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THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE
FOR FICTION 2013



EMPORIUM

Stories

Thrilling

JENNIFER EGAN

About the Book

A lovesick teenage Cajun girl, a gay Canadian astrophysicist, a teenage sniper on the LAPD payroll, a post-apocalyptic bulletproof-vest salesman: these are some of the cast that make up the stories in Adam Johnson's debut collection.

With imaginative grace and verbal acuity, Johnson peels away the veneer of our media-saturated, self-help world, revealing the lonely isolation that binds us all together.

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TEEN SNIPER

WHEN I REACH the rooftop, I pull the dustcovers off my rifle scope and head for a folding chair leaned up against an air-conditioning unit – right where I left it the last time I was up here. Sitting down, I have a clear view across a courtyard of lawns and fountains to Hewlett Packard. I line up a couple breakfast burritos on the parapet wall, in case this is a long one, and I crack a can of Nix. Most of us drink Nix because of how other sodas make you twitchy. I dial in my optics by focusing on flowers in the distance, impatiens and pansies, mostly, and I'm tuning the rangefinder when I get the go-ahead from Lt. Kim.

'Blackbird,' Lt. Kim says over the radio, 'at your leisure,' which is code for the fact that the hostage negotiations are failing and it's time to get to work. There's a tone in her voice, though, that kind of sounds like my mom when she gets on my case to join the private sector, where the 'real money' is. I'll admit I sometimes daydream on the job, but I'm trying to better the community, so it's like, get off my back already.

I sweep my scope along the flowers a little longer – there's a giant H formed from orange poppies and a P of velvety petunias.

One of the perks of being a police sniper in Palo Alto, aside from the satisfaction you get from serving the public, is the serious commitment these software companies show toward floral displays, toward making the world a more beautiful place. I shoot over flowers every day.

I fix the bipod of my Kruger Mark VI and chamber a round. The Kruger's an old South African rifle, made in the gravy days of long-bore ballistics, but the scope is state of the art, a fully digital Raytheon with cellular live-feed, so that it's a camera, phone, and radio, all in one. That means Lt. Kim can see and hear everything on a bank of screens in her command van down the street, but it's my shoulder she's usually looking over. I'm one of the best shots in the world – I mean, I have the gift. I've been lead sniper for over a year, but Lt. Kim can't get past the fact that I'm only fifteen.

The target is a Pakistani guy over in HP's think tank. He's wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt that says 'Cherry Garcia', and he's pacing back and forth in a cubicle decorated only with an *Aladdin* movie poster. The guy's pretty worked up, yelling into the phone, probably to Gupta, our communications officer. In the poster, Aladdin's hauling ass on his magic carpet with his little monkey friend, and there's an evil genie hot on his tail.

There's no hostages that I can see, only about 475 meters of open courtyard between me and Cherry C. The shot will be a tricky one: the bullet will become wobbly and transient as it moves through different temperature zones – bucking in the heat waves above the hot parking lot, diving as it crosses cool, shady lawn, and finally tumbling through the rising humidity of a man-made lake.

To the west, Cedric and Henry are dragging their heavy, water-cooled magnum into position atop a Jamba Juice, while across the way, Twan climbs a cellular tower, a sleek rifle equipped with satellite-assisted targeting dangling behind him on a rope. The satellite rifle is essential when the fog rolls in, and Twan is just the man to operate it – he's got the cool, the confidence, to fire on faith into a blank of white. That dude is smooth, and it has nothing to do with the color of his skin. Lt. Kim tends to only hire African Americans for my team. I think it's because they had it bad for a long time, and we need to make it up to them. Snipers in general take pride in not discriminating.

I'm calculating the crosswind when Lt. Kim calls back.

'Tell me how you're feeling about the shot,' she says.

I don't answer right away. I can hear her sipping tea in the command van, waiting for a response, while in the background, Gupta is negotiating his ass off in Urdu, though I do make out the word

pizza.

‘Maybe let’s talk about it later,’ I tell her. I know the guys are listening, and I’m gonna get some razzing about ‘my feelings’ in the locker room.

‘Do you want to try a few visualizations?’ she asks.

‘Just leave me alone, all right?’ I radio in, trying not to let my voice crack, which is a problem lately.

Lt. Kim’s one of those sniper commanders who also has an MSW, so she’s always all over my emotions, I’ve been having some dreams, I’ll admit, and we’ve been working on replacing bad images with good ones. Flowers are supposed to be my replacement images.

I ease my eye back into the scope. Even when Cherry G’s standing still, his figure warps like a mirage at this distance, and the crosshairs, flinching with my pulse, skip across his body. The only way to get closer to him would be to belly crawl through a hundred meters of flowers, but I don’t think I could handle sneaking through bed after bed of what’s supposed to be my positive imagery.

‘Yo, homies,’ I say into my scope. ‘Who’s calling the shot?’

I try to talk cool to the guys, you know, to work on our unity.

From his perch on the tower, Twan just grunts.

Henry is huffing and puffing when he calls in. ‘We’ve got a decent shot,’ he says, running out of breath. ‘Probably seventy percent.’ He’s working the foot pedals of the huge twenty-millimeter magnum while Cedric aims.

Like me, Cedric and Henry came out of the target-match circuit, with Cedric riding a full sniper scholarship to BYU and Henry touring Asia for Team Adidas. But Twan is different. He’s self-taught on the rooftops of Oakland, and like they say, the Lord looks out for left-handed snipers. Twan’s an ayatollah with a rifle, completely composed, but he’s touch-and-go as a police officer because he refuses to shoot women.

Any of us could probably make the shot, but I don’t want to look like a puss in front of the guys. Besides, not that I’m stuck up or anything, but I’m the one with the gift. I won the Disney Classic at age eleven, scored a perfect one thousand at the North Hollywood Open, and took gold in the summer Sniptathlon in Bonn, all before thirteen.

I flip down my clip-on shades and take aim. Sometimes, when I look through my scope, I am overwhelmed by the illusion that I know this stranger in the crosshairs in an essential way, like we’re old friends, like you can see their soul. This effect is known as ‘flash empathy.’ The LAPD has conducted a lot of field studies and found that ‘flash empathy’ is a leftover from the reptilian part of our brain and can’t be avoided. You just got to turn a cold shoulder to it. Luckily, we have these new Raytheon scopes, which make it so you’re not actually looking at the dude – it’s just a video image. Sunglasses help.

‘Blackbird has the shot,’ I announce and begin my positive visualization, which Lt. Kim says gives my mind a newer, more optimistic vocabulary for violence. A slug to the chest resembles a dwarf rose blossom, for example, so I would try to think of that. The head produces a pink mist of baby’s breath. If you’ve ever seen the maroonish-green bloom of a chocolate beauty, then you’ll know when you clip the liver. Exit wounds in general are trailing vines of red, kind of tangled and groping, like the new chutes of a spring hibiscus.

Finally, I do the math. At this distance, the slug will drop thirty centimeters, and the way the poppies are leaning suggests a slight breeze. So, I’ll need to train my cross hairs above Cherry G and to the right, making it look like my target is really the skinny monkey with the fez on the *Aladdin* poster.

Then it hits me, this feeling that I really know this guy. In the rinsed color of my video scope, I study the tinsely lines of sweat coming from his brow, the flush of anguish in his skin. In a flash, I see

a guy who left his culture and traveled around the world, only to become a hopeless outcast. His words are always a little off, and maybe the people make fun of him because he looks different and can't dress so good. Forget about the girls. It's like, because of your job, you have to leave your old friends behind, and then your new friends are always saying things to keep you down. You work side by side with them, and you're really trying, but it's like you're not even there. They never ask you to lunch or anything. Sometimes you eat alone at a restaurant and spot one of them, but they don't even see you. You overhear them talking about some new movie, and it's a movie you want to see, and – I stop myself, try to get a grip. Like the LAPD says, this isn't real.

