

TROUBLEMAKER

BRIAN PERA



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Copyright

For Dennis Cooper

Colorado Springs

Nothing else in the world to do, and nowheres else to go's how I ended up at the carnie. And that's how I met Red; got the fire hair, freckles scattershot all across his face. Said he was running, said he didn't know where he'd be tomorrow but sure as hell not there in Nebraska. I couldn't of said it better myself.

It was the last time I seen my ma. I come all the way from New York to Omaha, gone to her house and—what's new—she wouldn't let me in. Peeked out the window and mouthed the words I knowed so well by then.

... Go ... away ...

Just to bug her, or cause I come all that way for nothing and now what, I stood there, not a budge—stared her down. Her eyes skirted every which way over the windowpane, without she'd look me in the face. The more she done it the harder I stared. How'd we get to this place's what I's thinking. It was all in my head but not put together.

Red. I followed him around and for the most part he didn't mind. He even told me some about himself. Said he come to Omaha from a rinky-dink neighbor city. Got sent to Boystown, where Pappy Flanagan's supposed to save the souls. (“There's no such thing as a bad boy,” says Pappy. “Yeh right,” said Red, “just good and better.”) He ain't got a ma or pa, or so he much as said. Somebody-or-oth sent him there, and the second he was in he was trying to figure how to bust out. Made two tries and got caught both times—they dragged his ass back. And cause they knowed he wanted out they put the pressure on even harder, more than on the other guys what just sat around and did the “yes sir” “no sir.”

Wouldn't you know he finally got out without he even had to try. Some man, some bigwig or other, come to Boystown, made an act like *I's 'a gonna take care of this boy myself, gonna be my project, my special ward*. Told them he'd put Red to work in his yard, make a man out of him. And cause the guy got money what fooled all the soul-savers, he took Red's hand and waltzed him right out of there.

Sure he took care of Red, give him everything a guy could want and more. But there's always a few small hitches for the price of room and board. Not just do this and do that but favors traded plain and simple. Strip down and dough-si-dough: Red was the man's private boy. But the guy liked to share. There was stuff about flying him around in a jet, parties with other soul-saver bigwigs, putting on shows in back rooms. Here's where the story got sketchy on account of Red only let me in on so much. Said he couldn't never know for sure just who was who and who was listening in. He was going to keep quiet like some peoples told him, until they come through on their end of a deal.

Said he was here on business, said this was the perfect place to meet his man, the carnie: loads of peoples, noise, and colors, not a one thing to stick out from the rest. Told me I could hang with him

until the man come, but after that I'd have to beat it like we didn't know each other, which I figured be easy since it was anyways mostly true.

"So who's the man?" I says. "He somebody from Boystown? You aim to go back there?"

"You crazy?" he says and his face gone screwy. "I'm trying to get away from them. Twisted motherfuckers made my life hell enough as it is."

And already by that time I knowed to keep my mouth shut, so I changed the subject to me. Told him how I knowed just exacty what he meant, just exactly, on account of I myself ain't had nowhere to go. How I seen what little home I got left just a few days before I come to the carnie—no go and gone lost—and I's ready to head just about anywheres. When he didn't tell me to shut up, when I seen he just looking away like he always done so's it might be he's listening, I gone on about my pa dying awhile back and what that done to what was left.

"He was sick on his bed for the longest time: alcohol, and cigarettes. Or so they says. Holed up to the back of the house in a back room, his bedroom but since he got sick it seemed more like a waiting room weren't nobody waiting in but him. He was on all kinds of pills, washed down with whiskey stored somewheres in there.

"Whichever, he was almost always asleep when I snuck in—got his head propped on a stack of pillows, body a sack of bones by then—and I'd know he was still alive from the way he's breathing, mouth wide open reaching up far as he could make it like to suck all the air in with whatever energy he got left. Sometimes I'd take some of them pills myself, slide under his bed. Hide for the rest of the day. In the beginning I laid on the wood floor, which didn't bother me none but later I brung pillow and a blanket and made my own bed to lie in. Figured I may as well set up camp.

