fire, still no girls. I move toward the tent. I unzip it. I look at the burned sleeping bags. I kick one of the bags. I don't see any hair or bones or anything like that. Thank God. Jesus fucking Christ. What a shit show that would be. Really, really bad. Thank God. Man.

A real pain goes through my head behind my eyes. It feels like the reverse of getting shot through the head. It's like someone crawled into my body with a gun and fired it out of my skull.

I snap out of the dream fast. I look up at Myles, who looks surprised that I'm awake. I am, too. This wake up felt a little different. Jesus. What the hell was that?

"Myles," I say. He looks at me.

"Punch me again."

Myles punches my shit with no hesitation. I'm out again.

I'm back in the dream. Again, fire, tent, the works. Before I can even move this time, I feel the pain behind my eyes again. Fucking Jesus CHRIST.

I'm awake, looking at Myles.

"Are you waking me up?" I say to Myles.

"No. What sick game is this, you moron." He raises his hand to strike me again.

"STOP," I call out. I can't go back in my dream again. At least not right away. "I KNOW WHERE OUR KIDS ARE. GO TO THE TREE. I'LL SHOW YOU."

Myles lowers his fist. Thank God.

"Get me off this chair, and I'll show you."

Myles turns away from me. "Michelle, give me your handcuffs."

I hear a little movement, then I feel a pair of fuzzy handcuffs drop on my stomach.

“Doug: Untie him, then put these on him. Don’t let go of him.”

Doug unties me. He kicks me a couple times which I deserve, then he puts the handcuffs on. I tell him they are too loose. These aren’t supposed to be stylish bracelets. They’re handcuffs. He tightens them, but now they are too tight. Come on, Doug.

Doug and the rest of the pool people lead me over to the big tree. People are kicking and spitting on me like I’m Jesus being walked to my crucifixion. I’m like, “Guys what the fuck, I am helping,” but nobody cares. It’s spit and violence all the way to the tree. Occasionally I catch someone’s leg with my handcuffed hands and I’m like, “See? You want me to break your arm? Knock it off.” I swear to God: I’m going to break everyone’s arm by the end of this day. My overall plans change into something more good and profound, but I dunno.

We get to the tree. The group separates to make a path for Myles. Myles walks toward me.

“Get your butt in that tree and show me where my daughter is.”

“That’s not how it works.”

Myles kicks me right in my fucking balls, and you know what? I’ve had it. I throw my head back to meet Doug’s nose, who has been walking behind me the whole time. Clean break. I then jump and tag Myles with a double leg kick to his goddamn face. His body snaps back like one half of the McDonald’s logo. He shuffles to get to his feet but I step on his ribs.

“STAY DOWN AND LISTEN,” I say.

Myles stays on the ground. I look at my wife, who found a front row spot in the crowd. She is looking at me differently. Still tense, but with a lot less disgust. Damn. I don’t know. Might be sexual. I’m getting a whole different vibe from Michelle, and she doesn’t even

know about how I throttled Ken. When she finds out about that, imagine the look I'll get then. God, I hate Michelle, but I dunno.

I turn back to Myles.

"The tree only works when I am sleeping. I gotta go to sleep. Or be knocked out. Honestly? It would probably be best to knock me out because something is happening. Something is different. I keep getting woken up."

Myles is looking at me with big weirdo eyes. But he nods.

"And when you get in the tree, don't stay. This is just a peek for you. I don't know what happens if you stay in there and I wake up."

Myles nods. I let him know it's okay to stand up. He gets to his feet and we stand toe-to-toe. I nod, like, "Okay, you can rock my shit."

Myles winds back and sends a fist right to my head. Instinctively I block and counter with a Biu Sau thrusting fingers technique. Myles is back on the ground. Everyone groans.

"Jerry, goddamnit it's not the time to be a showoff!"

"Doug should have handcuffed me from the back! This is Doug's fault," I call out. More groans.

"Doug is a father, he's got a lot on his mind," someone in the crowd says. Oh my God. You've got to be kidding me. Now we care who is a dad and who is not? Get the fuck out of here.

I shake my head and turn back to Myles, who is up and sending a fist right into my face.

Okay, back in the dream. I look at the door, waiting for Myles to jump through. After a few minutes, he enters. He sees the fire and tent and I think that's enough. I feel the pain behind my eyes again. I yell out to Myles.

"Myles go back!"

He is all fucked up and mind blown, but he eventually gets it and heads for the exit.

I wake up on the grass, staring up at the sky. God. Nice day. It

hurts to blink and move my eyes. I think Myles hit me with the type of punch that causes brain damage. Whatever. Gotta keep moving. I hear screaming and a bunch of concerned voices. I follow the concerned voices with my eyes and, okay, yeah, things are not great.

The short way of saying this, is that Myles did not leave the dream fast enough. The better way of saying it would be to say that Myles no longer has feet or calves. It's a real mess, and I don't fault him for screaming. Blood. Ton of blood. I make eye contact with Myles. His face is really pale and in despair. I mime fast running with my arms as to say, "Remember when I said you had to be fast?" but I think he gets it.

I get to my feet. There's a lot of commotion right now. High stakes, no doubt. But, you know, I think things are moving in the right direction. Myles is bleeding out pretty bad, but I made my point about the dream tree. Also, there are a lot of people around, and I'm sure someone will step up and get the bleeding to stop.

I start walking back to the pool area, away from the commotion. To be honest, I'm really taking this high pressure time as an opportunity to steal a slice of pizza from the snack bar. Everyone is out of the pool area. They just saw a crazy dream-reality amputation. Lots of distraction. And you know what? I'm hungry. I'm allowed to be hungry. I know my daughter is gone and Ethan is probably involved, but what? I can't eat?

I make it to the snack bar. Nice. Plenty of slices left. Pepperoni in the first box, but I thumb through the different boxes until I find a sausage bell pepper. Wow. What a find. I take a bite. I was right to not settle on the pepperoni at the top. I was totally right.

You know what is crazy about the sausage bell pepper? The bell pepper is the real star. The sausage — not taking anything away from the sausage — but it has a lot of the spices that are already in the sauce. That's not to say you can do without the sausage (you can't), but it's redundant. The bell pepper though? Wow. Just

enough sweetness. Little bit of char. It's such a compliment to the sausage and sauce. Every bite with a bell pepper revalidates my belief that I am eating a complete pizza slice.

I knock out four sausage bell pepper slices. I clap at the boxes, and at the sky. It's my way of saying, if there is a god, he can let the pizza maker know this was good pizza. Pizza made right.

I'm full. I head back to the dream tree.

I get back to the dream tree. Wow. Damn: Myles is dead. I thought someone would step up and I was wrong. He is pale and not moving and dead. Damn.

Myles – not a good guy. A bad guy. A major asshole. But, he's dead, so the only thing I can say is that he was great. A great man.

I don't really know how to describe the atmosphere right now. Calm? Overwhelmed? Everyone is looking at me, maybe hoping I can make sense of what just happened. I motion to the tree and raise my eyebrows. Everyone kind of nods. Okay. I think we get it. I speak up.

“So look, there are three kids in there. We gotta get them out.”

Michelle steps forward to me. “Why?” she asks.

Unfuckingbelievable.

“Because one of those people is your daughter, you stupid bitch.” Michelle purses her lips and looks at the crowd of people as if what I said was some over-dramatic thing goofy people say.

The crowd agrees. With her. John Doe steps up.

“Jerry, this is tough, and we all get that, but you have to see this from, like, my perspective. Your wife does not like Samantha. Samantha made things hard on your wife--”

“—OH, SO NOW SHE'S MY FUCKING WIFE, JOHN DOE?”

“Jerry, I don't know where that's coming from. She's always been your wife. But your wife has been good to us. Samantha hasn't. That's just logic, Jerry. Try to understand where we are coming from.”

“And Jerry.” Brad Quigley moves forward from the pack with his palms open, facing me. “Denver got her father killed. I know that’s a tough thing to hear, but imagine how tough that is to say. We all loved Myles, so we rallied behind him. But now, he’s dead. Do we die now, too? I don’t know, Jerry.”

Someone in the back of the pack murmurs, “I’m not even sure who the third kid is.” A couple acknowledgements follow.

I look at the group. I can’t feel my broken face because the hollow pit in my chest is so painful. Assholes. Reptiles. I can’t think of anything but a trash can filled with reptiles. Crawling their way to the top of the can, hoping enough reptiles die below them so the floor gets higher, and they can get out.

In the crowd of assholes, I spot Gabe and his little girlfriend. His tits are fully out. No shirt. Tits getting hit by the Idaho sun. I can’t help but feel proud and insanely sad. And angry. And tired.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” I tell the crowd.

“I think we get in there and rescue the three kids because it’s nice. It’s a thing nice people do.”

Nobody seems moved by what I said, and I didn’t expect them to be.

“But none of you care about being nice. You care about you. If you were in there, you would think, ‘Hey, somebody better save me because that would be the right thing to do.’ But you’re out here, so you’re not gonna do anything.”

Everybody is quiet.

“So I guess I’m gonna have to make all of you be nice. Because, I don’t know. I can’t do this shit anymore.”

The crowd is quiet. Then Brad Quigley pipes up.

“Jerry, while Myles was bleeding out, you ran away.”

“I didn’t run--”

“Yeah, but you left the scene. And I think you went and stole pizza slices from the snack bar.”

Wow. Brad put that together fast. I look in the crowd and see Joann. She looks annoyed.

“Alright, look--”

“Jerry, you still have pizza sauce on your face.”

“Jesus, Brad, we all get it! Okay?” I feel the blood rush to my head. I take a deep breath. Not now. Now is the time to be nice.

“Okay,” I start, “I took some slices of pizza while Myles was bleeding out. I just thought that someone else was going to take care of the situation. The situation looked fine.”

“Jerry, he was bleeding really bad. You could have gone back in the tree and got medical supplies.”

Interesting point. Interesting point, Brad.

“Brad,” I say, “I’m not sure that would be possible. It might have been possible, but it might not have been. So I think it’s unfair to speculate on what I could have done. I will though, apologize for stealing the pizza slices. Joann, I am sorry.”

“Jerry, we’ll settle your tab after all this,” Joann says.

“Fine,” I say. “See everyone, that’s an apology. Part of being nice is saying sorry. Now, DOES ANYONE HAVE ANYTHING THEY WANT TO APOLOGIZE FOR WITH REGARDS TO MY DAILY TREATMENT IN THIS FUCKING TOWN?”

Everyone is silent. Unfazed. Goddamnit. Just before launching into an attack against the entire town, I feel a hand rest on my shoulder.

“Jerry,” Michelle speaks softly from behind me. “You can talk tough. Some people might listen. And the people who resist, you can take on a few. But there are too many of us. You are going to be beaten bad. And if I want? If I decide that I really want to see a hero? One of these men will kill you.”

I look at Michelle. This person. This thing so beautiful and warm and I wonder how far beneath the skin would I have to go to find her cold blood. Her scaly skin. How far?

“What is wrong with you, Michelle?” I say. “We’re talking about children needing help and somehow I’m going to die? This is absolute weirdo behavior.”

Michelle looks at me. Just me. She smiles, and the smile is fucking dark.

“Do you think you are the only one who dreams like you, Jerry?”

She tilts her head. She turns to look at the tree. She looks back at me. “I never, ever thought you would be able to use this. Or anyone else. I wonder what changed. Being near me? Who knows. But you went in there and learned a little karate?”

“Wing Chun.” I say. What the FUCK is going on?

“Gotcha,” Michelle is still smiling. “Is that what you wanted?”

“No. I mean, it’s cool. I can fight people. I beat up Ken Hardee in front of his child. The garage is mine now. But in the dream place? I wanted Famous Dave’s sauce. I also wanted some Sour Altoids. I had a good marriage in there, but she found out that Samantha is a lesbian. So I’m going through a divorce.”

Michelle looks disappointed. “Limitless power, and you want candy and sauce.”

“Yeah,” I say. “What did you want?”

Michelle unlocks her eyes from me. She turns and looks at the group. All of them, as individuals. Each and every one of them. When their eyes touch hers, they go soft. Dreamy, like they aren’t here. No one is really here anymore. John Doe, Brad, Gabe. Actually, kind of hard to tell with Gabe. That’s his standard face.

When everyone has left, she comes back to me. She gives me a sinister look, like a “where were we?” and begins again.

“Before I met you, I was okay. Just okay. If I wanted something, I might get it, I might not. Jobs, men, other opportunities. But I always felt, and I still do, that I deserve everything. I shouldn’t have to feel loss or rejection. So I guess what I wanted was, well,

complete control. When I found the tree, I knew right away. This would be it. This would change me. So I went in and dreamed myself a new body. A new face. I wanted to be desirable. Unattainable. I learned the tree couldn't give me that."