I shift my aim toward the little monkey, and start my countdown.

Here's where the gift comes in: the secret to being a world-class sniper is knowing how to stop your heart. I exhale, my chest goes quiet, and there's a ghostly feeling of serenity in my limbs. The rifle seems to just settle into its purpose, and things feel clear and flat in the scope. There's a hollow crack and for a second, the time it takes for the spent shell to spring and glint to the ground, Cherry G and I will both be lifeless,

Duck, you fool, I can't help whispering.

The slug goes, connects – a neck shot, my trademark, the wound lapping like the tongues of orchid petals. The target's knees go out, and he falls from view, dropping into the beige of his cubicle.

'Morning has broken,' I radio in.

'Copy that, people,' Lt. Kim announces. 'Blackbird has spoken.'

Back at the police station, I slip in through the side door and take the back way, around the squash courts, toward the locker room. I'm supposed to debrief with Lt. Kim after every assignment, but I'm just not into talking about it today. She's been worried about my 'problems with intimacy,' which she always drags back to the fact that my mother's a classic 'sniper mom' who shuttled me around to every child firearms contest there was. And I'd be on psych leave for a zillion years if I ever told Lt. Kim about the shrine my dad built out of all his second-place shooting trophies.

I run into my team in the hallway. They're standing next to a soda machine, working on some song lyrics. They've got a band but they don't get many gigs because they all play bass. Eyes closed, Cedric holds two fingers to his ear while Henry and Twan sing backup, snapping their fingers. It's an old love ballad.

'Pardon, mon cheri,' Cedric sings. Snap. Snap. 'Why you rebukin' me?'

Twan jumps in with the chorus; he's a large man with a booming voice.

'Ce soir, ce soir,' Twan sings. 'Girl, you're having me.'

I never thought much of French, but it sounds tough coming from these guys.

'Word up,' I say.

Twan stops mid-snap when I say this.

'That French is phat,' I say. 'Bet the lady friends go for that smooth talk.'

That's when ROMS rolls up. ROMS sniffs us, then lifts a claw in greeting.

'Yo, holmses,' he says, which is something I taught him. ROMS is the only one around here who's geekier than me, and he's a bomb detection and disposal robot. He's got some basic hostage negotiating programming, so I've been trying to teach him to talk cooler.

'Hey, ROMS,' I say. 'The posse and me was thinking about grabbing some chow. Wanna chill with us?'

'Let's eat and make friends,' he announces. 'Food is the first step in peaceful resolutions. Pizza, burger, baba ghanoush.'

‘Shit,’ Twan says and just walks away.

‘~~Maybe another time, sir,~~’ Cedric says, and Henry looks like he wants to bust a stitch something’s so funny.

‘It’s a date,’ ROMS says to them as they walk away.

ROMS is clueless to how the guys are always avoiding him, and I try to shield him from that. You see, ROMS and I are both Cancers, which means we’re sensitive and a little moody, but with a lot to say. For his birthday in July, I’m planning on getting him an update – Negotiator 5.0, with the latest Black English Converters – because ROMS wants to express himself, but he just doesn’t have the programming.

For now, ROMS and I decide to eat lunch without those guys. I have a learner’s permit, but there has to be someone in the car with me, and technically, ROMS doesn’t count, so we walk across the street to grab a Sony burger.

Generally, people don’t like to see a bomb robot enter the building, so ROMS and I use the drive-thru, which is a little humiliating. The ugly truth is, though, robots are way looked down upon in our society. Just because some people are different doesn’t mean they’re not the same as you or me. That’s why, when we’re working at a playground or day care, I tie a ‘Barney’ mask on ROMS’s display panel – purple and humorous, it helps ensure the next generation won’t have to live in fear.

I order a double Sony dog with a large Nix. For ROMS, I get a water, no ice – you have to wet his sponge reservoir every once in a while to keep his sniffer from drying out.

The girl at the drive-thru’s kind of cute. She’s about my age, with some skin trouble, though I like the cock of her headset. When it’s our turn in line, I can’t think of anything to say, but she’s the one who speaks first.

‘Nice rifle,’ she says when she hands me the bag.

I want to make my move, but ROMS won’t quit sniffing her, and he’s ruining everything! I kick him on the sly. When I do open my mouth, all that comes out is ‘extra ketchup.’ Then I go and add, ‘*s’il vous plaît.*’

She shakes her head and hands me two packets, like there’s a ketchup shortage or something.

The car behind us starts honking, so ROMS and I move along.

The only place to eat outside is the kiddie area, so I sit in a dinky seat, and ROMS parks on the rumpus pad. The play area’s really just a giant food recycler dressed up to look like a jungle gym, and the thing’s loud as heck. I look past the little rope that’s supposed to keep kids out of the heavy gears but I don’t see a muffler on the thing, a total code violation.

I sift through the fries for my instant game card, while ROMS pulls out a really long straw. I get excited when I scratch off a bikini and then a martini, but it turns out I’m one machete short of winning the trip to Haiti with the Sony Girls.

I throw the game card on the ground. What’s the use, anyway?

ROMS can see my disappointment. ‘Why the long face?’ he asks.

‘Thanks, ROMS, but I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘We can resolve this crisis together. We’re friends. First let’s start with some small talk. What do you think of the Raiders this year?’

That puts a smile on my face. ROMS is my friend. Some bomb robots, every time you turn them on you’re a new person to them. You have to reintroduce yourself and everything. But ROMS is different. We’re like a team – both of us dedicated to saving people, though I do it indirectly, of course.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Tell me this – you ever find a bomb, and when you touch it, you get a feel for the person who made it, like, who they really are, and suddenly you’re connected to them?’

‘All the time,’ ROMS says, though it’s a little hard to hear him over the gnashing blades of the recycler. ‘I’m versed in the signature detonation devices of most major terrorists.’

‘No, man. I mean, like, see their soul.’

ROMS slurps. ‘Is this about the Sony Girls?’ he asks.

‘Don’t even talk about girls. This problem is way different. Say I’m about to resolve a crisis, okay? I go to pull the trigger, and I get this weird sense of connection with the target, like we’re old homies. But then, as soon as I shoot them, that closeness goes away, and I’m left feeling sort of mechanical.’

‘I know where you’re coming from. I’ve been there.’

‘Really?’

‘I love you, man,’ ROMS says.

I chew a mouthful of hot dog, and looking at ROMS, wash it down with Nix. Because of his hostage skills, he always has some thing good to say when you’re down, but this surprises me. This is not in his programming.

‘Are you feeling okay?’ I ask ROMS.

‘Love makes the world go round,’ he says and snuffles.

I reach out, and his instrument shield is cool to the touch. When I check his power light, it’s flashing. He gets pretty emotional when his batteries are low, and his bomb sniffer resets to default, so that it sounds like he’s sniveling, like he’s about to cry.

‘Can’t we all just get along?’ he asks me, his voice slow and slurred.

Poor guy. I use my scope to call Maintenance to come pick him up.

‘Hugs,’ ROMS mutters before all five of his arms droop, and he finally goes out.

In the afternoon, there’s a brief rampage at Oracle and then a standoff at an upstart called crepes.com but tactical ends up handling it. It turns out that a crepe is a sort of pancake, except you roll it up like breakfast burrito. I don’t get to try one, though. All those bulls on SWAT snarf them down. Online crepe sales must be good, though – the parking lot’s solid BMW.