"Sometimes he woke up after I been under for a while, and I'd be quiet, listen to the shake of the pill bottles, gulp of something to drink. I expected he'd get to bawling, like he just couldn't stand being in bed no more after so long without cigarettes and whatever else, no matter what Ma said about he liked it better that way, but he never so much as shed a croc tear that I could tell. Just the bottles rattling and maybe he'd holler for Ma but she generally didn't come until after dinnertime, when I was dead to the world. By that time he didn't wake up much. Just asleep and gasping like he done. Mostly I'd be under the bed trying to match my breathing to his, let myself near suffocate in the breadbox, thinking I could get to where he was so's I'd know how it felt.

"Course it was me found him dead, snuck into the room to find it was silence, no more breathing out of whack or breathing at all. I figured he just delivered his self to whatever dream he been havin' right? Like they say peoples get to a point they like what's going on in their head better and want to go there so they just do; they just up and leave.

"Before I gone to tell my ma I searched the room until I found his flask: Looked in his drawers between clothes he ain't wore in years, under seat cushions and back of curtains, in the bathroom cabinet under the sink—all I found *there* was an invitation to him and my ma's wedding, like I'd want to go even if I could; it was pure white paper but for where the water pipes leaked lines on it. *Come join us for the wedding of So-and-So* and so on. Fell apart in my hands the second I picked it up.

“In the end I found the flask between the mattresses, half empty or half full. The whole time been right under his nose and dangling over mine; now how come I wouldn’t of figured that out. Should of knowed he wouldn’t put it nowheres he’d have to walk for it. I took it, along with an empty pill bottle, and hid them in my room. Then I gone down to the basement where my ma was, told her I weren’t breathing no more. She got her back to me, digging for something in the pantry, and I thought maybe I should just kick her in so’s I could get rid of the worst too now the best was gone.

“‘In a minute,’ she said without she even turned to look at me.

“Weren’t until later I found out the real reason Pa died: He swallowed every pill out of the bottles on his bedside table. Ma never mentioned the one I got. Once in a while, until I lost it like everything else, I took the lid off and held it up to my nose, tried to smell what been in it before, like hearing the ocean in a shell. Just a hint left, but I got me a sense for it. Ain’t made me feel better, or feel anything in particular, but I found myself doing it again all the same. By the time I finished the whiskey off I got a taste for that too. Still got the flask in my bag.”

And I motioned to it at my hip.

Red made a sound like to laugh, though you wouldn’t of knowed it by looking at him.

“Sounds like maybe *you* would of been better off at Boystown,” he said.

Least I knowed he was listening.

“Maybe so. You ain’t the only one’s said it. But for the longest time the only place I wanted in was my pa’s head. After he died my ma locked his room up, cause only she’s got the key, and cause it took her so long to get her hands on it. That woman’s all about keys. Once or twice she left it unlocked and I snuck in, looked through the drawers and the closets where all Pa’s suit coats was hung, ones he wore to work before he’s in bed so long. I took some of them—no more’n two or three—and put them in my own closet. Later Ma found out I got them, said she didn’t like the idea I’s sneaking around like a thief in my own daddy’s room, specially since he was dead now and couldn’t do nothing about it. I told her I didn’t know what she was talking about: Even when he was alive, if that’s what you want to call it, he couldn’t of done nothing.

“But I ain’t lived in that house for a long time now and don’t expect I ever will again.”

We was at the edge of the fairgrounds looking in, and I shut up cause I seen he weren’t listening now, if he ever been. Instead he’s watching the riders get ready for the rodeo—every one of them got a number taped to his back, all the papers flapping at once from the wind. I looked at Red and wondered about somebody like him—wondered was he like me, more ways than one, what would life be like the two of us moving through it together. Course later he’d take off for good, off to Colorado, where I’s now, shaking myself silly trying to kick this crud I been on. Red told me not to follow him but I ain’t never been a good listener and anyways by that time I ain’t got no choice. I knowed if a body’s got a fate, I got one too. He’s mine.