I jump in.

"I wanted to be Tom Holland Spider-Man. I only got the costume, and it didn't fit. I'm saying that because – I'm saying I get it."

"If I couldn't change my looks, I had to change something. I couldn't go through life with no power. I decided to learn how to look at men, how to touch men, how to talk to men – I learned how to control men. I spent a hundred years in there learning everything there is to know about controlling men. Women too, I guess. Then I woke up." She opens her hands up and out like "ta-da." I try to string a couple words together in my head, even though I know what I want to say.

"But I guess, I dunno. Where was I in all of this?" I ask. Michelle slowly nods and closes her eyes.

"It was interesting, the tree. It gave me these abilities, and it was great. But you know what that tree can't do? It can't change who you really are." She pauses, then grabs my wrist.

"I need to feel disappointment. I need to feel like I lost in some way or none of this works. The hours we spend in our home together, with no one else around, is enough disappointment for me to get out of bed in the morning."

"Yeah, whatever," I say softly with a lump in my throat.

"Jerry, I need you. At least I thought I did. Now, well I don't know. You're still disappointing." She looks over at dead Myles. "But less so."

Michelle takes a deep breath. She looks at the men in a trance, waiting for some type of signal to kill me.

"The tree gave me this. I won't forget that. And if you think I'm

going to let you destroy what I have, you are more stupid than I thought.”

“But you already have everything! You have it all! Our kid--”

“I may want more.”

“You have everything!”

“Well, now you can have everything too. And I guess. Well,” she stops and considers the tree.

“I guess if you have everything too, do I really have everything? Maybe. I guess if someone can have everything like me, how can I have more?”

So Michelle and I are standing at the mouth of the dream tree. In front of her horde of men. In front of their wives who are wrapped up in this nightmare so tight they have no fucking clue what is going on. In front of Gabe and his girlfriend.

Okay. I get myself into a Wing Chun fighting stance. I’m going to fight my wife. She sees my stance and looks amused. She takes a couple gentle steps forward into my fighting space. She makes her move.

It’s a great first move. There is no Wing Chun defensive counter for when a woman softly touches your ears with her warm hands.

I’m rock solid. My nipples are small and tight. I’ve got goosebumps from tongue to taint. I can’t get into an attack because my dick is making a teepee against my board shorts and the fabric has no give. I lower my defensive hand to see if I can slip my penis head up to the band of my board shorts. Michelle occupies the space I could have defended and she gets both my nipples. My balls are like a tight little walnut. I moan. Michelle cackles.

“This is too easy, Jerry. You have the sexual hotspots of a primitive adolescent. Your sexuality has no maturity. No depth. You will not last long.”

She clamps down on my nipples and I feel my balls shoot back against my prostate. I’m cumming from everywhere before I can

think about something nonsexual. She is dictating the pace. I am along for the ride.

By some miracle I am able to send an open palm to her nose and break it. I put some distance between us when she holds her face.

“You fucking IDIOT,” she screams. “You could have had everything, and you learn this stupid shit?”

“It’s not stupid shit. It’s ancient. Nothing ancient is stupid.”

She doesn’t waste any time. She lunges forward at me with both hands, ready to pull my face in for a kiss. God, that would be nice. But I can’t let it happen. I put both my hands over my mouth.

Damn. I fell for it. She was never going to kiss me. Her hands darted down and got my balls and Easter egg. She puts her mouth on my neck and sucks as hard as she can. My first hickie.

I’m a busted fire hydrant. My board shorts are slimed up. I don’t even know what’s left of me, but whatever is it’s coming out.

I’m done for. I’ll be left with no fluid in my body, and I’ll be dead soon. Samantha and Denver will die in my mind. So will Ethan.

I look at the fence and buildings that surround the Cronke Community Pool. Sam Cronke. First man from Chubbuck to make six figures. Even had an office in Pocatello. He cheated on his wife and hit someone’s dog with a fire poker. Dog was fine so he never got in trouble. He loved the pool so when his wife killed him everyone named the pool after him. Bad guy. Everyone is a bad guy. Maybe I’m losing too much fluid but I might just be in the meanest place in America. Me, the kids, we never had a chance.

There’s a loud bang. More fluid comes out, this time it sprays against my face.

I look through the gaping hole that used to not be in Michelle’s head. Through it I see Gabe, holding a Clint Eastwood revolver.

“Target DOWN.”

Gabe claps two times. His girlfriend breaks out of her trance. She sees Gabe, Michelle, the blood, and moves into action.

“Six is clear. Establishing a perimeter,” she says.

Gabe’s girlfriend moves like a goddamn seal around the edge of Michelle’s horde. She is sizing every single person up, barking orders. “Let me see hands!” Shit like that.

These two morons are going around the horde like Seal Team Six and making stuff happen. The girl in the pool who did not talk and my double D’ed son are locking the park down.

Once everyone is properly disarmed and handled, I pull Gabe aside for a quick convo about what just happened.

Gabe, still with that same big tongue, wet mouth delivery, gives me an answer.

“Idaho is an open carry state. I am within my legal rights to carry this gun. I am also within my legal rights to protect myself and others from immediate fatal harm.”

“Gabe, pal, you just killed Mom.”

“Well within my rights,” Gabe says, and he just keeps repeating this.

Turns out Gabe is a big Second amendment guy. He loves guns. Him and his little girlfriend. He goes on for another five minutes about how he was justified according to Idaho statute 19-202A and blah blah blah. Honestly? Gabe is a big weirdo. Should have seen this coming. You get big tits like that and people are on you about your tits, you’re gonna steer one type of way. Gabe became a gun guy. I wanted a nice summer where he learns body positivity, but he became a gun guy. Best case scenario he wears camo and pretends to be in the Army and then he joins the Army and realizes pretty quickly that it sucks and he becomes a P.E. teacher or something. Worst case scenario is pretty bad.

At this moment, though, I have to thank him because he saved my life. I also need to address the group because we have now seen

two deaths. People are coming out of the trance and it appears that they in some way saw the murder. They saw Michelle get killed. Their eyes were open. Time is of the essence, so I don't think about how anyone is going to take this.

"First off, let's give a warm round of applause to Gabe and his girlfriend for taking down Michelle."

"NO," the horde responds. There are grown men bawling right now. And their wives. I mean, fine, it was a murder. We saw a couple deaths pretty quickly, but one of them was an actual murder. I acknowledge this.

"Okay fine. FINE. Gabe, it would have been nice to not have a lethal shot."

"I was protected by 19-202A."

I roll my eyes.

"I know, but Jesus, Gabe." I turn back to the horde. "Alright, so we have mixed feelings about Michelle, and that's understandable. Healthy even. But, you know, it's done. And I was saying before, we're going to start being nice. Michelle was not very nice to you, even though it may have seemed like it."

"We have to bury Michelle," John Doe says.

"No, John Doe. She wanted her ashes spread. You know that," Brad says.

"I forgot. Fuck. I can't believe I forgot that. Jerry--"

"Goddamnit, guys."

"--Jerry we have to get her cremated and have her ashes spread at the Café Rio in Pocatello."

Everyone chuckles, as if they all know that Michelle loved that Café Rio. And they probably all took her there, so they do know. Motherfuckers.

This is unfuckingbelievable.

"HEY. My daughter and his daughter are still in that tree. Things have CHANGED."

John Doe puts the brakes on cremation planning.

“Jerry. Things have changed. You’re right. We gotta start being nicer and more considerate. We all fucked your wife. It was more than that, but it was also exactly that. And I know we told you it’s just summer, and you gotta laugh, but most of the time it wasn’t even summer. And if you fucked any of our wives, we would have been pretty mad at you.”

Brad crosses past John Doe downstage right like they are in an eighth grade play.

“To piggyback off John Doe, we probably would have been mad, yes, but it would have been different because none of our wives were out trying to have sex with you. They probably didn’t want to.”

John Doe crosses past Brad this time.

“But Michelle,” John Doe pauses to collect himself, “Michelle was different. Michelle wanted to have sex with us and she wanted us to have sex with her. She really meant it. You know, today has brought a lot of clarity. We can be nicer, but part of that is being nice to ourselves. We’ve got to properly mourn, Jerry. You know that’s true in your heart.”

I don’t actually. My heart doesn’t know that a group of men need to mourn my wife who just tried to kill me. But I know they won’t help me if I don’t help them. Fine.

“Fine. Cremate her,” I say.

“After the memorial, Jerry.”

I throw my arms up and out at the group. “What the fuck, guys? A whole memorial?”

“We can’t just cremate her.”

“Okay, fine, go to Cafe Rio have the memorial, and spread the ashes.” I turn to leave these assholes to their business.

“Jerry,”

“What?”

“We’re not doing the memorial at a Café Rio. We are spreading

the ashes there. These are two very different things. Probably two different guest lists.”

“Oh my god.”

“I mean, respectfully, you probably would not be invited to the Café Rio to spread her ashes.”

“Okay, good.”

“She never went to Café Rio with you.”

“I said ‘good.’”

“But it would be disturbing if you weren’t at the memorial.”

“Fine.”

“You are her husband.”

“Hey, John Doe? I’m not a complete fucking moron. But let’s get this thing moving, okay?”

“Of course. Remember, Jerry: She meant everything to us.”

“And when this... thing... is over, you are going to help with the girls and the tree. All of you. Because that’s nice.”

John Doe nods for the whole group and smiles at me.

“Yeah. That’s the nice thing.”

FOURTEEN

It's infuriating to see how quickly they all come together to make this cremation/memorial happen. Wendy Adler, Brian Adler's wife, is Chubbuck's undertaker. She sprints over to Michelle to begin preparing her body for cremation. Sprints. This is a person helping the woman who caused her husband to climb to the top of a Maverick gas station and threaten to jump if he didn't get to see Michelle's nipples one more time. "Just one more time!" he screamed. Wendy was on the scene trying to show Brian her nipples and it just made Brian more distraught. "Not yours!" he screamed. "If you show me yours again, I'll try and fall faster!"

Marcus Soule works for the city and is already brokering a deal with Pocatello to get a permit for her memorial on top of the "I" overlooking Idaho State University. "I'm only doing this for her, Marcus. Not for you." I hear on the receiving end of the speaker phone.

Ashley Jensen is a wedding planner, so she has 200 chairs one phone call away at all times.

John Doe runs up to me during the chaos, "Hey we all got to talking and decided on a potluck type thing for the memorial. Some of Michelle's favorite foods, you know?"

"No one here is a caterer?"

"Dave Yearwood is, but he's having some pretty bad medical problems today."

"Okay."

"What dish are you thinking of making?"

"What?"

"Well I just said, Jerry: It's a potluck. You need to bring a dish."

"Oh Jesus fucking Christ, John Doe. You know what? Fine. I'll bring plates and napkins."

“Ashley is getting those, Jerry. Need a dish.”

I could kill John Doe. Right now. Twist his head off his neck like a Barbie doll.

“I’ll go home and make nachos.”

“Jerry.”

“What?”

“You are going to make a plate that people are going to need to eat at the serving station?”

“No. They can cut out a little bit and put it on their plate.”

“I don’t see it. Fine, okay, but I don’t see it.” John Doe walks away in a huff, back into the commotion of Michelle.

The group thins out except for Gabe, Joann, and Gabe’s girlfriend. I motion Gabe over to me. I look over to Joann standing by the dream tree and get her attention. She walks over. Gabe and his girlfriend eventually get over to me, but it feels like a true lifetime.

“Okay. Everyone here is a goddamn tire fire. We still have to get Samantha and Denver. Agreed?”

They nod, yes.

“Okay. Thank God. So here is what I know about that tree: I can bring items in. I can bring items out. People can come in and out. Something is happening where I can’t stay asleep. I need to be asleep in order for the tree to work. Now, I think Ethan is behind the whole me not being able to sleep thing. I also think he has Samantha and Denver.”

Nobody says anything.

“Let me add that I brought you all over here to maybe help me brainstorm stuff.”

Everybody nods. But everyone stays quiet.

“The floor is open for ideas, guys.”

Gabe clears his throat, “We should go in the tree and get them.” Gabe is back to being dumb. Gabe had zero hesitation putting a bullet

through his mother's head. He knows Idaho gun laws. Now this. Joann is having a tough time jumping in the brainstorm. Gabe's girlfriend looks unwilling to offer up any ideas. I try to get the storm going.

"So I need to sleep for a really long time. A very deep sleep."

Joann's eyes light up as much as I think her eyes can light up. "I keep a couple IV bags of pentobarbital in my car. One bag of that and you are in a coma, mister."

"Good," I say. I motion to Gabe's girlfriend. "What's your name?"