The last shot of the day is a disgruntled so-and-so at Sun Microsystems, and as the news choppers begin to circle overhead, my heart stops for the longest time ever. I can’t even tell if I stopped it or if it just shut down on its own. I’ve never been hooked up to a monitor or anything, but you can feel your chest tighten and know when something’s not working, so this is not in my head, like Lt. Kim says. Above, the hovering reporters are already trying to hack into my scope’s video feed for the evening news, and all I can do is sit on a gray, stinky roof, feeling nothing.

After work, Gupta and I ride the CalTrain to his gym.

Lt. Kim says one of the keys to being a healthy sniper is not taking your job home with you, so I agreed to find a way to unwind after work. That’s when Gupta invited me to join him a couple nights a week for a little Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

At rush hour, the train is packed. Most of the people are just guys hunched over their Porn Pilots, though there’s a couple tough-looking characters, too. I don’t get worried. Even though I only weigh 110 pounds, people don’t mess with me. They see my rifle and know I’m a peace officer, that I’m here to help.

The Transit Authority painted yellow happy faces on the fronts of their trains to discourage all the suicides, and as a northbound commuter races past in a smiley blur, it makes me wonder if Lt. Kim doesn’t have it all wrong. Maybe when you put a good image over a bad one, it’s the bad that wins out. I wonder if the happy face helps the guy driving the train.

I ask Gupta, ‘Hey, who’s Cherry Garcia?’

‘Ah, this is Ben and Jerry,’ he says. ‘A very fine flavor of ice cream. Every bite is cherries.’

I think of cherry blossoms, see their peeling pink bursts.

‘Well, at least all those hostages made it safely out of HP.’

‘It was data he was holding hostage,’ Gupta says. ‘He threatened to erase all of HP’s bar codes. Talk about bringing a company to its knees.’

‘So no one was in danger?’

Gupta shakes his head.

‘What were his demands?’

‘He wanted a magic carpet ride back to Karachi.’

We shake our heads over the tragedy of this, over the needless waste.

‘Why not just jump on a plane, then?’ I ask

‘Why not just jump in front of a train?’ Gupta says.

‘He really said “magic carpet ride”?’

Gupta shrugs. Beyond him in the window, California bungalows flash their pastel backs at us. ‘I don’t know about exact words,’ he says. ‘This is a popular saying.’

When we get to the jiu-jitsu gym, there’s a beautiful girl waiting for Gupta. She’s about sixteen, bay-leaf skin against the blue of the mat, warming up with knee twirls and neck bridges.

‘What a daughter,’ Gupta says to me. ‘Why couldn’t she stick with debate? Keep your distance from this one,’ he adds, but I can’t tell if he thinks I’d be trouble for her, or the other way around.

When she comes over, she’s still loosening up her arms.

‘Nice rifle,’ she says. ‘Rhodesian?’

She talks a little funny because of her mouthguard.

‘South African,’ I answer. ‘It’s an early model Kruger.’

‘Didn’t the UN ban those?’

I shrug. ‘Technically.’

She lifts her eyebrows, impressed. ‘I’m Seema,’ she says.

‘Wanna spar?’

‘Okay,’ I tell her, even though she’s got ten pounds on me and ‘Mission: Submission’ is embroidered on her gi.

We start to circle each other, with Seema faking a couple lazy leg chops. Her ankles, when they flash from her gi, are strong and cut.

Jiu-jitsu is based on the notion that people need distance to hurt you. Instead of keeping away, you pull your opponent closer, so that your bodies are touching, so their arms and legs are too close to strike. Then you have to learn to feel at home in the grasp of a stranger.

Seema rushes me, clinches, and sweeps a leg. On the ground, I endure a couple ankle cranks. I roll out of a double heel hook, then surprise her with a wrist crucifix.

That gets her attention. ‘You new here?’ I ask.

Seema’s keylocks are savage, and she keeps a constant knee in my kidneys.

‘I beat all the guys at my old dojo,’ she says, ‘so here I am.’

From behind her hot pink mouthguard, she flashes me a wicked smile.

Her legs are around my hips, feet interlocked, and when I try to pass her guard, I almost eat a triangle choke. Even though she’s wearing a full gi, her ta-tas are *right there*. I’ve never grappled with a girl before, and I’ll admit I’m concentrating on not farting or anything.

‘You’re the Blackbird, aren’t you?’ she asks, sneaking her legs up to my shoulders so she can set an arm bar.

‘My real name’s Tim.’ I block her arm attempt, but the distraction suckers me into a side-mount, and before I know it, I’m breathing some serious shoulder blade. Suddenly, I’ve got gi bums on my face. This girl is wriggly.

‘So, do you shoot women?’ she asks.

This question is probably just a distraction so she can reverse me. I entangle an arm and work an elbow lock. ~~She winces enough that I know the joint is getting pretty hot. ‘Justice is blind,’ I tell her.~~

‘Whats that suppose to mean?’

I don’t really have an answer for this. It’s just what they taught us at the Academy. Under me, I can feel her ribs undulate as she breathes, the graceful arc of her sternum, and to answer her question, my mind’s drifting back to an old sniper ethics course, when Wham – she flips me with an elevator.

‘I’d shoot a woman,’ Seema says. ‘If she was asking for it.’

‘Really?’

She sets her hooks, improves position, and then Bang – rear naked choke.

‘That was a joke,’ she says, knowing I can’t talk anymore. To really sink the choke, she arches her back, which makes my vision go sparkly. Then she gives me a little lecture. ‘You know, in Switzerland, you need a court order to shoot a woman, and in Brazil, they teach women jiu-jitsu, so there’s way less violence.’

I can’t tell if her dark hair has fallen in my face or if the lights have gone out. All I know is I feel relaxed all over and warm, the opposite of when your heart stops and your blood’s just loitering. I picture Brazil as a green country filled with colorful talking birds and mangos maybe, where beautiful women walk around in white gis, and whenever one person tries to hurt another person, a woman appears and pulls you down, wraps her arms around you.

The next morning, I cruise the hallways looking for Gupta so I can gather some intel about Seema. I check the whole police station, practically – the lockdown, motor pool, all the tanning beds – before I see the red light flashing outside the interrogation room.

Through the one-way mirror, I see Gupta doing an interrogation: a ‘suspect’ is blindfolded and strapped – for his own safety – to a reclining medical table next to the truth machine. What I can’t believe is that behind Gupta, at the toolbench, is Seema. She’s wearing a crisp labcoat, hair up in a little bun, and she’s stripping wire with a set of black cutters, trying to make clean connections for the electrodes.

The interrogation room kind of gives me the willies. Not that I’m against the judicious use of electricity, in the name of Protection and Service; it’s just there’s something a little claustrophobic about the place. I admit Lt. Kim’s done wonders with the decor, throwing in a few plants and inspirational posters – she even invested in a new kind of oral shunt, which not only keeps a ‘suspect’ from biting his or her tongue, but also forces the mouth into the shape of a gentle smile.

I put on my mirrored sunglasses, and as I open the door, remember to watch my language – all ‘suspect’ conferences are taped on closed-circuit, which means the reporters hack in every once in a while, so we try to keep a lid on the cussing.

‘What are you doing here?’ I ask Seema.

‘I’m soldering,’ she says when she sees me, ‘for justice.’ She holds up the smoking iron like the Statue of Liberty.

‘No, I mean here, at the police station.’

‘It’s national Take Your Daughter to Work Day,’ Seema says, though we can barely hear each other over Gupta’s ‘suspect.’

‘Oh, right, sure. Hey, I had a great time yesterday.’

‘You hung in there longer than most,’ she says, and without a mouthguard, you can see she’s got a chocky set of braces. Wearing her hair up also reveals some cauliflowered ears from grappling. But her eyes are deep brown, rifted with gold.

Behind us, Gupta's really going after it. 'Where did you stash the dang PIN numbers?' he demands. 'And no more of your darn lies.'