Two days already and don’t nobody seems to know him. Wish I still had the black-and-white picture, one where he’s leaning against the bleachers. Behind him you seen the riders, Ferris wheel, stuffed animals hanging by the neck, awning. He’s at the carnie but not really, way he’s away from

everybody else like ain't a one of them he needs, and not even a look to what's around him—something bigger than him on his mind. Even in the picture he wouldn't look at me, got his eyes off the sky. Sky takes up most of the picture, shoulders on up is shine white and the puff of his cigarette smoke and clouds. He's in the denim coat with the sheepskin collar, pack of Marlboros front pocket peeking from under the flap. Striped T-shirt, dusty-red hair. Eyes squinted and his mouth puckered up towards his nose like he's thinking hard.

That's how I describe him to anybody I think maybe's seen him around here in Colorado Springs on account of it's how I remember him, even after I lost the picture like everything else.

First day here I ended up in what my ride called the Garden of the Gods. We been on just any old road, passing empty fields what just kept going on until they run into mountains and sky. Nothing but a trap in all directions. I ain't never met my ride, until a few hours back down the highway, but anyways I turned to him and talked like maybe we'd knowed each other longer, which is what I always done. Talked like he'd drove me all along and seen everything else I did, out the same windows, same eyes, and I said:

“I don't see why he'd want to get to a place like this so fast so bad. Nothing here what won't wait for him, be exactly the same three weeks or six ahead.”

Or something like that. And like he knowed what I's talking about my ride said, “There's plenty to see when you know where to look.” A few miles up he turned into some of that emptiness like we making a run for it, down a gravel road through red dust, around a bend, and into this garden.

So I take back what I said cause even though I didn't see Red there I seen now maybe why I come. All around the car was rocks piled mammoth high, fiery red as the guts of a volcano turned inside out, like pictures what flash by too fast in disaster movies and the news. Here it was; standstill. For all I know it *was* the middle of a volcano, and we'd drove right into it—like to get swallowed up. That same color lit the vinyl seats of the car on fire, and I squinted my eyes so's everything become just that and nothing else, got warm enough I felt maybe I's on fire too and so sleepy. Then too soon my ride said “Well let's go now you've seen it,” and he drove me to a spot downtown where I lie peoples was sooner or later waiting for me.

This here's my third night without no shut-eye to speak of, and I's set to fall over. I left New York a week ago for Nebraska with no dope and nowheres to get more. Now I's empty-handed and ain't got connection one in Colorado Springs, and no cash even if I done. But I promised I wouldn't do the stupid no more anyways, so I been keeping a lid on things with the little joke bottles of liquor I lifted off the train. I got to make them last on account of I can't afford no more until I get set up, but try to tell n that once I's feeling good off one or two.

Even the YMCA ain't cheap enough I can square it here: muscleman at the front desk give me the merry ha-ha when I showed him what little money I got, just what's left of the dough from the carnies. I give him a look like if he weren't already dead inside that jug he might be soon, and since then it been pass the time at whatever pinball machine I might run across, line my quarters on the deck of the game and take up as much time as I can pay for. Nights I crash in the fountainbed of Something-o

other Square, Courtyard Such-and-such, downtown; for now. Somebody's bound to come along.

Me and the Madam figured out going back to Nebraska was the thing to do. She said give it one more try and I done like she asked. Ain't my fault it didn't work out. No way we could of knowed a thing that from New York City. So I took the train and give it a chance. Just weren't meant to be. And once I seen Nebraska ain't got nothing for me, and I ain't got nowheres else—nobody nowhere and so on—well I's free, go where I want. Don't know a soul in Colorado Springs, or anywheres else no more, and might be I'd of been tore up about it if things was different. But I can't say it makes no nevermind anymore.

I come to New York from Memphis.

Sort of.