"Presham."

"The movie," I say.

"The movie?"

"It's based on a novel. Precious."

"No. PreshAM."

"The novel was actually called 'Push'. By Sapphire," Gabe says.

"Gabe, I don't give an absolute shit who wrote Push. Your girlfriend is named Precious, like the movie."

"My name is not Precious. It's Presham. P-R-E-S-H-A-M."

I roll my eyes. I'm stuck with two complete assholes.

"Okay, Presham. I'm going to go into a coma. I need you to stand by my body with your gun. I need you to protect me. These guys are going to come back from the funeral all pissed off. It's part of grief. Let's try and do a decent job of hiding my body, yeah? But if they find my body, you gotta start shooting. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Now hold on. Don't shoot unless they are going to do something bad to my body. If they seem nice and just want to hang out, okay."

"Okay."

"Okay as in don't shoot."

"Okay." Presham has a thirst for blood. She will kill. I could

circle back and make sure she gets it, but it's out of my hands. It's out of my hands.

"Gabe, you are going to come with me into the tree. I need your gun and swimming powers."

Gabe clears his throat. "Okay. And, but, what about the nachos?"

"Huh?"

"You told John Doe that you were making nachos for the memorial? Can we go to Fred Meyers for nacho stuff?"

"The memorial? Oh fuck off with that. Fuck OFF with that." I cross my arms and pout. No one is giving me an inch of daylight with this memorial thing.

"I'm not making goddamn nachos for that stupid memorial." Immediately I am hounded by these three. I'm being called a hypocrite, a liar, man, everything. I knew I was going to make the nachos. I knew I was going to the stupid memorial. Let me blow off some steam. Let me say I'm not going. Jesus guys.

Me, Presham, and Gabe go to Fred Meyers and get nacho stuff, which to me seems insane, but okay. I had Joann hang back and get the pentobarbital ready to go. Fred Meyers is such a shit show. It always is. And if you are taking your kids? Forget it. I don't even know why I went to Fred Meyers. Terrible place for specific meals. This is a bulk place. I have to buy three of everything I need and I'm very irritable. Gabe is hounding me for toys. Gabe is going into high school after this summer. He also killed his mother today. He thinks the whole toy aisle is his. I get him a wiffle ball bat and tell him, "This is not going to be a thing where you kill someone and you get a toy. That's not the deal. Far from it." He asks if Presham can get something. No. No way. I have to draw the line somewhere.

Quiet ride home, but we are home.

FIFTEEN

Well, fuck it, here is my recipe for nachos:
Three bags of party size corn tortilla chips
Can of jalapeño slices

Mexican cheese mix, two bags

Two cups of diced tomatoes

Two limes

Two cups of diced red onions

One can of black olives

One can of refried beans

Salsa, red

Sour cream

Put the chips on a metal tray

Cover the chips in cheese

Put the beans on the cheese

Put the onions on the beans

Set the oven at 350

Put the tray in the oven for twenty minutes

Pull the tray out

Transfer the nachos to Tupperware

Put the olives and jalapenos on top of the nachos

Tomatoes, too

Squeeze both limes on top of the nachos

Don't put the sour cream or salsa on the nachos. Bring it to wherever you are going to eat it. Put them on there.

I make the nachos despite my daughter currently being kidnapped. They turn out great because I am good at making nachos. I get them in the Tupperware. Olives, jalapenos, tomatoes, limes. Gabe is in charge of the sour cream and salsa. Presham is in charge of nothing.

The drive to Pocatello is fine. Once we cross over the 86, Gabe and Presham have their faces pressed up to the window the entire time. They see the gun and ammo store next to the Red Lobster. They ask me to slow down. I don't.

Pocatello does nothing for me now. After decades in a world where I was a high-end home owner in this town, it all looks too familiar. I don't even have to squint that hard to make it seem like Pocatello is no better than Chubbuck. Buildings aren't much taller. Cars aren't faster. The people seem better, but that's not hard. Chubbuck has the worst people on earth.

We park in the Idaho State University campus parking lot. Just east of the parking lot is a hill that some people call a mountain. On the side of the mountain is a huge "I". The "I" is for "Idaho." At the top of the hill/mountain is a flat space where people can get married or take graduation photos. In our case, we are honoring the life of a total shit head woman who was gunned down in her prime.

No easy way up. You've gotta hike. I'm humping up the nacho plate myself because if anyone else takes it up, they made the nacho plate. Doesn't matter who actually made the nachos. Only thing that matters is who brings it up.

Gabe and Presham are hiking alongside me. Gabe brought his wiffle ball bat. We got into an argument in the car about it. I said for him to leave it. He said he wanted to bring it. I said, "What's the point you didn't even get a wiffle ball to go with the bat." He said that someone up there would have a wiffle ball. I laughed in his face. No. No one is bringing a wiffle ball to a memorial. Presham piped in and said that if I am going to demand that everyone start being nice, I have to be nice as well. Looks like Presham has some thoughts to share. How fun.

We make it to the flat part. The men and women of Chubbuck made a beautiful setting for Michelle. Everything is extremely taste-

ful, but inspiring. A memorial for a person murdered within the hour.

John Doe stops setting down place settings to greet us. He sees my nacho plate. He's tense about it. He takes a hard look at Gabe and Presham. He comes into my personal space and lowers his voice.

"You should not have brought Michelle's killers to her memorial."

"Gabe is Michelle's son, for chrissakes."

"When the son kills their mother, they aren't going to her memorial."

"The Menendez brothers went to their parents' funeral, John Doe." I don't know why I know that, but I do. They did. I walk past John Doe and set my nachos down on the buffet table.

I do a quick lap around the space. I'm anxious and irritated that I have to be here, that I've somehow cornered myself in this situation. I have no idea what my daughter is dealing with right now. She's gotta be alive. Ethan is a monster, but he is predictable. He loves debates and negotiation situations. He loves winning battles of the mind. What he has right now is leverage. I don't know what else I'm in store for, but none of it makes sense if Samantha is dead. He wants me. I know that.

So yeah, I'm a total wreck. But honestly? This memorial is beautiful. Very personal Michelle details. Photos of her with friends — guy friends — different stones and crystals that symbolize the various parts of the body she was able to heal. Solar string lights are draped around these white columns, and I bet once the sun sets, this place is really going to pop. The music set up is just one guy with a set of crystal bowls, but man, he knows his way around those bowls.

The really impressive thing is they somehow walked us through

the journey of her life, but also made it seem like me, Gabe, and Samantha never existed. Michelle would have loved that.

Everyone is tastefully mingling. In between planning and executing this memorial, everyone had time to go home and throw on formal clothing. I don't know if they had time, but they made time.

One of the guys at the pool, Max Suphan, is the youth pastor at one of the 50 churches in town. Guy loves playing three chords on an acoustic guitar, sitting on a chair backward to talk to high school kids about remaining chaste, and using my sleeping pillow to get a better penis angle during sex with my now dead wife. He walks slowly in front of a microphone stand that has Michelle's face taped to it. His face looks like it was caved in by sadness.

"Hi, um, everyone. I know I talk a lot about Heaven and Christ. I know I've said at other memorials that the person who is dead is luckier than all of us, because they get to be with our Heavenly Father. I don't know if I believe that or if it's something nice to say, but I can't even think about that right now. I just feel angry."

Max finds Gabe in the crowd. He closes his eyes.

"I just feel so mad at Gabe. I'm honestly worried that me, or a group of guys including me, are going to go out and try and kill Gabe, and that we won't stop until we do. Michelle felt so good."

At one point he was looking up at the sky like he was talking to God, but now he is looking right at Gabe and shaking his finger.

"I swear to fuck -- Gabe. Gabe, I'm talking to you. You better run and never stop running. You better never stop. Never stop you piece of shit."

Max, the youth pastor, breaks down in tears. Two other guys have to help him away from the microphone. I look over at Gabe who is staring at Max expressionless. He is holding his wiffle ball bat. Gabe is not going to run. He welcomes the violence. To think that I began this day, this summer, thinking he was not prepared to

face high school. He is in a reverse *Kill Bill* situation with virtually every grown man in Chubbuck. But I dunno. I am starting to think all of these men are in a situation with Gabe.

I don't know why this just came to me: At some point, maybe five years ago, the cable guy was at our house and he asked me if I wanted to set up parental controls on the internet. I said I would do that later. He said he could do it for me, right there. I said I would figure it out. Then I forgot. I'm looking at Gabe and I'm like, wow, what a slippery slope. It's all related. What a world.

More people come up to the microphone and it's the same thing. More threats to Gabe's life. Descriptions of Michelle's body in great detail. Emotional collapse. I'd love to make myself a plate, but no one else is making themselves a plate. At some point we are gonna have to get down to business and get back in that tree and I would love to have a full stomach. That's looking like a no-go.

I get tapped on my shoulder. I look down. It's John Doe.

"You're up next."

I shake my head. "I'm not speaking," I say. "I had a pretty terrible experience with Michelle. I have nothing fond to look back on."

John Doe looks at me and back at the microphone. He gives me an uncomfortable smile. He holds up his hands like he is trying to physically reframe the situation.

"I know if my wife had just died, I would be more than willing to speak at her memorial."

"John Doe, you know that's not even close to a fair comparison."

"It's not. Michelle was a much better woman than my wife."

There's some mild applause in the background. Whoever was at the microphone is now done. Everyone is looking at me. I look at John Doe. Jesus. Fine.

I go up to the microphone. I speak.

"Michelle and I did not get along. But we had two kids and I

love them. They're great kids. And Michelle is somewhere in them, so she can't be all bad."

"I remember," someone from the crowd interjects, "I remember Michelle tried to get a group of us to get her pregnant."

People vocally agree. What the fuck. I get back on the mic. "Hey, this isn't an interactive thing, you know? Like, nobody spoke during your turn."

The guy who chimed in responds without hesitation.

"I know, but I'm just trying to flesh the story out. Your story. About your kids."

"Yeah ,but--"

The guy puts his hand up to shoosh me, like he forgot that me and my son are trained killers.

"Jerry, I know it's a summer night and we're all trying to enjoy that, but it's not about you, man."

I feel my whole body get hot and I'm going lightheaded. "I know that. Well aware. I just -- those are my kids and they're not your kids."

"Jerry, no one is saying they're not your kids."

"Yeah, but you're saying you fucked my wife because my wife didn't want them to be my kids."

Now he's got this smile on his face. It's the kind of smile you have when you are actually being a piece of shit and you are enjoying it because that's what you love doing most.

"Jerry, we're just trying to paint the full picture. That's all. You told half the story and we were telling the other half."

I'm not interested in the other half of the story. The blood rushes to my head and I make an executive decision: I am going to harm every person at this memorial. There is another part of my brain that wants to not do that, hoping maybe they will do something nice and help me with my daughter. But the executive part is moving fast. Too fast. It's executive time.

I move toward the little “other half of the story” guy. He puts his hands up like he’s so surprised I want to assault him. Once I get him in my hands I am so overwhelmed. I forget Wing Chun. I rip off one of his butt cheeks. In my hand is a bloody pad of meat. Ripped it clean through his pants.

Everybody yells but nobody moves. I look at the potluck table. I look at my nachos. I turn back around and scan the crowd for John Doe. I see him. I approach him.

I get my hands on John Doe. I turn him around and put my palm hard into the back of his neck. Paralyzed. John Doe is paralyzed now. Whole life changed. John Doe, you shouldn’t have fucked my wife and then beat me up while I was trying to be Spider-Man. You should have stayed in Daughtry.

A couple more guys rush up and try to go at me. Guess what? I paralyze them. I think I am a nice person and I want to be nice to people but I also believe in limits. I have reached my limit. I have a pretty high tolerance for being treated poorly but I have reached my limit. And that’s okay. Everyone goes through this.

I guess this is me saying that I’m justified for paralyzing everyone at this memorial. Not random people on the street. But everyone here treated me like shit and it’s honestly so goofy to treat them super nice when they never really started being nice back. There was all this talk about them being nice to themselves, and you know what? I’m going to be nice to myself, too.

“EVERYBODY STAND UP AND FORM A SINGLE FILE LINE,” I say to the memorial service. The three paralyzed guys are at my feet. No one stands, but also no one moves. Watching a paralyzing is a tough thing. I am empathetic to that.

“Okay. No one has to stand. Or form a line. But you do have to stay where you are. You can’t get up and try to fight me.”

Nobody moves.

“Good.” I take a deep breath. My lizard brain retreats into my

normal brain. I feel the blood go away from my face and back to my regular parts. God. It really is a nice summer night. Sun stays out a long time these nights. Might not go down until 10.