The 'suspect' keeps confessing, but it's lame, and Gupta hates to reward insincerity. Plus, you can barely understand him with that oral shunt.

'Not so fast this time,' he says, and the grinding buzz of the truth machine starts again. The whole thing unnerves me – you know the sparking zap is coming, followed by a little blue smoke ring and that ozone smell. The suspect's blindfolded, so he can't see when the next jolt is coming, and his skin keeps wincing in anticipation.

Look out, I whisper, feeling a wave of flash empathy coming on, strong enough that the 'suspect' begins to resemble a normal person, a neighbor you might know or some guy walking in the park. The LAPD says this is when good cops make mistakes.

I throw my sunglasses on the bench – they aren't working at all. I feel a little woozy, and I'd look like a total puss if I fainted in front of Seema.

'Hey, Gupta,' I call, which makes him stop and smile, surprised to see me.

'Take five,' Gupta tells the 'suspect,' then comes over to grab a clean towel.

'Blackbird,' he says, 'what the heck are you doing here?'

'How about we give the technology a rest,' I tell Gupta. 'What say I bring Twan in here so the two of us can play a little "good sniper-bad sniper," see if that works?'

'Sorry, Blackbird. This is kind of a father-daughter thing.'

'As if,' Seema says. 'This is so unfair. That guy doesn't even have a fighting chance.'

'I'm sure the world would be a better place,' Gupta tells her, 'if everyone settled their differences with hand-to-hand. Until then, aren't you forgetting how angry you got when someone stole your PIN number last year?'

'At least in jiu-jitsu there's rules,' she says.

Gupta sops his forehead and turns to me. 'Kids,' he says, shaking his head.

We follow him back to the silver table, careful to stand on the rubber mat, and looking at that poor fool all strapped down makes me want to amscra out of there. I look at Seema's large eyes, at the way she bites the tip of a finger, and I get the feeling she's waging her own battle with empathy. I've got some techniques that could help, but it's something everyone, finally, has to do on their own.

Gupta adjusts the truth machine's dial past 'candid' and 'frank' to 'gospel,' the highest setting. Then he tests the new electrodes by swiping them together, and an arcing flash of light leaves us all blinking a moment.

'That's not really a truth machine, is it?' Seema asks.

Gupta throws her a stern look.

Seema points at the machine's fancy display panel. 'I mean, behind those lights and buttons is some kind of pain machine, right?'

'Hush now,' Gupta says, lowering the rods, and I can't tell if he's speaking to his daughter or the 'suspect.' Our eyes follow Gupta's hands to the man on the table, who lies there flinching. There's a point in sniping when the bullet's away, when someone's fate is sealed. The Kruger bucks in my hands, and for the moment or two it takes the slug to find its home, the target still thinks life is A-okay. They're so clueless in my scope, so lost, I can't help whispering, *hit the deck*. This is the dream I keep having: It's always a nice day. I'm raking leaves. Sometimes washing my dad's car. Ghostly, from far away, I hear my own voice call, *duck*. I don't scramble for cover in these dreams; instead, I just stand there, holding the hose, searching the roofs and trees for the part of me that's sure everything's about to go wrong. This is the voice that Lt. Kim always wants to talk about, the voice in my head that believes anything can end, suddenly and without warning.

There's a flash of light, and my knees go weak. I must look like one of those old snipers who's gone

soft, the kind you see living in the street in his dirty uniform, selling daisies for a buck. All I can do is
head for the door, steadying myself as I go.

In the hall, I lean over and breathe deep as a team of chirpy cadets passes.

Then Seema is by my side. 'Hey, are you okay?'

'Yeah,' I tell her, hands on knees.

'I don't know how you do it,' she says. 'I mean, I only have to come here one day a year.'

I stand straight, try to arch my back, snap myself out of it.

'That room's just a little claustrophobic,' I tell her.

'Let's get some fresh air, then,' she says. 'I could use some fresh air.'

I'm feeling pretty shaky, so I'm thinking of what a cool sniper might say. I lean against the wall, try
to stand all smooth. 'Yo,' I tell her, 'we could maybe grab some lunch.'

Seema casts a weary glance through the one-way glass to her father, hunched over the metal table.

'Sure,' she says, and it's that easy, we're going to lunch.

We start walking together, debating tostadas or vindaloo, but before we even decide on a restaurant
ROMS comes cruising by, obviously headed out on a bomb disposal run. He's pushing an asbestos
supply cart and wearing his shiny Mylar blast suit.

He stops when he sees me. 'What up, peoples?' he asks.

I pretend I don't see him, even though he's waving his claws in big *hellos*.

'Do you know this robot?' Seema asks me.

'Sure, we're home-slices,' ROMS says.

It knots my gut, but I cold-shoulder ROMS. 'This geek?' I ask Seema. 'No way.'

ROMS pulls off his shiny hood. 'Hey, homie, it's me!'

'Shove off, drone,' I tell ROMS, who puts his hat on all wrong and slumps away. To Seema, I say,
'That robot used to help carry equipment for our band.'

'You're in a band?' Seema asks.

'Yeah, I play bass,' I tell her. 'Most of our numbers are in French, though, so you probably
wouldn't understand.'

My hands are all shaking, I feel like such a fake.

'*Quel chance,*' she says. '*Je parle français aussi.*'

Then I hear this voice in my head. *Get out of there,* it says.

'Sorry, gotta go, see you,' I say and head back down the hall, beating it through the lockdown and
central processing. I race past rows of booking tables, then stumble through the gift shop – knocking
over all kinds of souvenir shot glasses and nearly killing the bail blonde – before finally ducking into
the Sniper Lounge.

Inside the lounge, I'm so wound up I pace back and forth, trying to get hold of myself.

'Easy, there, Blackbird,' Twan says from his recliner.

Cedric and Henry look up from the couch – they've got the new Monsanto catalog, and they're
checking out the centerfold. Everyone's trying to relax and clear their heads before the America
Online convention this afternoon. They'll need their best, if last year was any indication.

I go to grab a Nix, but the fridge's empty. 'Crap,' I say. 'Someone came in here and stole our soda
again.'

I slam the cooler shut, but no one even looks up, nobody around here seems to give a turd. So much
for unity. No weekend retreat to Team Mountain will fix things this time.

'I bet it was those asswipes on SWAT,' I say, furious. 'They're doing it just to laugh at us.
Everyone knows the guys on SWAT all drink Buzz.'

Normally, Twan won't give me the time of day, but he comes over and puts a hand on my shoulder
'Hey, Blackbird, get some focus. Save it for AOL,' he tells me. 'What say you sit in my chair, put

your feet up, check out the Monsanto Girls?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I say in total defeat. ‘I’m only into the Sony Girls.’

‘There you go,’ Twan says. ‘You’re sounding better already.’

‘Oh, come now,’ Cedric says from the couch. ‘The Monsanto Girls are it.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Henry asks him, laughing. ‘You’re Mormon.’

‘The Monsanto Girls are kosher with the hive,’ Cedric answers. To Twan, he asks, ‘Where’s Muhammad stand on the Monsanto Girls?’

‘Twan likes ’em natural,’ Twan announces. ‘I don’t speak for the Prophet.’

I pull Twan aside, steering him over to the fireplace.

‘Twan,’ I say, quiet enough that the guys can’t hear. ‘I need some advice.’

He leans against the humidifier, considers me. ‘Yeah?’

He looks very fatherly, with the bookshelves behind him. I feel I can trust him.

‘There’s this girl, and she’s not like other girls. She’s different, but I keep screwing everything up.’

‘Different how?’

‘She’s got these big eyes. Man, when she looks at you, she knows the real you.’

Something I say contains a certain gravity for Twan.

‘This girl,’ he asks, ‘she a friend, or you talking love?’