To understand one you got to understand the other, if you can keep them straight. If you can keep them straight you's one step ahead of me. Like I say I's in Omaha, Nebraska before I's in Colorado Springs, and before that I's in New York City. In New York City, I's at the Madam's. It was Nebraska first, straight out of the womb, then Memphis later on, from Memphis to Buford, Arkansas but don't get me started on that cause I decided I best just forget Buford altogether if I can.

So: New York City, like I say. I go over it in my head again and again but it's a circle and soon as you get to a point I think I can stop I see I's still caught up in it, with as much of it ahead of me as behind me. For now, just behind's Nebraska, and right behind that's the Madam putting me on the train headed north there. Before that, back farther or maybe just ahead, when I first come to New York, is coming to her house fresh off the bus from that place in Arkansas don't exist no more.

When I first come in I got everything a body could want. Made me feel like that was life; you know, figure out it ain't working one place you go on to another next in line. Course that was back before I come to feel there's limits on these things. I been kicking around Forty-deuce the day my brother come in, happy to have my feet on the ground after being on the road so long, until I come across some guys hanging out front of Howard Johnson's just down from the big co'cola sign. They told me about working at the house, for the Madam, on account of we got to talking about how I's broke and I got no place to go. They took me there and Bam straight off I's making the dough; got a room of my own and anything else I want or so I thought.

They could of at least half warned me.

There was all kinds of rules. No drugging in the Madam's house for one. But there's ways to get around that one: always was and will be. I learned that—how to hide it—from my pa. No drugs, and keep up appearances. Madam practically spit-combed her boys' hair, told us what to wear and what to say and when to shut up, which is the part I ain't never been good at.

Turned out she was right on a lot of things I didn't want to give her credit for. I can see that, now. She said I'd be big for a couple months but don't start to count on it. Said I'd do good to keep my thoughts to the future. The johns like a new face makes them think well maybe this here's a Hardy Boy, one of the Brady brothers. Just a kid next door. Act like you's in it but ain't, like somehow you stumbled into doing this for a living, which is anyhow mostly true but not like they got it, on account of I kind of been down that road before, in Memphis, road what led right to this house, even if I didn't know I's on it or what address I's looking for.

Madam said after a while they'd figure I's there to stay, that maybe once I was next door but now I's stuck *here*; for good. And she was right. After a while I's sitting on my ass in the living room—

john after john—trying to remember all them things she told me to do would get get me sessions on
I got to start working for them.

My only chance was to make myself good at what I done, get to be a pro as they says but I ain't never knowed just how to do that. I'd finally get a guy up in the room and wouldn't know what to say or not, fall all over myself to the point the Madam got phone calls about what the hell you letting the boy up in them rooms for and what kind of house was this anyway.

"What are you good at?" she asked me one time after yet another john wanted one thing and I give him everything but.

"Don't know," I says. "I can name wildflowers. And I know geography."

"I mean up in the *rooms*," she says. "We're talking about the rooms here. What can you do upstairs that gives you an advantage? You've got to think about these things."

And I racked my brains. But I couldn't never come up with nothing. All I knowed was to try whatever she just told me downstairs—I tripped through it like I ain't never done it before, which the Madam said would of been okay if I didn't always look like I's set to vomit. The other guys was always talking about the money, making the cash, but I didn't see why nobody needed it. Who need money when you got a warm place—the bed and eats and the whole shebang? Only thing I needed that the Madam weren't about to give me was my dope, the friend I made from the guys what first brung me to the house—better friend than Pa's liquor and pills ever been. When I needed that, I got it out of the street from a guy they knowed called Mannie—good old Mannie—who didn't care if I looked like I's about to chuck up, long as I put out.

"Just remember, you got the power," one of them other boys told me when I first come in. "They don't know why they're here; why *you're here*. They think it's just about sex."

But I didn't know what *he* was talking about neither. He was twenty-nine and been doing it since he's fifteen, so he got more time to figure it out than I done. I just wanted a place to stay and room to do my own thing, didn't care about money cause what did I need it for.

Thing is, even though I didn't need no money to live there, to live there I got to make some, which is another circle I couldn't make a straight line.