“You guys need to stop being dumb assholes. I get that we allegedly turned the page, and we’re starting to be nice, but this is a bad start. All of you said it would be nice if you did a memorial for Michelle. Fine. You said you want to spread her ashes at Café Rio. Fine. You said the memorial has to have a potluck and I needed to make a dish. Fine. You all got to get on the microphone and said you want to murder my son. Based on what happened today? Not fine, but understandable. But then, after I get pressured into going up to speak, I say that I love my kids and you guys all jump in and say that Michelle wanted them to be your kids. Gabe and Samantha are mine. And I love them.”

Everyone is looking at each other. No one wants to speak. They all have something to say and they don’t wanna say it.

“SPIT IT OUT,” I bark.

Brad Quigley sighs.

“Jerry, your kids are your kids. Right? They are yours.” I nod. Good. Brad gets it.

“But--” Brad starts again. His eyes are closed and he can’t stop himself.

“What he was saying is that, Michelle wanted kids with someone else. Like, one of us. So, you know — Jerry, do you know how genetics work? He quickly throws his hands up as I march toward him. “No, I mean, hold on Jerry! I mean, those kids, they would be different kids if one of us got Michelle — Jerry, NO!”

The reptile brain is back. I march toward his table, and I give him paralysis. I’m not going to be told I don’t know what genetics are. At least not right now. The reptile brain is still going in my head. It looks at the crowd of men and comes to a quick verdict and punishment.

“Alright. Here’s the deal. That was the last person I have to paralyze. We can be done with that. But, I’m going to come by each table and break everyone’s arm. Snap it. Snap it clean.”

Someone from the back of the memorial responds.

“Jesus, Jerry.”

I look in the direction of the voice. I recognize the head and face.

“Was that you, Brian? Stand up. Stand up and wait at the potluck table. Don’t run away.”

Brian Alder gets up slowly and drags himself to the potluck table. Brian and I both know this is not good for him. I address the group again.

“If anyone runs, you get paralyzed. I’m going to catch you. I’m going to catch you and you get paralyzed. Right there. You’ll be paralyzed up here and you’ll get a sunburn because you can’t get away from the sun. If you stay where you are, you get something, but not as bad. You’ll get like, a broken arm, that’s it. Then, you know what? When I’m done with your table, you can go up to the potluck table and make yourself a plate.”

“Can I make myself a plate right now, because I am at the potluck table?” Brian asks.

I am in absolute shock with Brian’s behavior.

“No, Brian, you cannot make yourself a plate right now. You made a rude little comment. You are getting paralyzed. Waist down. No more legs. You were rude so you don’t get to walk again.”

When I say this out loud, a part of me is like, how did we get here? But we’re here, you know? These are the stakes.

I nod to myself about my thoughts. And the stakes. While I am nodding to myself about the stakes, Brian tries to run past me. I stick my arms out and grab him. I paralyze him. Paralyzed. Full. Neck down. Come on, Brian.

Now there are four bodies that are alive but unable to move. I

don't even know how they are getting off this little mountain. I'm not moving them. No way. The other guys are gonna, well, I dunno. If everything holds they are going to have broken arms. God... are these paralyzed guys going to get discovered by strangers tomorrow? That's going to be so weird for the strangers. I shake my head. So weird. I hear another person speak and that breaks my concentration.

"I don't think Brian was insulting you, I think he was just shocked by the stakes."

Oh my God. What is the deal? I look to who just spoke.

"Randy."

"I'm just explaining--"

"You guys have to stop talking. Seriously. What is wrong with you."

"Am I going to get paralyzed?"

I take a deep breath. I'm losing steam. These guys are morons.

"No, man. I mean, God, just be quiet. I don't need explaining or help. I mean, I will need help later. But no more talking."

Silence again. Then, goddamnit, someone raises their hand. Dave Yearwood. The guy bounced back! But still. Enough with the talking.

"No. And your table is first for arm breakings now," I say to Dave.

"Honestly, whatever. It's actually a good question. You can paralyze me, I don't care."

Damn. This must be a crazy question.

"Ask your question."

"If you break our arms how are we going to help you get your daughter back?"

Oof. I nod at him, like, yes. That question was worth it. I think. I can't back off breaking people's arms. Why? I mean, like I said, these are the stakes. And also, I want to. They hurt my feelings and

I'm beyond accepting an apology. It's selfish but I'm not perfect. This is for me. So I gotta make that work.

But I can't ignore the point being made. It's good. I think.

"Alright. If you help me, I'll fix your broken arm in the tree. It's complicated and I'm going to have to learn surgery, but trust me, I can fix it."

He comes right back at me, locked and loaded.

"What if we just go to the doctor after you break it?"

Damn. Damn it. Okay. Hold on.

Wow, I think he's got me, but I give it my best shot.

"Alright, but you know hospitals and insurance costs. It's going to be super expensive. I break your arm, you help me in the dream place, it's free."

He starts up again, but it's fine. He has a history of good questions and from that, a respect has grown between us. Also, only hours ago, I was using him as a literal punching bag.

"Some guys— again I'm sorry for talking, Jerry, I know the rules — but a lot of guys have insurance. I can't speak for everyone on how good their insurance is but, you know. We may just get our arms broken and call it a night."

The majority of the group nods. Yeah. Checkmate. The American health insurance system has once again proven to be unbeatable.

"Does anyone not have insurance?" I ask.

Two guys raise their hands.

The guy closest to me is Alan Soule. Alan is that credit union manager I used to complain about the posters to. Wow. You know, the credit union has all these nice posters and says it's doing all this great stuff, but guys like Alan have no insurance.

The other guy is Lester McCallister. Lester is a young guy, fairly sharp. Just graduated from ISU and life is starting to get tough on him. Probably thought, "why do I need insurance? I'm young."

Well, Lester. Maybe you shouldn't have come to my wife's memorial. Maybe you shouldn't have fucked my wife. Because that kind of behavior is officially a health risk.

I take those two and break their arms. Then I put them to the side. After that, I go to each table and break everyone else's arm. I break the left arm because most people are right handed. I'm trying to reel the stakes back in a bit.

But man. Breaking people's arms is disgusting. It's an audible experience. Bones and muscles and tendons... getting rocked. And then the scream from the person who is getting their arm broke. Jesus. I almost stopped after the first table, but that wouldn't be fair.

Once everyone's arms were broken, it ended up being a nice potluck reception. Everyone loved the nachos. And they figured out how to cut a little out, put it on their plate. It was not hard. I did not think it would be hard. You can bring nachos to a potluck and it will be fine.

After some honest-to-god warm goodbyes, me, Alan, Lester, Presham, and Gabe make our way down the hill. Before we left, I took some of the paralyzed guys and moved them closer together so they could stay warm for the night. I thought that was nice.

SIXTEEN

The drive back to the pool is annoying. Lots of moaning from the broken arm guys. I get that the arms hurt. I'm not mad at them. But I figured they would go into some type of shock by now. A lot of people say when they get major injuries that they can't feel it because they are in shock. It's tough. I ask Gabe if he ever got a wiffle ball. He says no. I turn the radio up.

We make it back to the pool okay. The broken arm boys are sweating pretty badly. Everyone is still at the memorial so I tell them, hey, you have your choice of pool towels for your sweat. Go nuts. They grab my pool towel, which sucks, but I can't stop them. I gave them free reign and they took it, fair and square.

I tell them to take their sweat towel, walk over to the big tall tree, and wait.

I see Joann at the snack bar setting up a little pentobarbital station for me. She put up three or four pool noodles to act as some type of camouflage. God, what a sneaky little moron. I love her. People are going to see right through those noodles and my lifeless body will be perfectly on display. It's so bad but she clearly cares.

I make my way back to my pool chair. God, it used to all be so simple. Just get a chair and keep it. Now, all of this. It's real time pressure. But what else am I going to do, you know? I call Gabe and Presham over for a quick huddle. They shuffle over with zero urgency. After a thousand hand waves, they make it to my chair.

"You guys have some weirdo stash of guns, don't you?" I say. Blank stares. Nothing.

"Guys, Joann is trying to cover my body with three pool noodles. I am going to be out cold. Not moving. All the guys in town are going to get their arms reset, and guess where they are going?"

"Fred Meyer?"

“Gabe,” I sigh. “Gabe they are going to be coming here, bud. Probably to kill me. And both of you. So if you have a stash of guns between the two of you, you know, help your old man out. Defend my body.”

Presham looks at Joann standing up the pool noodles.

“Can we take an Uber Black?” Gabe asks.

“What, why?” I say. Gabe says nothing. He doesn’t need an Uber Black; he just wants one. This fucking kid, I swear to God.

“Normal Uber. Go. And Gabe, when you get back, get Lester and Alan, and go into the tree. Presham, you stand right at my body. Let’s get some nodding. Yes? Nod your heads.”

They nod. They leave.

I lean back on my pool chair. I fish through my cooler and find the last hard seltzer. The milky pool water is still. It’s quiet. I open the seltzer and the snap of the aluminum seal echoes through the pool space. I take a couple hard pulls from the can and let the acid bubbles beat the shit out of my throat. The sun has just started to set. This is it. The endgame.

This entire day got away from me. I wanted a nice day at the pool where we all work on our bodies. I now straddle two worlds, my life existing on two different planes of time. I’ve aged decades and only hours at the same time. I’ve seen a couple deaths. I’m currently in the midst of a hostage situation. But you know, I did have a couple laughs along the way. And, to be fair, I did tons of work with my body. An insane amount of work on my body. Gabe’s body? I don’t know. I just don’t know. Not even sure I care.

Despite every physical sensation telling me otherwise, this seltzer is going down smooth.

I take every sip seriously. I let the sips drown my ears so all I hear is the seltzer going from the can through my lips and down into my throat. I entirely lock my brain out of life. Time could be moving fast or slow, and it doesn’t matter. It is happening without

my participation. I am focused on drinking alcohol right now. That's it. I'm alcohol drinking and it is good.

Once the can is done, I set it down by my pool chair. I see Presham and Gabe are back, getting out of an Uber with Pelican cases that I assume are holding guns.

Joann is putting the final touches on her noodle fort when I come over.

"The noodles are to hide you from people," Joann says.

"I figured," I say.

"They'll look over here and they'll just see pool noodles."

"That's good thinking, Joann."

Joann smiles at me. She's tired. I can tell she knows the noodles are dumb, but she worked hard on it. I'd never tell her to her face that the noodles are dumb.

"Hey, Joann?" I say.

"Yeah, Jerry?"

"I just want you to know that, in my dream life, I married a woman like you. Just like you. It was nice. We had a good life together. We even had a son. Good kid."

"What happened? Did I die?"

"No. You turned out to be a big homophobe. Our son is the same way. But before all that, it was nice."

Joann smiles. It's great.

"Do you think that's just like a dream thing or do you think, I dunno." I say this fast so the embarrassment will come quicker.

She looks down. Her face gets a little red.

"I dunno, Jerry. If you were married to Michelle, you must be some kind of man."

"Oh don't worry," I say. "We never came close to having sex. My kids came because I jizzed in my jacuzzi. My jacuzzi got my wife pregnant."

"Hmm," Joann says. "That might just be my speed."

I scrunch my nose and shift back. What the fuck? Who is this woman? What does that even mean? That's her speed? Jacuzzi's with cum? God almighty.

I break up the bizarre sexual tension Joann created. "I think it's pentobarbital time," I say.

Joann smiles and rolls her eyes like we are already comfortably dating and me saying "it's pentobarbital time" is something she has heard a million times.

She sets me down on the pool chair behind the noodles and starts feeling for a vein on my arm. Goddamn these are soft hands. She finds a vein on my arm, and then she puts the syringe right in the back of my fucking head like an animal.

Why the fu--

SEVENTEEN

I am at the Burning Teton campsite. I wait a few seconds. Nothing. No snapping back to reality. I smell the melting plastic and whatever else a tent is made out of. I think about the fire being put out. Extinguished. But it keeps going. When I think of anything to put the fire out, there is a strange block I feel in my brain and body, like I'm fighting someone. The fire stays.

Instead, I think about a big bag of sand and a shovel and it appears. Okay. Good. I use the shovel to dump sand on the flames. Flames gone. I find a loose campsite hot dog and get some calories in. Jesus fuck.

Eventually the guys come in. Alan, Lester, Gabe. Gabe's gun is orange.

"Gabe, why is your gun orange?"

"That's the color."

"Gabe, is that a gun with bullets?"

"Like, is it loaded? Yeah."

"With what kind of bullets?"