‘I just met her,’ I say. ‘How do you tell?’

‘Look at her,’ Twan says. ‘Really look at her. Not just check out her body. You need to see the real her. Then you’ll know You can’t help but know.’

After work, I grab a sixer of Buzz, to work up my nerve, then I head to the old Iridium Satellite Tracking facility near Stanford. The company went belly-up, but its tower is the tallest fixed object in sight. At the padlocked gate, the dish above is mongo, a sniper’s dream. I sling my rifle, hop the fence and start to climb the huge frame, monkey footing it up the diagonal struts.

When I reach the lip of the giant white dish, high above Palo Alto, I swing a leg over and slide through the dust to the center, where I find the remains of an old campfire. There’s like fifty cigarette butts strewn around and some used condoms, so I watch where I step.

At the leading edge of the dish, I dangle an arm off the side and assume a Thompson side cradle stance, which keeps your legs from going to sleep during prolonged situations. After my scope calibrates, I crack the six-pack and begin scanning the neighborhoods for Seema’s house. It’s funny, but when I finally drink my first can of Buzz, it tastes just like Nix,

Combing the storybook neighborhoods and canopied streets for her house, I guess I’ve got it in my head that I’ll find Seema in some perfect state – wearing a flowing gold and pink sari as she swings in a hammock, reading one of those really long novels, in French maybe, and she has a foot dangling, just sweeping the grass as she rocks. She’s probably eating a crepe, very elegantly.

On my third can of Buzz, I spot a guy washing an old-timey station wagon, and when I see he’s wearing generic white sneakers with blue dress socks, I know this must be Gupta. I dial in the focus, careful not to start my countdown or anything – I mean, Krugers don’t come with safeties.

Sweeping to the backyard, I spot Seema. She’s wearing khaki pants and a khaki polo with the insignia of the local animal shelter, and she’s doing a pretty weak job of cleaning the barbecue. She scrubs for a while, stops to look around, accidentally wipes a dark smudge on her cheek.

I know what it’s like getting stuck doing chores no one else wants to do, and I get this urge to tell Seema she’s not alone, that I’m here, too. I want to place my crosshairs on an apple or pear above her to shoot through the stem and have it land perfectly in her hand, so she’d know someone’s looking out

for her. It's a pretty stupid thought, I guess. Gupta doesn't have any fruit trees, and there's only so many ways to show affection with a rifle.

I crack another Buzz, and even though it's warm, there's something really snappy to it. I don't even down my first sip before I start to get the sense that I know Seema in a special way. It doesn't hit me in a flash, but sort of grows on me. I'm doing what Twan says, really looking at her through my scope – the way the splashing water makes her feet glimmer, how she squinches her face when she works a gross spot on the grill – when I get this sense that she's ahead of the kids her own age, a little smarter, more mature. She doesn't really have friends who know the real her. So she has to pretend she's someone she's not, acting older, tougher. Then her father's trying to make her follow in his footsteps, shoving French classes down her throat, steering her toward debate, toughening her with jiu-jitsu. Through my scope, I watch her hose the spider webs out of the burner, and it's clear that Gupta's trying to make her the world-class negotiator he never was. It's like she has to live someone else's life. Maybe all she really wants to be is a UN monitor, to travel to other countries on peacekeeping missions, wear cool uniforms, and try to make a difference. This is the real her, without any poses, a girl who really likes to help animals, who just wants to go out and make the world a better place without having to shoot anyone.

Suddenly my legs have a mind of their own. I jump up, and I'm balancing on the edge of the dish, and if I fall, I'm like, *whatever*. I feel that light.

I grab the tower's guy-wire cables, and in a slow-motion jump, rappel all the way to the ground, a move that leaves my crotch and one armpit black. Before I know it, I'm over the fence and heading down the street. I find myself jogging, and it's like I'm wearing headphones that only play static. There's a silver fire hydrant, and for no reason, I go up and kick it. I'm running along, turning into the neighborhood, and have you ever taken a good look at your hand, I mean really stared at it?

'Howdy, Gupta,' I say as I trot past the mist of his hose. At the door, I ring the bell, and I'm kind of jogging in place. I ring it again. At my feet, there's a flower bowl of puffy-faced dahlias and aster, all purple and trippy. Normally I'd get sort of queasy, and my ribs would be tightening. But I feel great, like I'm ten years younger.

It takes long enough, but Seema finally answers. She's sort of smiling at first.

'Look, Seema, wow,' I say. 'I am so into peace. And animals.'

'Blackbird? What are you doing here?'

'I'm a Cancer, you know,' I tell her. 'So it's hard for me to talk. And I have all these weird dreams, not the ones with the Sony Girls – ha-ha – but mostly where I mow the lawn. Sometimes I just wash the car, like Gupta! But there's this voice in my head, and Lt. Kim thinks that once we get it to go away, I'll stop worrying that the good things in life are destined to fail, like you and me. But I'm up in this satellite dish, and I'm thinking: what if this is the voice that still believes things can be okay, that believes in good and warns me away from bad? It wants to protect me, just like the United Nations.'

'Dad,' Seema says.

'You win a lot of awards, you know,' I say. 'And you think you're Aladdin, cruisin' on that carpet, showin' off with some loop-the-loops, but the real question is – what about the evil genie? Honestly, Seema, I'm no Aladdin. I'm more like the little monkey.'

Gupta comes up the driveway, wielding a soapy brush.

I admit I've been gesturing kind of wild with my rifle. I pull the last Buzz from my back pocket, a hot and shaken. It goes everywhere when I open it, and I lift a finger to say *gimme a sec* while I suck the overflow.

'*Pardon moi*,' I say with foam on my face.

'I think it's time to leave, Tim,' Gupta says.

'Okay, that was a lie, I admit it. I don't really speak French.'

‘Dad, let me handle this,’ Seema says. ‘Get lost, stalker-boy,’ she shouts and goes to slam the door.
‘Hey, wait,’ I tell her. ‘I really have to use your bathroom.’

I still need to explain how I don’t like to shoot women, but Seema assumes a jiu-jitsu stance, so I decide I’ll maybe just down my Buzz and go.

The next morning, I wake on the lawn of the police station with a blistering case of dry mouth. The sprinklers have run, and I’m clueless how I got here. My rifle’s gone. When I sit up, it’s like there’s rock salt in my joints, and maybe I cracked a couple floater ribs – sure signs I’ve been on the losing end of some grappling. Wringing the water out of my shirt, flashes start coming to me from last night – tank tops, cutoff shorts, and lots of mustaches all broomy and stiff – evidence I tangled with SWAT. I’m pulling my sneakers off to shake them out when I spot a rifle barrel sticking out of a Dumpster beside the station.

My poor Kruger. I shake a banana peel off the scope and try to clean coffee grounds out of the breech with a wet sock. Can I sink any lower? I decide right there to lay down my pride and squish out back to the bomb shed to see ROMS.

The bomb shed’s really just a nickname for a complex series of bunkers behind the station that house all the equipment we don’t want the media to know about. The walls are three feet thick and the ceiling is satellite proof, so this is where ROMS goes to hide out when his feelings are hurt.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, ROMS is parked alone in the middle of a dark corridor where we store the blanket cannon, a device that fires sheets of steel wool at incredible velocities. The protesters call them ‘drapes of wrath,’ but most every one agrees there’s no faster way to induce good citizenship.

The air is damp and smells faintly of rust. ROMS has his screen saver on.

‘Hey,’ I say to him.

‘You must be lost,’ he answers. ‘Your new, cool friends aren’t here. Why don’t you check the SWAT Rec Room?’

‘You know I don’t have any cool friends. I’m here to see you, man.’

This cheers ROMS up enough that his green light comes on. He smiles a bit, and I know it’s cowardly, but when he doesn’t say anything about the way I dogged him, neither do I.