Gabe pauses. Then his face goes blank. He shuts down. Gabe brought an airsoft gun. I set my hot dog on the ground and look at Gabe. Why? He had a real gun hours ago. On him. No one asked him to have it then, and he had it. Now when I ask Gabe to have a gun, he goes home and grabs his orange airsoft gun? This is not goof-around time. Gabe looks dead serious, so I don't know if he thinks it's goof-around time. I think he was dead serious about bringing that gun. We're back to Pool Gabe. It's one step forward, two steps back all the time.

At some point I get tired of staring at Gabe and I go back to my hot dog. I eat it in silence. When I am ready to talk, I talk.

"First," I address the group. "Little housekeeping: Alan, Lester:

I'm gonna give you metal arms for now. You'll have a metal arm in here, and your arm won't be broken anymore. In here."

"Okay, but--"

"I'm not done, Alan. I'm not done. Metal arm, in here. Now, once we are done, we'll come back here, and then someone needs to go out of the tree and get me some DVDs or some medical books, and then I'll learn about surgery and bones and stuff. Then, we'll leave here, okay? When we get back to regular life, you will still have broken arms. But I will have the knowledge of how to repair your broken arms. And then we'll just play it by ear."

"Like, you will repair our broken arms?"

"Yeah, we'll play it by ear." I say this because I don't know if I am going to want to repair broken arms right away once we are done with this. It's a lot. I change the subject.

"It's gonna take a lot of time in here to learn all that stuff. Regular life, it'll be like 20 minutes at most. But in here we're talking, like, seven years. Minimum. So, you know, think of hobbies or something. Right now, focus on the mission. But if there is downtime, yeah, think of a passion project."

I can tell that's not sitting well with Alan or Lester. But our healthcare system is fucked and I am using it to my advantage. I hate to say this, but, I got 'em.

I give them their metal arms. I make them kind of heavy because that's funny. We have to keep things loose.

"What do we do now?" Gabe asks.

"Yeah," I say. I pick at my neck and look around. I'm not Dog the Bounty Hunter. I have no idea what to do. I try to do a simple move where I imagine the girls in front of me in order for them to appear. It doesn't work. So, okay, the easiest possible method is a no-go.

I feel a tickle on my shoulder. I'm not *not* in the mood to be tickled, but come on. I jerk my shoulder.

“Gabe–”

I whip around and see Gabe is still standing where he was before. I look at my shoulder.

Oh wow. Samantha’s bee.

“Hey, bud.” I say. The bee looks spent. I think of any sugar liquid I can imagine. I feel the force working against my brain, but I manage to eek out a warm Otter Pop. I bite the Otter Pop open and let the bee have a drink.

The bee starts to wake up after some time. I wipe some ashes off its back to loosen it up. The bee starts to fly. It hovers around my face then slowly starts to drift away. I follow the bee and the guys follow me.

The bee takes us to the door in the back. I go to open the door but it won’t budge. I step back.

“Goddamn,” Alan says. “Looks like that door has got every screw, lock bolt, and washer known to man. Some of those things aren’t even American.”

He’s right. This door is all fucked up. I try to imagine another door next to this door. One without any shit on it. Nothing.

“Alright,” I say. “Let’s all shake the door and maybe our human strength can rip it off.”

Everyone approaches the door. We shake. Nothing. We’re all emasculated and that’s obvious.

“We’re gonna need to get all those bolts and screws off, Jerry,” Alan says.

“You think?” I say. Fuck.

“Fuck,” I say out loud. “Okay, well, Alan, Lester: What tools do you need to undo these?”

“The tools I ain’t got,” Lester chuckles.

“Yeah, Jerry, you need a pro for this. For anything like this, I normally call Ken Hardee. He’s got some stuff.”

“No, correction,” I say. “I’ve got some stuff. In my garage. Ken’s stuff is my stuff.”

“Okay, Jerry,” Lester says. “Takes a real pro to use those tools. Not saying you’re not a pro or nothing. It’s just, Ken’s a pro.”

“Well, fuck,” I say. This is clearly the work of Ethan. This is clearly an Ethan trap. Fine. Fine, Ethan.

“Gabe, go to Ken Hardee’s house. Explain what is happening. Don’t make anything up. Just the facts. Tell Ken to get his tools from my garage and come to the tree with you. If he helps us he can keep his tools in my garage. But he has to treat me as an equal. We are equals now. And if I say something funny to him while we are both in my garage, he needs to laugh. He can politely laugh if he doesn’t like the joke. But he can’t just turn his head and pretend not to hear me. That’s insane. And tell him that all of this is non-negotiable. I will shake him in front of his family again.. . Got it?”

“Can I take an Uber Black?” Gabe asks.

“I don’t care,” I say.

Gabe smiles and leaves.

Lester, Alan, and I wait for what feels like 30 days in here. I don’t know. I don’t have a clock. I have an internal clock, though. I trust it. 30 days.

Lester, Alan, and I don’t talk. We have no common interests.

Gabe comes back. No Ken.

“Where is Ken, Gabe?” I ask.

“He wants an apology for you attacking him in front of his son. And for screaming in his son’s ear.”

“Oh, for fucks’ sake!” I say. Fucking Ken!

“It would be easier to apologize. Even if you don’t mean it,” Alan says to me. I just look at him. Alan. What does Alan know?

“Gabe, you go back there. And you tell him this: If he does not come with you and his tools, I will shake him until he dies. I will shake him until he dies and I will scream at his son. I will scream at

everyone he loves. I am one Uber ride away. You tell him that. You tell him, 'I am one Uber ride away.' And you leave it at that."

Gabe looks at me.

"You can take Uber Black, but this is the last time."

He smiles and leaves.

Another 30 days. Fifteen days in and Lester apologized for being not so talkative. "I have a lot of stuff on my mind."

Who cares? But fine, we all accept his apology.

Gabe comes back, with Ken. Ken has a Pelican case of tools. I look at Alan like, *imagine if I apologized? Imagine if I did that?*

"I still think we should talk as men after this," Ken says to me.

"We'll play it by ear," I say. I point to the locked door.

Ken saunters over to the door and seems to know everything on the door.

"Yeah, I can see this door being an issue for a single-parent household," Ken says, unprovoked. He snaps open his Pelican case and goes to work. He takes a solid 20 minutes explaining the difference between European screw faces, Chinese bolt sizes, some company in Israel that makes custom drill bits and it's like, Ken, I beat you in a fight. This means nothing. Just smile at me, once.

He gets the last bolt off and before I can open the door, he opens it. That's not how it works, Ken. I am the leader. I open the door. I move us to the next level in the journey.

Thank God he did, because he is immediately met with the absolute kitchen sink of projectiles. Everything. Every bullet or whatever that shoots out of something is now in Ken. Ken is dead. Man, there is something to be said about leading from behind. I delegated the door opening to Ken and it paid off. No other way to look at it. I delegated and it paid off.

"GODDAMNIT," Lester yells. Alan throws up. Gabe is fine.

"Everyone relax," I say. I take a breath. Ken's body is throwing

up blood from every pore. He has immediately gone into shitting himself. I try to be nice.

“It’s okay to acknowledge death. Ken is dead, and that happened. But we’ve seen a lot of death today. So let’s keep that in mind. This is just another one. A drop in a bucket. But if you start looking at these deaths one by one, then yeah, it’s gonna be hard to move forward.”

I nod my head at the group. Again, I’m not worried about Lester and Alan bailing. The medical industry in America is the leverage. These men would rather risk getting sprayed with bullets than pay out of pocket for major surgery.

I walk to the side of the door so I can get a good angle of vision without getting shot. I see nothing. I hear big, clanking noises. And hydraulic sounds. Maybe it’s a garbage truck. I remember that Ken was shot badly. Maybe it’s not a garbage truck.

I think. I can’t get bullet proof glass going. I can’t get riot shields. I think a little more. Something drops down outside.

I point to the giant cartoon anvil ten feet in front of the door.

“Stay behind that! Let’s go.”

We run out the door and keep our backs against the anvil. I peek around the corner.

It’s some type of transformer, metal, robot thing. Fifty feet tall. It’s got a big metal sword and guns on its shoulders and inside the head I can see my ex-wife and Chochi. They’re all pissed off. They are yelling something at me, but they probably got a good glass system in that robot because I can’t hear anything. But it looks hateful.

I have to think that my divorce is not going well. I don’t think I’m going to have time for a follow up with my divorce lawyer because this seems like we will be fighting to the death. Best case scenario, Chochi and my ex-wife die. I gotta say, that makes me

pretty emotional. Right out of the first door I am forced to kill my dream family.

But you know, this is one of those crack an egg to make an omelet situations. Yeah, I married one of these eggs. Had sex with it. That egg got pregnant and we had a baby egg. Had a whole life with these two eggs. Now I gotta crack both of them to make an omelet. The omelet is saving a lesbian couple. This crack an egg phrase captures my situation perfectly.

I turn to the boys. I try to speak over the sound of gunfire and rockets exploding against my cartoon anvil.

“Boys, we gotta kill my dream ex-wife and my dream son. They clearly have aligned with Ethan and have become a Transformer. This is hard for me. I would give it a six out of ten for how hard it is for me. They are family, but they are bigots. Big time bigots. Anyway, I will have to turn each of you into a car. You can then become whatever you want once you are a car. That’s how Transformers work. To make things go faster, I’m just gonna choose your car for you.”

“That’s not a Transformer,” Alan says.

“Huh? What are you doing Alan. Are you trying to be the leader of this group?”

“It’s a Jaeger. It’s from the movie *Pacific Rim*.”

I look up at the robot again. Oh man. Really? I shake my head.

Oh, come on Ethan.

EIGHTEEN

Alright. So I don't have a perfect track record with Ethan. It's close. I've catered to most of his desires mainly because his desires are wild and intriguing and leave me breathless. He is truly the clown prince of eastern Idaho.

But whatever. I fucked up once. One time. He wanted to see *Pacific Rim* at the drive-in in Idaho Falls. Okay, great. I didn't see *Pacific Rim* when it came out, and honestly I didn't want to see it at the drive-in either. It's a musical. I'm not a musical guy. I like action. So, you know, hard pass.

So the day rolls around and I'm like, I'm not going. But I don't say anything because I figure... I don't know what I figured.

But he goes. And he's like nine. And he doesn't have a car. So he's just at a movie theater with no car and no guardian and that was bad.

People said this could be considered traumatic for a young kid. So I asked him if it was. He said no. But he also said that I exhibited poor judgement. So there you go. Not traumatic.

But now I'm sitting here looking at a fucking death robot based on this movie I didn't go see with Ethan and I'm starting to think this whole thing was traumatic and he lied to me.

NINETEEN

“**A**lrigh. Jaeger, huh? Is there a particular song the Jaegers sing?”

Alan looks at me with a dumb face.

“Alan. A song. What’s the most popular song from *Pacific Rim*?”

I expand the question to the larger group with my eyes. Like, let’s go. Start singing, dum-dums.

Gabe pipes up.

“Some Enchanted Evening”

“Great,” I say.

“That’s from *South Pacific*, the musical.”

“What? Is this a different thing?”

“*Pacific Rim* was an action fighting movie with giant robots and monsters,” Alan says.

Interesting. I think I would have liked to see *Pacific Rim*.

“We did *South Pacific* at my school,” Gabe says.

“Okay.”

“I was in it,” Gabe says.

“Okay.”

“I did lights.”

“Did you do lights, or were you in it?”

“I did lights.”

“Okay, Gabe.”

“You said you couldn’t come because you were taking Ethan to see *Pacific Rim*.”

I don’t have time for this. I shrug, hoping that shrug will be enough of an apology for the next few minutes. I’m sorry, but it’s go time. Also, lights? I turn the lights on and off every day. Do I need my parents to watch me? Whatever. I am remorseful.

“Okay, we gotta destroy that Jaeger. How do we do that.”

“The Jaegers normally fight kaijus but they beat kaijus in the movie, so I dunno,” Alan says

“What about another Jaeger?” Lester says.

“I don’t even know what a Jaeger is, guys,” I say.

“There is one right there, Jerry. We talked about this.”

“Yeah, but I still like, what’s its deal, the Jaeger?” I know I’m being hard-headed but this is the first time in here that I legitimately felt close to death. I might be stalling.

Lester and Alan go over the plot of *Pacific Rim* in solid detail. The guy from *Sons of Anarchy* is in this movie. I did not know that. Actually, two guys from *Sons of Anarchy*! This movie sounds great!

Okay fine. I know what a Jaeger is. I know enough, at least. I tell everyone I have to close my eyes and do some imagining and that everyone needs to be quiet.

I close my eyes. Jaeger. *Sons of Anarchy* guy. Robot. Weapon? Yeah. But a big weapon. Biggest one in the world.

I open my eyes and observe my creation.