‘Heard you had quite a night last night. Tried to fight the whole SWAT team?’

‘I keep screwing everything up,’ I say.

‘You know, Tim, turning to sodas and martial arts never solved anything.’

I hang my head at the truth of ROMS’s words. ‘Look, I need your help.’

ROMS grows serious. He points his dish at me.

‘Okay. Tell me about it.’

‘There’s this girl, and maybe I’m in love with her. But every time I try to talk to her, I turn into an idiot.’

ROMS starts to pace the room, rolling past bushels of finely wound laceration wire. He turns suddenly to face me.

‘I have much experience in the realms of amour,’ ROMS says. ‘My years in demolition and negotiation have taught me first hand about the effects of love, with my specialties being rampages, revenge bombings, and murder-suicides.’

I sit on an empty canister of laxative gas. ‘Go ahead,’ I say.

‘Here are a couple tips. First, love and firearms don’t mix. That also goes for drugs, alcohol, or artificial stimulants.’

‘Too late for that one.’

‘Next, when making decisions in matters of love, avoid ledges, bridges, rooftops, towers, and open windows.’

‘Strike two.’

‘Most important,’ and here he pauses. ‘Never, ever diss a friend over a girl.’

‘Ouch,’ I say. ‘Point taken. But those are all don’ts. I need the dos, man.’

ROMS thinks on this. He sniffs the vacant air as if for wisdom, then continues.

‘To begin with,’ he says, ‘She might be hungry. Supply her with pizza. People need food to make good decisions. Sharing food is also an ancient ritual of trust and friendship. Next, show your good faith – give her something, a gift perhaps, no strings. Then, open the lines of communication and be prepared to listen. Finally, give her space and time to make up her own mind, without any pressure. If all else fails, offer yourself in exchange.’

‘In exchange for what?’

‘Um,’ ROMS says, ‘the hostages?’

‘Hostages? There aren’t any hostages. You don’t know anything about love, do you? You don’t know the first thing.’

My voice cracks when I say this, and I tromp off.

The rest of the week is hard to take. Cedric and Henry quit the force to start snipers.com, a private ‘consulting’ firm that provides just-in-time sniping to Silicon Valley companies. Because they do all their shooting in-house, everyone’s spared the media attention. Henry leaves me a note that reads, ‘H who hesitates, masturbates,’ which is what the SWAT guys are always saying, and only too late do we realize that Cedric copied all our training videos and gave them to *America’s Zaniest Sniper Bloopers*.

Twan and I put in lots of overtime, which means I have to shoot all the females, and it gets to where I’m barely able to focus on the targets in my scope. Forget about replacement imagery – it’s everything I can do not to set the Kruger on autosnipe mode. Gupta gives me the silent treatment, and the Sniper Lounge is like a ghost town. My mom buys stock in Cedric’s IPO.

Then ROMS is killed in a blast at Ikea. It’s one of those savage detergent bombs. The explosion is broadcast live, and the video has the same color-leaked quality as my scope. ROMS lets out this sad little moan when he realizes he’s snipped the wrong wire, and knowing what’s coming, he turns himself off. He mutters something as his arms droop, his screen blips green, and all that’s left is a halo of static. Then his video feed stops. Flowers, I think. Flowers, flowers.

I’m a zombie, I’m so sad – I find myself eating breakfast burritos morning, noon, and night, and I’m about OD on Nix. But no one seems to care. Hewlett Packard digs up its poppies, and rebeds with snapdragon. CalTrans installs speakers on the fronts of its trains that blare ‘Ode to Joy’ all day. And each shift, after I hang up my Kruger, is nothing but another star next to my name at the detail desk, and I don’t even care about the perfect attendance award anymore. You know, when a K-9 is lost in the line of duty, he gets like a twenty-one-gun salute, but ROMS is simply swept up with an electromagnet so they can recycle his parts.

To try to cheer me up, the guys on Narco invite me out for a Buzz after work, and the bail blondes bake some awesome cupcakes – the girls are sweet, and they laugh at all my jokes, but I wish I could say they made me feel any better. The funny thing is my shooting just gets sharper and sharper. It’s like I’ve got my heart working on remote control, my accuracy is that good. I go where Lt. Kim tells me, fire at a dot on the horizon, and a kilometer away, a neck goes pop.

Then our new ROMS arrives. I’m chitchatting in the gift shop when the maintenance guys drag a

big crate into the station. They tear it open right there in the lobby, cardboard going everywhere, and figure I could use a new sidekick = I know it would be dissing the memory of ROMS to chill with a new robot, but I've been feeling pretty low, and then there's this dream that won't let up. Cruising over for a closer look, I decide that I won't teach this ROMS to talk cool, that I'll just accept him for who he is.

When the shrink-wrapping comes off, this robot's, the spitting image of ROMS, though it looks pretty pathetic all covered in foam peanuts. The bar code says it's a Virgo, which means it's finicky and needs to be needed. The guys boot up the operating system and wet the sniffer reservoir. Suddenly everything comes online. Arms lift and hover.

'Hi, I'm ROMS,' it says to a maintenance guy. 'Let's eat and make friends.'

It turns to me, 'I'm ROMS. Let's make some small talk.'

I kind of back up, and the robot advances. 'Food is the first step in peaceful resolutions,' it says. 'Pizza, burger, baba ghanoush?'

But I keep moving, across the marble floor, and out the glass doors of the station. In the parking lot it's raining lightly. There is a chill in the air, the magnolias looking a darker green against a sky that's roof-sealant gray. Hearing that robot say the exact things as ROMS makes me feel duped, like I've been best homies with a parrot.

I shoulder my rifle and wander the wet streets of Palo Alto. I'm like, who cares if my gun gets wet? The Kruger saw a dozen hard years in Angola before it ever met me, so I suppose it can take a little rain. I follow the CalTrans tracks, tromping through gray shale. Rows of eucalyptus trees hem the rails, which alternate between silence and the shock of commuter cars. The smile-faced engines have taken a beating. The yellow paint's chipped and dingy, and the insistent smile on these bruised faces makes me philosophical, gets me thinking about the big sniper in the sky and what he has in mind for us.

I stand among trees whose leaves shiver green for the northbound trains and silver for the south. Did ROMS know the real me? Was he my friend, or just a machine programmed to say whatever I wanted to hear? To find out, I decide I will believe in him and try his advice.

I detach my scope from the old Kruger. I notice how scuffed the stock is, touch the spots where my fingers have worn away the varnish. Then I hang my rifle in a tree, where it slowly turns with the wind, and start the long walk toward the foothills of Stanford to Seema's house.

When I knock on her door, my hair is wet on my face.

Seema answers in baggy sweats. She's holding a can of Sass.

'Hey, it's freak boy,' she says, but she doesn't slam the door.

I hold up my hand. 'Please.'

'You're a freak. You know that?' She puts a fist on her hip, and leaning against the door, considers me.

'Please, I only wanna say three things.'

'Number one?'

That fizzy scent of Sass is on her breath, but I don't let it intimidate me.

'I would like, when it's cool with your dad, to take you out for some pizza.'

'How about, *I'm sorry I went freako whack-out on you.*'

'Here's the second,' I say and hand her the scope.

She looks at me like I'm an idiot.

'It's a Raytheon,' I tell her. 'Top of the line, unavailable to civilians.'

'A rifle scope. Just what I've been needing.'

'Well, it's also a telephone and a radio, so you can reach me anytime, at work or home. If you ever want to talk. Or maybe if you just need someone to listen.'

Seema looks at me sceptically, then walks out in the driveway with me.

~~‘Hold my Sass,’ she says and lifts the scope. Suddenly, her iris is amplified in the lens, a ring of iridescent chocolate with green rifts and pits of oily gold. When she blinks, it stuns me. She roams the neighborhood with a slow scan.~~

‘Here’s the rangefinder,’ I say. ‘And this switches it to thermal. Thermal’s so sensitive you can see the heat signature of a pumping heart. If someone looks normal, but you can’t see the strobe of their heart, then you know they’re concealing body armor.’

‘Cool,’ she says. ‘*Thermal.*’ A smile, greedy with amazement, crosses her face.

Real quick, she lowers the scope to look at me, like this is some kind of trick.

‘What’s the third thing?’ she asks.

‘If you ever need a friend, I offer myself.’

She squints one eye, staring at me, like she’s trying to figure me out.

‘So you just came over here to give me this, as a friend?’

‘Look, I think you’re cool, and if you wanna hang out some time, call me.’

She keeps looking at me like that, and it makes me nervous.

‘Dad says that robot on the news was your little friend, the one from the band.’

‘His name was ROMS,’ I tell her. ‘We lost one of the good guys.’

Seema doesn’t say anything to this, which is one of Lt. Kim’s tricks to get me to talk more. I take a step backward, toward the street. ‘ROMS was a friend, and I’m not sure I’m ready to debrief yet. But I’m ready to listen, if you want to talk. Cool?’

Seema sort of shrugs and smiles. There’s possibility in the gesture, which means I haven’t been totally shot down, and I don’t want to push my luck.

That’s when I turn and start walking. I make my way down the middle of the street so Seema has a perfect line of sight – if she decides. to lift the scope and watch me go. Maybe I look like a dork to people driving by, a kid walking all slow down the yellow line, but if you’re looking at someone through a scope, they become large, filling the whole field of view, and there’s nothing in the world but them.

I don’t puff up my shoulders or anything. I want her to see the real me. If she trains her lens on me she’ll know me, and she’ll call. If she calls, that means the LAPD is wrong, that empathy is real. Even if Seema uses thermal, she’ll see a kid who looks pretty skinny, but is glowing red as he walks into the blue-green of a relatively cold world.

YOUR OWN BACKYARD

IT IS THE oily tang of tiger fur that startles me awake, and the first thing I do is look for my son, whom I dreamed of at top speed. The scent is gone before I even open my eyes, but a quick pulse still pants in my wrists as I sit up to see my boy watching *CHiPs* reruns with the sound off. Ponch and John ride their motorcycles on the beach while wearing mirrored sunglasses.

I have taken to sleeping on the couch because it is summer, and Mac is a boy with too much time on his hands and a day sleeper for a father. Last week I woke to find his hands on my belt, lightly twisting off the key to handcuffs I hadn't even noticed were missing. We looked at each other. 'I have the right to remain silent,' he volunteered, *for the record*, and I watched him roll out into our south Phoenix neighborhood, headed toward wherever my handcuffs might be. But today, he seems satisfied with *CHiPs*. I pull off my khaki security guard shirt from the zoo last night and rub my eyes against the midday sun through the windows. Today he's just a normal boy again, a little Indian on shag carpeting, legs crossed, shoulders hunched, reading Ponch's lips.

Sue says he's been telling kids in the neighborhood his father's a police officer again, that they better look out, which only adds to her theory that my quitting the force made things even worse for him. It's hard to know what to do about this. She is at the end of her rope with the board exams and a boy like Mac. She is reduced these days to studying with a stopwatch and speaking in two-word sentences: Room, *now*. Toys, *away*.

I see Sam moving under the carpet and watch him slowly cross our living room. He's a Mexican boa, five foot, that I inherited from the zoo one night. There's a hole in the carpet behind the couch where he gets in, and in the summer heat, he roams the whole house, a prowling shape between the cool padding and shag. The other pets are unsure of him, including my Dalmatian, Toby, so things work out. Sam runs into the side of Mac, who doesn't move, who's gotten used to this dark-roaming shape. Sam is also indifferent to what might be out there; he turns and swims off toward the television set, where Ponch and John now appear in a five-lane freeway. With their white bikes and round helmets, they are like bowling pins, a seven-ten split. 'You think that's really them riding those bikes?' I ask.

Mac knows how I feel about this show. He doesn't even take his eyes off the screen. 'I want my shoes back.'

'Those bikes have never even taken a real turn. There aren't even scratches on the footpegs, and those sidecovers are spotless. They've never been down.'

'They catch a lot of bad guys,' he says.

'They catch old movie stars, has-beens.'

'At least they're out there riding,' he says, 'and not code nine at home.'

I try not to escalate this, especially over a show Mac usually says is for 'dildoes,' a term whose meaning, at nine years old, he seems sure of. 'What makes you an expert on code nine?' I ask him.

He turns back to me for the first time, a little too proud that I can now see he has picked up yet another black eye from somewhere, 'You,' he says with enough drama to make me think he's heard the term somewhere and assumes it means more than merely off duty.

I try not to be coplike about all this. I watch Ponch and John pull over a limo with a Jacuzzi full of bikini-clad women. The girls bounce and throw handfuls of bubbles on Eric Estrada, who feigns a mock defense, and I tell you I'm really trying.

'Come on,' I say. 'Let's cut that hair.'

'For the shoes.'

It's dangerous to give him too much leverage here. 'One day. No more, okay?'

'Affirmative,' Mac says. 'Roger that.'

Aff-erm-tive, I hear from the kitchen. It took me a year to teach that bird to say that. But you can't unteach them once they've learned.

In the kitchen I grab Sue's veterinary shears and open a pack of hot dogs she's left on the counter to thaw. Taped to all the cabinets are her anatomy lists and dosage scales. On the fridge hangs a chart of the parasitic cycle. I snap off a half-frozen hot dog and crunch on it while I wonder how much animal science Mac has picked up the last four years I was on night patrol. Only now, as a rent-a-cop, do I think about how many times he's reached for the cereal, the bowl, the milk, and read the secrets of animal husbandry. Slowly, unknowingly, he must have picked it up.

When he comes in the kitchen I get my first good look at the shiner, a deep purple-brown that swoops and fans out to his cheekbone. He doesn't say anything about it and neither do I, which is our version of life after the bomb. The first black eye was last year, and he learned the worst possible lesson in the world for an eight-year-old: it didn't hurt nearly as bad as he'd expected. Next time, I knew, he would punch first. The boy's been punished, rewarded, tested, and medicated, and here we are, *post bomb*, as Sue says, *stealing our sons shoes*.'

We had long ago made a deal, and it was supposed to go like this: she'd do most of the child-raising work while I made it through the academy and the first three years on Traffic, then I'd watch Mac while she made it through vet school. Well, Mac is nine now, Sue's exams are here, and I am no longer a cop. I am no longer the same kind of father that once thought Mac was a good name for a boy who used to describe motor-throwing car crashes to his son over dinner each night, who referred to hurt people as occupants and ejections and incidentals.

He snaps one of the cold hot dogs off the pack and sticks it in his mouth like a cigar. Though chewing frozen hot dogs on hot days is a habit he inherited from me, I am confronted with a portrait of him in what seems to be his natural state: bored, bruised, and sullenly indifferent to anything an afternoon with me might bring. I take a breath, open the door, and step out into the summer heat.

Out back, I set him on a stool so he can watch his haircut through the dog slobber and paw prints on the sliding glass door. I hook up Sue's grooming shears and then stand behind him, a sweating father and his black-eyed son reflected in a patio door. He is too large for his age, with bully sized shoulders and thick hands that already have a hunch about how to get their way.

'I hear there's been some trouble in the neighborhood,' I say and flip on the shears.