Man. Not great. It’s a robot, sure. But it’s covered in human skin and looks a lot like the *Sons of Anarchy* guy. The blonde, sexy one with the big wiener. But man, it’s got a big gun thing. Could also be a bat. Thought about going with a sword but I decided against it. Imagine getting beaten to death with a bat.

“Okay. Alan. Lester. You’re up.”

They both look at me with goofy surprised faces, as if this wasn’t going to happen.

“Jerry, this is your dream. This is your issue. It’s your daughter, you know?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t see *Pacific Rim*. So me getting in the Jaeger, I don’t know. It seems bad. It seems like a bad idea.”

I end the conversation there. It’s a tough spot for Alan and Lester because death is very much on the table. And it’s hard to debate me because I am physically stronger.

Alan and Lester get in the Sons of Anarchy jaeger and do some basic human connection per the process shown in *Pacific Rim*.

"You guys gotta connect. It's an important part of being in the Jaeger," I call out to them. They know it's important, but I want to feel like I'm a part of it.

The skin folds around the two of them and the Jaeger rises to meet my dream family's Jaeger.

"Pay attention," I tell Gabe. If Alan and Lester fail then we're gonna have to get into one of those things. I'm gonna have to mentally connect with Gabe. We're already at a disadvantage.

The two Jaegers face each other. I look up at my dream family's Jaeger and I can see my ex-wife screaming at me. She wanted me in that Jaeger. Too bad.

My dream family's Jaeger starts things off with a full haymaker to the *Sons of Anarchy* Jaeger. Clean shot. Rocks its shit. No counters. No ducking.

The *Sons of Anarchy* Jaeger doesn't move. Did they not feel that? Impossible. The blonde guy in *Sons of Anarchy* is so sensitive. Takes everything as a slight. That Jaeger had to have felt that.

My dream family throws a hammer punch right on the top of the other Jaeger's head. The head collapses like a tin can. Motherfucker.

Sons of Anarchy Jaeger doesn't move again. The back of its head pops open a bit and a bleeding Lester pops out.

"OUR ARMS ARE TOO HEAVY, JERRY."

"Huh?"

"YOU MADE OUR ARMS TOO HEAVY, WE CAN'T LIFT THE GUN."

I don't say this, but I feel like a lot was asked of me in this situation. I'm not NASA, you know?

"THEN KICK," I say. "USE THE FEET." They are gonna die.

Lester pops back into the Jaeger and the Jaeger lifts its leg and the Jaeger falls.

So the *Sons of Anarchy* Jaeger is face first on the ground. Can't get up.

I yell to my dream family's Jaeger, "LET'S CALL THIS ONE A DRAW," but I actually don't get past "LET'S" before they bring their foot crashing down on the *Sons of Anarchy* Jaeger. They stomp the bejesus out of the *Sons of Anarchy* Jaeger.

I turn to Gabe. "Lester and Alan are dead. They have to be. What a shitshow. But I took some mental notes and I think we have a good shot at this. Be prepared to connect mentally with me."

Gabe goes to speak but I shit you not, a spit bubble jumps off his tongue and floats in the air. Imagine your mouth moving in such a way that this happens, often. Gabe does not finish his thought. I close my eyes and think about a new Jaeger.

Jaeger

Not covered in skin

Gun? Yes

Sons of Anarchy

Love it

Ron Perlman

Ron Perlman was also in *Pacific Rim*

Ron Perlman

Gun

Jaeger

I open my eyes and goddamnit. I knew it. The fucking Jaeger is basically Ron Perlman holding a gun. And he's covered in skin. I don't even think this thing is a Jaeger. I think it's a 30-foot Ron Perlman.

I look up, "Are you Ron Perlman?"

"Yeah," Ron says.

Goddamnit.

“Can we go inside your head and fight my ex-wife?”

“Yeah,” Ron says.

Fine. I turn to Gabe. “Okay. Dad got distracted during dreaming and now we are going to fight inside a Ron Perlman. I’m sure it will be fine, but it also sucks. But we gotta just shut up and do it, okay?”

Gabe nods.

The giant Ron Perlman lays on the ground and opens his mouth. In the middle of his 70 teeth is a little door. We open the teeth door and climb inside Ron Perlman’s head.

Ron Perlman’s brain is pink and beautiful. Things are firing off big time. This is a good brain and Ron Perlman is not fucking around.

This is not like a Jaeger set-up, but I think I can work with this.

“Gabe. I’m going to touch Ron Perlman’s brain. Ron Perlman and I are going to connect. You stay on the side and keep your hands in your pockets.”

“I should connect with Ron Perlman, too,” Gabe says.

“What? No. Come on, Gabe. This is primetime stuff. Ron Perlman. You’re not ready.”

“What about the gun?” Gabe asks.

“What about it?”

“Who is in charge of the gun?”

“Ron Perlman — Gabe, did you see *Sons of Anarchy*? Did you even watch *Sons of Anarchy*? Ron Perlman is a murderer.”

A voice fills the room.

“Guy, I’m an actor. That’s a show. I’m not murdering anybody.”

“Dad, I actually murdered someone. I killed mom with a gun.”

“What?” Ron Perlman asks.

“Gabe, bud, you shot Mom and that’s all well and good, but we are in a high-stakes situation. Killing mom was honestly low stakes.”

That’s not true. Gabe saved my life. But I just think Gabe

syncing up with me and Ron would be a lot. I give Gabe a look, like, “meeting over,” and I stick my hand right on Ron Perlman’s brain.

“Ow, fuck,” Ron Perlman says. But we are syncing up big time.

Ron is trying to learn who I am, and I am trying to see what he looked like as a child. It must be insane. Ron Perlman in kid form? I gotta see it. He is fighting me, but my curiosity is too powerful. I find a memory in his brain where he is standing in front of a bedroom mirror holding a Hanukkah present. Jesus Christ. It is insane. I’m so thrown off I lose my control of the situation and Ron Perlman snaps me out of the sync.

“You’re a fucking cocksucker,” he says to me. I feel ashamed. I don’t linger on that for too long because my ex-wife has taken her robot’s arms and drove them across the rib cage of Ron Perlman. Ron grunts. I can hear his ribs splinter and his organs move.

“Ron! You have to fight my ex-wife and son or they will kill you!”

“No. Youse two gotta get out of my head. This is between you and the old lady.”

“Ron,” Gabe says, “the two people in that robot hate gay people. That’s why she divorced my dad. Because my sister is a lesbian.”

“Get the fuck out of here. Those two?”

“Yeah, those two,” Gabe says. “Let me have control of your gun. It will be my brain doing the shooting so you don’t have to say you killed anyone.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it kid. I’ll kill homophobes, kid. I’ve killed homophobes,” Ron Perlman says.

Ron and Gabe connect brains and Gabe gets a hold of the gun. I’m sitting over here like, Ron Perlman just admitted to murder. He said before that he was just an actor and doesn’t want to kill anyone, but it was the mention of a homophobe that got him to say, yeah I’ve killed people in the past? This man is full of secrets, but that’s just how people are.

So Gabe fires two quick kneecap shots at my ex-family's Jaeger. He then fires a bullet into the head where Chochi and Marge are located.

"Hey, for fuck's sake, Gabe," I call out. "Maybe we knock the Jaeger down and we can put them under arrest or something."

"Our lives are in danger. We are within our legal rights to use lethal force."

"Gabe, this is a dream, bud."

"That means we don't have to be in any type of danger to justify use of a deadly weapon," Gabe says.

Okay. Gabe is going to be homeschooled. He's actively looking for a justification for murder. This is a character flaw that we get around with one-on-one studies away from other kids. I am not going to come out and say problem solved, but homeschool is a solid solution.

"Just avoid killing them for now, okay, bud?" I say this, and it's enough of a distraction for Chochi and my ex-wife to exploit. They come down hard with a karate chop to Ron Perlman's gun hand. Gun flies away. We have no defense other than Ron Perlman's body. Ron Perlman is over 70 years old. This is bad.

And it's bad from the start. They get Ron's arm and rip it clean off.

"YOU MUTHAFUCKAS!" Ron Perlman screams. Poor Ron. It's a ton of blood.

"Gabe, we gotta go," I say. Gabe doesn't respond. I look over at Gabe.

Gabe's covered in blood. His right arm is gone, ripped off at the socket. Gabe and Ron are one. Not ideal.

Once the gun was out the picture, this fight turned into a robot beating an old man. Hard to be a couple guys stuck inside the old man. The pounding of each metal fist echoes through the cavern of

Ron Perlman's head and through the body of Gabe. Gabe at this point is a mangled mess.

I don't know why, but I think about when Gabe was one year old and hadn't showed signs of walking. His Doctor said he should be holding himself up on stuff. He should be moving around that way. There might be something wrong, he said. But one day I looked down at the end of the hall, and there was Gabe, standing. On his own. I said, "Hi Gabe," and he walked down the hall to me like it was nothing. He got to where he should be on time, just skipped a few steps.

I snap out of it and throw my hands at Ron's brain. He doesn't like it but he doesn't have a choice. None of us do.

I throw up one of Ron's hands to block a haymaker. I feel his bone snap. I lurch Ron forward to shoulder shove the Jaeger back. I miss. We go to the ground.

I turn around and see the other Jaeger eclipse the sun. It raises both hands up. Those hands are probably going to come down and end us. The shadow from the Jaeger feels nice. I feel like an absolute failure, but it's nice to get out of the sun.

Before I can enjoy the shade, a dart of grey light moves past us and I see the sun again. The Jaeger set on crushing us is gone. I hear what sounds like a rocket moving past us, the air collapsing due to some shit hot speed. Ron Pearlman's head moves to follow the sound.

A half mile away, the Jaeger is getting pummeled in the sky by something smaller, some airborne machine. The machine has fire coming off its feet. It is moving itself and the Jaeger straight toward a purple-red canyon ridge. The ridge ripples when the Jaeger hit it at a sonic speed. The sound comes after. Holy shit.

The smaller machine darts up in a giant loop, coming back towards us. The machine looks human, sleek, even a little curvy. It's a machine, but, damn. I would fuck this machine.

The machine is now hovering above us. Its voice is metallic and rattles all of Ron Perlman.

“HIDE,” it says.

The glass face mask of the machine slides down, and oh my God, it's Jen from Bakersfield. My dream daughter-in-law. I am no longer interested in fucking the machine. Interesting development. No

longer a fun, sexy development.

I hear a sound coming from that far away ridge. Jen hears it, too. I look over. My wife and Chochi's Jaeger is pushing itself off the ridge. It manages to get itself off, and starts moving toward us with alarming speed.

Jen presses a button on her forearm and a beautiful blue flare pops out of the top of her machine and into the sky. Second later, a swarm of similar machines come over a hill behind us and descend on my ex-wife and dream son.

My ex-wife's Jaeger moves toward the swarm. They meet the swarm 50 yards away from us and it's a crash of metal. The Jaeger's giant hands catch and crush a couple, but there are too many. Jen from Bakersfield is flying above, firing rockets into the Jaeger to keep it off balance. It's too much. The Jaeger falls on its back. Then, like a bunch of sharks when a kid falls into the shark exhibit, they tear the Jaeger apart.

It's an unrealistic amount of blood. I have to assume that Marge and Chochi are creating that blood, that the blood is not coming from the Jaeger. I am white knuckle holding onto the idea that Marge and Chochi are two hateful people, that they are part of a dream that turned into a nightmare, that they are not real. But it's crazy. I spent a life with them.

Yeah, so I'm in Ron Perlman's head having myself a cry. A solid, tip-to-taint emotional experience of grief. Gabe tries to rub my back, but his hand has this strange weight and stink to it. It could

be Ron Perlman's brain juice but I don't think it is. Gabe's hands just smell bad. I politely get his hand away from me.

I see that the commotion over the Jaeger has stopped. Gabe and I limp out of Ron Perlman's brain area, through his throat and out of his mouth. Gabe is in bad shape. Arm gone. Bleeding at the nub. All beaten to shit.

"Gabe, you gotta head back. Once you get out you'll be fine, but if you die in here, I don't know."

"I'll be okay, Dad," Gabe says. His eyes are moving around with no particular agenda.

"Gabe," I say. "You did good. You did the best."

Gabe's eyes stop moving and get wet around the bottom lids. He slowly shakes his head. He pushed himself off the side of Ron Perlman's face and walks toward the pink door that appears. I walk with him. I pat him on the back as he opens the door and limps through. That kid had an entire experience that he will never be able to capitalize on. Can't put it on a resume. Can't put it on a college essay. If he ever tells a person outside of Chubbuck that he went into his father's dream and fought a Jaeger inside a TV actor's head, he will get put in a fucking nut house.

It sucks. He did great and he'll have to keep it to himself. It just sucks.

I hear the sounds of rocket propulsion and see in the distance Jen from Bakersfield coming toward me. She lands her machine softly on the ground five feet in front of me. The machine is a lot bigger than I thought. Maybe 15 feet high. Not as big as Ron Perlman, but still big.

Jen from Bakersfield climbs out.

"Hi, Jen," I say, not knowing what else to say at a moment like this.

"Things went south once the lesbians came in here," she says. She looks hard. Weathered. Jen from Bakersfield looks like shit.

“One of them is yours?” she asks me.

“Yeah,” I say. “Is that a problem?”

“The problem is gone now,” she says. We both look at the wreckage.

“I don’t know, I think the problem is still around here somewhere,” I say.

“I loved your son,” Jen from Bakersfield says. “But I didn’t know he and Marge felt that way about homosexuality.”

“It caught me off guard, too.”

“We never really spoke about homosexuality too much.”

“No.”

“I guess we never had to.”

“Yeah.”

“But now they’re dead.”

“The lesbians?”

“No, Chochi and Marge.”

“Yeah, okay, got it.”

“So we can talk about homosexuality,” Jen says.

“What? Jen, are you a lesbian?”

“No.”

“Okay, then what the fuck are you talking about.”

“I want to talk about homosexuals.”

Jen from Bakersfield got in a robot and killed her husband and mother-in-law so she could talk about gay people? I am not unpacking this. I’m not asking any clarifying questions. Well, that’s not true, I’ve got one question.

“Who are they?” I ask Jen from Bakersfield. I point to the swarm of flying robots a half of a football field away.

“The town of Bakersfield,” Jen from Bakersfield says. She’s got her shoulders back and she’s very proud and I’m just taken aback by how little I know about my daughter-in-law. She’s kind of a weirdo.

“Okay,” I say. “You saved my life, thank you. Thank you, Jen.” I say this with my hand out like, okay no more weird conversation from you. This is now business.

“Do you know where the lesbians are?” I ask. Jen looks up at the sky. She squints and all the leather parts of her face crack.

“They were here. With us. Now, I don’t know.” She tries to put the right words together and I just know she’s not going to come close.

“It’s like they are in the air. They are in the sky. I feel them.” She closes her eyes and lifts her hands.

I turn around and walk away while her eyes are closed. I don’t know. I’m not going to do that. I’m not engaging in weirdo behavior right now.

“Youse gonna turn your back on me without sayin’ goodbye?” It’s a giant deep voice that is not Jen from Bakersfield. My heart sinks.

“Hey, sorry Ron, I forgot about you.” I turn to face Ron Perlman. He hasn’t moved since we hid from the Jaeger. He is spitting up blood. I can hear his lungs working hard. They are close to punching out.

“Protect ya kids,” he says. “There all ya got.”

“Okay,” I say. “I love you.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I don’t know why I said that. I wouldn’t say I love him. But I used his body for a huge fight. The guy did a lot for me. We connected at the brain. He connected to my son’s brain. And now he’s here spitting up blood, and it’s a lot.

He spits up one last mound of blood and then dies. I don’t know if he dies in real life. I’ll have to check. Lester and Alan? Dead. I’m certain.

Jen no longer has her eyes closed. She is watching Ron Perlman be dead. She looks at me.

I nod at Jen from Bakersfield and keep it moving. Moving somewhere. Without a particular destination, the desert sand is heavier and everything seems farther away. Jen from Bakersfield gave me the worst information. Even if she was giving a clue it would be bad. The sky? The air? Great. What are they? God?

Oh.

TWENTY

I hear a low buzz at my back. It gets louder. The buzzing has a shadow that comes over my head. It comes over my head and lands right in front of my face.

A gentle swarm of bees. How are they gentle? I don't know.

From the center of the swarm pops my daughter's bee. It lands right on my nose and looks into my eyes.

"Hi, bud. Can you and your friends take me to the Cronke Community Pool? You got one of those in here?"

He hops off my nose and goes back into his swarm. The buzzing sound spreads as the swarm flattens and lowers to my feet. I step on the swarm with both feet. The swarm rises, carrying me. As the swarm moves forward I try to remain standing like the green goblin, but the speed is too much so I sit down on my knees for the duration of the ride.

This is not the 86 freeway I remember from decades ago. This does not feel like an abstract, but a very cool space to have American biker vibes. The color is drained. There is a hollow feeling, like the abstract freeway from decades ago was actually an optical illusion built in a factory warehouse and now I'm standing in the center of the warehouse. I'm riding on a cloud of bees so I shouldn't complain, but I'm just saying what I see.

We get off at the Yellowstone exit and head left into a version of Chubbuck. I see what look like the fronts of check-cashing stores, boarded-up diners, a Deseret Industries thrift store. The lights are on, but nobody's shopping. Nobody is here.

We take the turns past the middle school and past the fire department, and end right where Cronke would be. There are cars parked, but they don't appear to be completed. They're just blocks of different sizes and colors.

The bees set me down. Samantha's bee pops out of the middle again.

"Thanks, bud," I say. The bee goes back into the swarm. The swarm goes away.

I see the big tree with the wide opening sitting just outside the pool area. It's at this moment I recognize the lack of sound. It's kind of like when we get a huge dump of snow and everything goes quiet.

I walk toward the gated entrance to the pool area. I flick open the latch and let myself in.

All the pool chairs are neat with towels laid out. Except for the towels, they are all unoccupied, except for one that would be next to my pool chair.

"I guess we got here early, Jerry." She pats the chair next to hers.

"I feel bad, but it's nice to have a moment to ourselves." She smiles at me and it's the smile that kicks off both dimples. This isn't the standard smile that is a stretch of the mouth and nothing else. This one is real.

"It is nice, Michelle." I say this before I cannot say it. And before I can turn around I head in her direction. I sit on the chair.

"It's hard, though," she says, her words bouncing in a pleasant rhythm. "You love the moments with your children, but you really, I don't know... it's just nice to have a second with you."

Before my ass is collected by the plastic straps of my pool chair, I feel tears coming down my face. I'm not sad.

"Did you get here okay?" Michelle asks me. I watch her search my eyes for any type of hurt she can heal. Earnestly heal. I want to tell her about everything. I want to tell her I met Ron Perlman, and got him killed, that I almost got our son killed, that I got Alan and Lester killed. I want to tell her that I tried to be Green Goblin on the bees but the bees were moving too fast.

I want to tell her how good this feels. I want to tell her that I love her. I love this.

But it's the nothing. It's that nothing sound. Even though this is everything I want I can see the cracks. It's like turning around on a Disneyland ride and seeing the cogs and gears and you lose the magic for a split second.

But this isn't some idealized concept of the open road like before. This one is a torture device.

I close my eyes. I don't move. I let the tears fall down my face and I listen for that nothing sound.

This isn't some torture device built by a 10-year-old. This one is mine.

"I can't kill you," I manage to whisper. I feel her hand go up my back and grab my shoulder.

"I'll always be here for you," Michelle says. There is no poison in her tone. She means it.

"I know," I say. I open my eyes. There's something, some muscle in my ass or legs that gets me off the chair. It's not my brain. It's not my heart. They both want to sit and be loved by this version of Michelle. But the ass knows.

I walk away from the chair toward the pool. I get close to the edge. The water is gone. Every drop.

Sitting at the bottom of the pool is an extremely fat man. I recognize him.

"Hi, Mr. Cronke."

"Hiya, big guy." Sam Cronke looks up at me. One eye is blasted through where I'm assuming his wife put a gun and got whatever revenge she was looking for. I can see the back of the pool through his head.

"Did you drink the pool water?"

"It's more sunscreen than breast milk. But more breast milk than pool water!"

Well, that answers that. I wave goodbye to Mr. Cronke. I take one lap around the snack bar to see if there are any slices of pizza. Nothing. I figure it's time to go.

I leave the pool area. I get to the tree. The hole is huge. The other hole was smaller. This one is bigger. I don't even have to duck. I put my hands up over my head. I can't touch the top of the entrance. Huge hole. I go inside.

TWENTY-ONE

I'm in a cubed room. I know most rooms are cube-shaped, but this one is a real cubed situation. Dark grey walls made of square stones. A stone cube table. Stone cube benches. Ton of cubes.

Ethan is sitting at the cube table. In front of him are some little stone cubes. Not that little. Like, baseball-sized cubes. Okay. Cubes. Got it.

"I'm surprised you made it this far, Jerry." Ethan says, not looking at me.

"Yeah, the door right at the beginning almost fucked me up, bud. Where are the girls?"

"Not here. This is a room built for the masculine. Stoic. Logical. If we allow women to be in here, it will be like every other place they have ruined. We've talked about this, if you can remember."

"Women, yeah." I am not really paying attention to him. I'm looking for side doors, windows, anything that gets me the fuck out of this room. I see nothing.

"Hey, bud. The girls are alive, right?"

"I don't know," Ethan says.

"Bud," I say, raising my voice, "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I mean precisely that. I don't know. They could be alive. They could be dead. It is entirely up to them." He pauses. "But I can bring them back. Whatever form they are in right now I can bring them back."

Oh, what the fuck. "They're not like in a cage on the other side of the wall or something?" I ask.

"No," Ethan says. "I gave them an opportunity to live. In here. No obstructions. Just like you wanted."

“Oh, good,” I say.

“But not a dream life. A real life. A real life where they will suffer consequences for their actions, and they will not be put on some pedestal just because they are women or anything like that.”

“Okay, so it would be a life like how you think life works.”

“How life works, yes,” Ethan stops looking at me and looks at the cubes in front of him. I look at Ethan. He built a really cool cube room. I’ve seen him build cube rooms on the computer, but this one is great. He has no idea how small he looks at his table.

“Do you want to know the rules?” Ethan says.

“Of the what?”

“Of this game.”

I had no idea that we were playing a game. Was the robot fight where people got murdered a game? Jesus. That reminds me.

“Hey, bud, real quick before the rules: I really fucked up with the *Pacific Rim* thing. You really wanted to go--”

--It’s fine--”

“No, it’s not, bud. No one should leave you alone at a drive-in movie theater. You don’t have a car. That was dumb. I’m an adult and that’s real basic stuff to not fuck up. And I did.”

--It’s fine. Don’t--”

--I know, but I’m sorry. Okay. I interrupted. Rules of the game.”

Ethan stares at the cubes again, this time for a few seconds.

“Rules. Yes,” He looks up at me.

“If you want me to call them back, touch the stone on the left.” He touches the stone on my right, so his left.

“Alive, dead, they will be back here. But, I will stay here, in control of you. I will be at the levers of your body we built for domination. You will be my vessel to right the wrongs we suffered in the real world.”

“Okay, so that’s stone one,” I say. “What about stone two?” Ethan’s tiny hand grabs stone two.

"If you touch this stone, they stay where they are. If you trust your daughter to make good choices, she will be fine." Ethan looks at the stone again. "But she stays, you have no more contact with her." Ethan pauses. "And I leave with you."

I can tell he's never said that part out loud. It was a solid production with the stones and everything, but I get it now. It feels like someone kicked my heart in its nutsack. I'm having trouble even looking at the kid. He's sitting there, white as a ghost. We're not stupid people. We get what just happened.

"Ethan, I promise you, bud. I promise you, I'll kick the living shit out of your parents."

"JUST PICK A STONE."

"Bud, I'll throttle your father--"

"PICK. A. STONE."

"And, you know what? I'll fight your mother. I said I wouldn't hit women. But I'll, Jesus, I'll fight your mother."

"PICK."

I move toward Ethan. "Bud, I'm not gonna pick a stone. I'm not going to choose."

"YOU HAVE TO."

"I know, bud."

"THOSE ARE THE RULES."

"I know."

"THERE ARE RULES."

"I know." I make sure I look at him for this. "But I'm not gonna pick a stone. I love you, bud. And I failed you. I let you down. You've had a lot of people let you down, and that's tough because no one should have let you down. You're a kid."

Ethan's face is now red and his eyes are wet.

"I want you to come with me, bud. Let's get out of this place."

"Are you taking me home? That's this stone." Ethan holds up one of the stones. His hand is shaking.

“No, bud. I’m not taking you home. I got an idea of where I’m gonna take you. It’s nice. You’ll be happy. But it’s not home. I can’t take you home.”

Ethan does one of those cries that is silent but real. The whole Ben Shapiro thing is gone now. He is a very sad little boy.

The full truth is that I can’t take him home because he is an up-and-coming serial killer. It’s bad. I didn’t lie about failing him. Everyone failed him. I thought everything he was doing was cash money and very exciting. Turns out, it was a cry for help.

I get around the cube table and put my arms around him. He is sweaty and soaking from tears. His smell is not great. He is heaving so hard from the sobbing I’m afraid his ribs are going to break.