He simply shrugs and bends his head forward, chin to chest, waiting for me to start. I palm the curve of his head and roll it side to side as I run the buzzer up the back of his neck. Toby trots up with the desert tortoise in his mouth, an object he carries everywhere, and he shows it to Mac and me as he looks eyes first the buzzer and then the half a hot dog in Mac's hand. The tortoise has long since resigned itself to this fate and even lets his legs hang out, which serve to funnel the slobber.

'Mom says you've been telling the kids I'm back on the force.' I say this and I'm suddenly unsure if I'm going about this the right way, but his head feels loose and pliant in my hand, the hair soft and short like when he was young.

'So.'

'So, is this true?'

'Mom told me you didn't turn in your badge. She says you can go back anytime you want.' As easily as he spoke, he waves the hot dog back and forth before Toby, who sways and drools but can't figure a way to eat without letting go of the tortoise.

'You know that's not true.'

He shrugs.

I spin his head halfway round, so he can see me out the sides of his eyes. 'I'm not going back there

so it doesn't matter. You listening to me? Believe me on this. That's over.' But even as I say this I see he's messing with the dog. He's shaking Toby by the nose, pinching the nostrils so its cheeks puff out around the tortoise. 'Let go of the dog.'

He does this and then I let go of Mac's head, which rolls back down to his chest.

'Brad's dog. You can hit it with a brick and it won't even blink.'

'I'm serious. I'm not going back on the force. You hit a dog with a brick?'

'I'm just sayin', he says and scratches the dusting of stubble on his arm.

'Did you?'

'What?'

'Throw a brick.'

'Mom says you're lazy, says you want to be code nine.'

Code nine, he says and I can feel his lip curl, sense the slouching indifference of his shoulders, and suddenly I don't want to keep shaving him. Suddenly, I can see him in a not-too-distant future, a tattoo on his arm, an earring maybe, wearing a black concert shirt with a wallet on a chain, and I don't even want to touch him, because for a moment I know this kid. I have arrested him a hundred times.

I flip off the buzzer and tell him to go hose off.

'What about my hair?' he asks, but it is not a question. 'This sucks.'

'Hose, now,' is all I can say as I point him away, toward the hose and the algae-green dog pool beyond.

You'd be surprised how many animals get killed at a zoo. We cull old ones, young ones, sick ones, extra ones. I cull them. Yesterday I spent most of the night scooping baby scorpions out of Desert Dwellers. They'd gotten out of their glass enclosure through the vent tube and were all over the atrium. I used a fishnet to scoop them up and drop them into a bucket of water, where they sank like dull pennies. The night before that, I fished all the newly hatched alligators out of Reptile Land with a long-handled pool skimmer. I dumped them in a feed tub and then placed it in the big cat meat locker till they were hard as tent stakes. I cull the overbred carp and the pigeons that swoop in from the capitol. I'm the one who harvests the ostrich eggs, and unless you've entered a dark pen of nine-foot birds, armed only with a pole and a flashlight, to try to take their eggs, you don't know what I'm talking about. An ostrich can put a man's ribs out his back, which is something I've seen, though not from a bird. Last week I shot a tiger.

But tonight is the kind you find only in Phoenix, only in July. The moon is rising over the Papago foothills like some distant drive-in movie, and I will forget about black eyes and roughed knuckles, will swing wide of the empty tiger pen as I roam the zoo's dark paths in my zebra-striped golf cart. I have tonight's list of the animals I'm to cull stuck to the cart's visor, and beside me on the seat are my son's dirty Converse sneakers, a temporary measure I know, a faint hope that tonight at least, he won't get too far from the house while I'm gone. It would be dangerously simple to get in the habit of daydreaming on a job like this, to let myself ponder life amid a sleeping zoo, to speculate on the animals on that list, to keep looking at those shoes. I know that trap already, and tonight, I have decided, there will be nothing in the world beyond the cart, nothing but the luft of stale, warm air up my shirtsleeves and four more hours of dark. I will hum through the exhibits, roll through my list, and later, I hope, remember nothing.

In the distance I can hear a big cat scratching against chain link. From somewhere come the soft thumps of a great owl hovering in its small aviary, and I sink into the kind of feeling I used to get back when I was a police officer and would cruise through residential neighborhoods. I could meander

through dark cul-de-sacs for hours, head back, one thumb on the wheel, only using cruising lights, as passed homeowners' neat lawns, their sprinklers snapping on to hiss in the dark, their security lights occasionally sensing my patrol car and shocking an upturned Big Wheel in the drive or an empty swing set. There would be nothing at all but the green glow of my dash gauges; beyond my windshield, the world became a series of dark houses that blended, and my mind would go blank.

I keep my headlights off now as I did then, but tonight, it's because of the rabbits. They make their way down the empty Salt River bed from the city dumps, and the zoo is overrun with them. Pink eyes are everywhere, ears swiveling in turn, and the sudden sight of me racing through the zoo is enough that they can throw themselves into the bright lights of trouble. You can't believe what they're capable of. When they get into the Oasis, they'll eat whole flats of hot dog buns at a time. They end up in trash cans, air ducts, gummed up in water pumps, or zapped in electric fences, and even if they find their way into a place like Sonoran Predators, it's not good because they're dump bunnies, raised on rotting food, full of worms.

I cruise into the night-scent of wet eucalyptus, roll through a funnel of bugs humming under a floodlight, and I stare straight on because I don't want to get to know the animals the way some people would. I don't name them or follow too closely their movements. Back on patrol, when I rolled past houses and through alleys, I never looked in those windows or wondered if the sons were in their beds because if you let up out there, if you let your thoughts start to wander, there wasn't one house you couldn't picture without chalk lines in the drive or yellow tape across the door. This isn't nostalgia, here, not the voice of an ex-cop with a wife and a boy and nine years on the force. My goals these days are less ambitious. I am a security guard now, lucky to get this job, and tonight, as the rising moon blues the asphalt before me, I am hunting only rabbits.

I've got a little Remington .22 semiauto, but it's unwise to shoot at any distance in a zoo, so I'm driving around to check a set of heavy-mesh raccoon traps I put out on my first rounds. The zoo is nestled in Papago foothills that slope into the shallow pan of south Phoenix, which is where I used to patrol. Occasionally, through breaks in the trees, I can see the bright city grid expand below, and every street corner, every alleyway, comes back to me in the orange glow. I know these spots in my nightly rounds where my old life appears suddenly and all too bright, and so I have trained myself to look at my coffee in its little holder on the dash, at my hands on the plastic wheel, because it has happened before that I have seen silent red and blues out there, and it let myself wonder *is that Ted or Jose or Waco* out there running something down. Then it's all too easy to start wondering about the runner, *how old is he, what's he running from?*

No, I try to keep focused on the task at hand. Sometimes high school kids try to jump the gates and occasionally there's a problem in the main lot because of the adult bookstore down the road, but other than that, it's best to stick to rounds. Mr. Bern, the zoo director, is still a little leery of me, so we talk through Post-it notes. I come to work, peel my note off the guard shack, and do what it says without thought. Speculation won't change the animals on the list. Dwelling won't bring my son in from the parking lots and canal roads below.

I wheel the cart around in the soft mulch of the Petting Zoo and head uphill to an exhibit called Your Own Backyard, which contains species of lesser interest like donkeys and javelinas, animals most people forego because of the hike. At the top, it happens like it always does: the zoo gives way to a wash of Phoenix light, wavering unsteady in the heat. It makes you look, look away, then look again. At the highest point in the park, the zoo also is reduced; it is now only the tops of trees, a rising breath from the green, and for a moment I feel for these rams and sheep, to whom this dangerous city appears brilliant and alluring. From below, there is a faint call of lemurs, and the thought crosses my mind to turn the cart around, to check the trap in the morning, because honestly, I can stare out into that city for hours. But then I near the trap, and the sight makes me stop and set the brake. I turn the headlight

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