I whisper in Ethan’s ear. “I’m gonna wake you up, and then we’ll get out of here, okay?”

I feel him nod his head in my chest. I let go of Ethan and head toward the exit. I turn to Ethan.

“These are great cubes, bud.”

I leave.

I step outside the giant tree entrance. I feel a pull of gravity guiding me back toward the pool area. I move my feet but there is only one direction I am allowed to go.

I enter the pool area, and make my way down the hall past the empty rows of pool chairs. I turn right and open the door to the Cronke Teen Center. I see Ethan, sleeping on a white beanbag.

I bend down and gently shake Ethan. His little beady eyes open. He sees me and his beady eyes get heavy.

“Let’s go, bud.”

I lift him up out of the bean bag. I put my arm around him and we leave the Teen Center.

I get Ethan out to the parking lot. We’re sitting there waiting for my cloud of bees. I thought they would come when I thought about them but I guess that’s not the case.

Right when I tell Ethan we're gonna have to walk back to the airport, here come the bees. The bees see me and are fine, but once they see Ethan they become a full blown swarm. The rest of my EpiPens are in my truck in the real world so I can't play fast and loose with the bees.

"GUYS," I yell at the bees. "HE'S FINE. WE TALKED, AND HE'S FINE."

Samantha's bee pops out of the swarm and lands on my nose.

"He's okay. We just need a ride back to the airport. He's cool. I promise."

I can tell this is going to be the last ride I get from the bees. Ethan must've really fucked up while I was gone.

The swarm becomes a cloud, then flattens out and Ethan and I step on. I tell Ethan he needs to sit because the bees move too fast to stand, but he doesn't listen. He'll have to learn on his own.

We make our way through Chubbuck and onto the highway back to the airport. The sky is that deep purple again. Nice breeze. Little thunder. Everything is nice.

Ethan is still standing. He managed to stand the whole time and look cool. Good for him.

We get to the airport and step off the bees. The bees fly away. Samantha's bee doesn't even say bye to me. Tough way to end what I thought was an interesting friendship.

We go into the airport and into the kitchen where I work. I see the whiteboard Ethan took notes on what felt like decades ago. I make Ethan a sandwich with the Famous Dave's. I really pour it on because my supervisor was brutally murdered by her daughter-in-law.

Ethan eats his sandwich in silence.

"I really throttled Ken Hardee," I tell him. He smiles a little.

"I reached over his kitchen island--"

"What's a kitchen island?" Ethan asks.

“It’s that place in the middle of a kitchen that’s not connected to anything and people eat there. Sometimes there is a sink.”

“Got it.”

“Yeah, so I reached over his kitchen island and I shook him. I shook him in front of his kid. He was like, ‘Please... stop... my... neck...’ but I’m sorry, it was shaking time.”

Ethan laughs a little. I laugh a little, too. I forgot that Ken died in here. Ended up being a decent guy. But, you know, I gotta cheer Ethan up.

Once Ethan eats his sandwich, I take him in the back of the kitchen, back to the important door where I first stepped outside the airport. I make a quick turn to another door. The bathroom door.

I open the door with Ethan and step inside.

It still smells like the carpet piss smell that I remembered from when I was young. Good. First part is going well. I look to my left and see another door just next to the toilet with the pink rug cover.

I open the door. Ethan and I walk out to a carpeted living room. Everything is tan and wood. I hear windchimes. Everything around the living room is pleasant and delicate. The air is stale. It’s nice.

“Nana?” I call out. I hear silence at first. Then a voice coming from the other room.

“Is that you Jer Bear?”

I hear light footsteps on the carpet approaching us. The footsteps touch the linoleum floor in the kitchen and my Nana appears. She is small, with a reddish blonde flat top and big glasses. She has her tennis shoes on and gray sweatpants. Her shirt has little birds and some words that would be on a grandma shirt.

“Hi Nana,” I say.

“Hi, Jer Ber. Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, Nana. Hey, I have someone who is going to stay with you. His name is Ethan. He’s a good kid. Ethan, say hi to Nana.”

“Hi,” Ethan says.

My Nana smiles so big her cheeks move her giant glasses up her face.

“Hello, Mr. Ethan. My goodness, you are a skinny boy. Surely I can find something to feed you. Sit down at the table and I’ll... you know I was just at the store and I saw the most lovely... I’ll have to find it.”

Nana turns around and starts slowly fumbling through her kitchen. I look at Ethan, who is looking around the home.

“She’s not going to rev your crazy little engine. But she’s going to love you. She’ll be here forever, and she’ll love you.”

“Will you come visit?” Ethan asks.

“I can, yeah. But you have to be good in here. I know you can be good. She’ll be nothing but good to you.”

Ethan nods. His eyes are wet again.

“Alright, bud. I’ll leave you two be.”

I give Ethan a hug and jump into the bathroom exit before my eyes get wet.

TWENTY-TWO

I am back in the airport kitchen. Samantha and Denver are living their lives somewhere. Hopefully alive.

I know they're alive. It's Samantha. Denver seems like a good kid. But I know Samantha will be fine. Wherever she is.

I take a couple squirts of Pepsi out of the fountain machine and think this one out. Assuming they are fine, do I even bother disturbing them?

I get a couple more squirts of Pepsi. I don't fill the whole cup. If you fill the whole cup, you drank a whole cup of soda, and that's bad. Couple squirts? That's just living.

I finish my squirts of Pepsi and get out of the kitchen. I head for the airport terminal area.

The terminal area is filled with bodies that give off the appearance of airport movement. Lots of bodies waiting in line. Lots of bodies awkwardly holding their shoes. Lots of bodies looking for a wall outlet. Lots of bodies on the verge of a meltdown. Some bodies look absolutely shitfaced.

I head over to a desk with a person.

"Any of these flights going to Los Angeles?" I ask.

"This one is," the person behind the desk says. Their face doesn't move. It's like an old video game face. One expression: a pixelated smile.

"Okay," I say. I walk past her down the gate tunnel.

I board an empty plane. When I sit, there are no walls or roof of the plane. My mind knows it's a plane. Within seconds, I am flying through the purple clouds of Idaho and heading directly toward the sun. Once the sun is at my fingertips the plane lands.

TWENTY-THREE

Jesus fuck. Los Angeles is hot.
My fucking god. Los Angeles is the hottest, brightest place on earth. It is relentless. I am somehow off the plane and in some shithole area of the desert. I see one palm tree making a tiny ball of shade.

Bingo. I walk toward the ball of shade. It grows bigger and bigger and once I am close enough, I see a little tent. I stop.

“Hey, girls. It’s Samantha’s father. Jerry.”

I wait for what feels like forever. Two heads eventually pop out.

“Hi, Dad,” Samantha says.

“Hi, Mr. Yatsko,” Denver says.

“Are you okay? Are you feeling good?”

“We’re hungry,” Samantha says.

“Oh my god. When was the last time you ate?”

“Lunch,” Samantha says.

“Oh.”

“Yeah we’re just like, hungry for dinner.” Samantha says. Both of them giggle like two dork kids.

“Okay,” I say. “Can I take you two out for dinner?”

“Sure, Mr. Yatsko,” Denver says.

The two girls pop out of their tent and hop in my car that appeared out of nowhere. They both sit in the backseat, which, fine, but I’m also not a taxi service. I even say to them “I’m not a taxi service, you know,” and they both laugh and that’s as far as I get with my frustration.

We end up going to a Roscoe’s Chicken and Waffles. I heard these places are great and they are only in LA. I’ll probably never go to the real L.A., so this is my chance. I tell Samantha and Denver that I heard Black people really like this place and Obama ate at

one once and they both tell me to not say that once we get inside. I say I'm not going to, but what I said is true, so it's not bad. Facts are bad? Okay.

We get a booth (I asked for the booth Obama sat in) and we order. The girls share two waffles. I order three wings, a waffle, potato salad, and French fries ("If it's good enough for the President, it's good enough for me!").

The food comes and we eat. Not a lot of talking. I'm taking in the vibe of Roscoe's, which is similar to the airport. Lots of filler. The ambiance of people. Outside is an unnatural pitch black. The parking lot outside the window is also pitch black except for a few unrendered cones of light coming from the street lamps.

After finishing one of my wings, I take a break to talk.

"Y'all should come back," I say. Both girls clench up. I can tell that is a stressful concept. I try to figure out if it would be less stressful if I told Denver that her dad is dead now. Also, maybe Samantha would be happy to know that Gabe shot her mother in the head.

I decide against that. Maybe I play those cards later. I have to play them eventually. In the real world, you have to know if your parent was shot in the head or cut in half by a tree.

"I think you two are great. You're great kids." I pick up my second wing. I put it down. "But this isn't life, you know? It's something else."

"But we can be together here," Samantha says.

"Yeah, but, I dunno." There's a point in my head that I am trying to make, but the words aren't coming.

"You can be together here, yeah, but the chance of not being together is, I dunno. It's what makes something grow. That's where growth is."

I now know what needs to be said. "I don't mean the 'not being together' as in people who don't like gay people not allowing you to

be together. I'm not talking about some assholes in Chubbuck. I'm saying, I don't know. Look, I don't know if you two have what it takes. No one knows. Except you. At some point, I dunno, you may just look at each other and nothing feels the same. Or maybe it'll feel great forever. You two may go to the real L.A. and one of you hits it off with someone else. I dunno. But you deserve to have that moment. You deserve to feel like shit or feel really great or some mix of both. So go do that."

"Did you ever get that chance?" Samantha asks me. And you know, it's kind of strange. All of the embarrassment, physical punishment, rejection, feels very distant, like some Thanksgiving meal 10 years ago. Tasted, digested, gone. At 50 years old, I don't feel like my life has been much of a mix between good and bad. Lot of bad. But, I don't know. It's nothing really profound, but it seems like all that bad stuff has stopped. Like someone finally pulled the plug out on the spiked dildo machine occupying my asshole. Maybe the next 50 years is all good? I don't know. I doubt it. But for the first time in what feels like forever, I am curious about how it's all going to turn out.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Back in high school I read (skimmed) this one book of Japanese death poems. I recently read it again, mainly because I felt like I made up this book of death poems up and needed to see if it actually existed. It does. It's called *Japanese Death Poems*.

The death poem book is funny. It is poems written by Zen monks on the verge of death. A majority of the poems are like, "Ah, fuck. Who knows?"

There is one poem that felt like Jerry's death poem:

Needles pierce my ailing body, and my pain grows greater. This life of mine, which has been like a disease – what is its meaning? In all the world I haven't a single friend to whom I can unburden my soul. Truly all that appears to the eye is only a flower that blooms in a day.

—Daigu Sochiku

I was going to start the book with this poem. I love it. It's painful and funny and I love miserable complainers. But I decided against it. I think this book is not about Jerry's miserable, painful life.

I wrote this book as a father of two very young children. Parenthood is an endless fountain of pain. Physical pain from sleep deprivation and stepping on toys. Emotional pain from watching your heart rip out of your chest and live inside two small bodies. But there is joy in enduring the pain, of living through the day as someone's parent. A unique, rich joy.

I personally am no longer concerned with the smallness of my life, or how it can be captured in a single flower that blooms in a day, or whatever that dying monk said. The joy of my children, their flowers, their existence, is truly enough for me. And I think that's where we leave Jerry, too. A couple of my friends have said that the ending of this book doesn't feel like an ending. I think in Jerry's story, his ending doesn't fully matter. In the comforting moments of knowing his kids (including Ethan) are safe, he kind of forgot that he was no longer the punching bag of Chubbuck. I think his kids carrying on in whatever way they do is his ending. I think we carry on through our kids and our parents carry on through us, and in that way we never end.

If you are like, hey, fuck Keith and his dumb bullshit...that's also valid! I read a Japanese death poem book. I love my kids. Sue me.

Moving on to thank you's. First, my wife. You make time to read these books. You make time for everyone in our family. You make more time than there is time in a day. You are magic. I love you, my hanni.

I'll thank my Mother-in-law next. Dorian, you read this book when it was a bunch of loose papers on the kitchen table. You didn't have to read it, but you did. You do a lot of really nice things you don't have to do. I love you, Bubbe!

To my friends Ryan and Jesse, a very heartfelt thank you. I love you both. You have read my terrible things and my good things and you will read my work until your bones become dust. They will find your bodies under a mountain of my paperbacks.

To Humorist Books! Marty and Brian: Thank you for giving my stuff a home. I am writing this before the editing process starts, so I have nothing but nice things to say. (Update: Brian, an absolute pleasure to work with you. This book was put in very skilled hands, and I am extremely grateful. Marty, I hope the devil keeps you as a pet.

I guess I want to end this by saying thank you to Idaho. I spent some very important years in Rexburg and Pocatello. A story for another time.