So after a while Madam said she couldn't do nothing with me no more; I's a lost cause. Said she weren't stupid, she knowed I's on drugs; said I got about two minutes left there. Course then I started trying harder, gone up into the rooms and squinted my eyes to stay awake and figure whatever it was I needed doing to make this thing work, like it done back in Memphis in the bars. Said to myself *I got the power* over and over until the words run together. But the dope kind of set up camp in my head so's everything seemed like it was happening in another place, and I couldn't figure out the system.

One of my last days at the house—the last of the few minutes—time I's in the Grey Flannel room with yet another john wanted it without the condom, I done already give up. If I got all the power how come I got to keep telling myself's what I's thinking when I's thinking at all. In the back of my head in the little pocket where things still made sense, place as impossible to get to as any other I's set on getting, I knowed I's on my way out, and weren't all the power in the world could change that. *I be*

through this before, so what did I care. One john was like every other, and *still* I couldn't figure him out.

"Now you can make some money with this man," says Madam downstairs, after I left the guy in the Grey Flannel room—what's decked out like somebody's office, like any minute somebody could hold a meeting there all hush hush and ain't we all important—telling him to get comfortable like the day he's born.

"He's a regular. He'll try to get you to go without a condom. Don't tell him no, even if you don't intend to accommodate him. Remember what I told you? About suggesting something else before he even realizes he's not getting what he wanted? It's all about suggestion. Make another suggestion and show him what you're talking about to make it stick in his mind. He'll see you again if you do it right. Keep in mind he doesn't like you if you're a day over twelve, so don't talk much but keep a smile on your face. Think of high school prom, like it's next weekend. You're one of those shy boys: Everything's okay by you, sure, whatever."

"Are you listening?"

The john told me to stand a ways back so he could get a look, which was fine by me. I smiled and started doing it. Then he asked what was my favorite rock bands.

"Pretty much everything," I says, grinning cause what the hell made him think I got time to listen to the music.

Before long, it was just the floor I's looking at. He'd started undressing. If I watched him, all I could think was how white he was, how his dark socks left a purple ring around his legs when he took them off. If I looked at the floor I could think of something else, try to keep a grip on what I was supposed to do next and who he's supposed to be, manage half a smile.

He gone on talking phedinkus; about his wife, just a little, and a lot about his brother. How his father built up a business for him and his brother to divvy, but it was the john's idea his brother was getting greedy—said he lived with him all his life and knowed him like the back of his hand. He wanted somehow to get rid of his brother, kick him out of his half.

"Ever since we were little we were at each other's throats," the john said. "That house wasn't big enough for the two of us. He's always, *always* thought he could get his way."

But it was all says which to me—business and partners and shares. And I ain't never lived long enough with nobody to tell one thing or the other about *always*. I looked at his wingtips over by the white leather chair in the corner, stared hard like I's sober. Them I could figure—not a trace of dirt or wear, polished slick like he just bought them, like they was still a commercial what put the idea in his head to get them in the first place. Only thing give them away was their smell. From across the room it was office carpet, cold sweat socks, lady's perfume, the guts of a house on the edge of the suburbs.

"I like to have my balls licked. Can you do that for me?" as he set the lettuce on the bedside table pulled the bedspread down, and jumped on the bed like he was still a football star.

Course I didn't want to; I tried to think was there anything Madam ever said about something like that, tried to think up a suggestion what could make something else seem just as good, but weren't

nothing come to my head, and meanwhile he's staring hard at me like I weren't the grinning boy wonder he paid for no more. So I just smiled and said no.

"Only with peoples I know better."

"How do we get to know each other better?" he asked, like it was some game he could figure out.

Then he picked up a smut rag from the pine trunk, foot of the bed, started flipping through it. Every other page or so he stopped, made a sound like *hmm*, or *there we go*, or *now we's talking*, but it was only him talking, studying the magazine hard like to get ready to tell me who I was. I made my way to the bed and sat next to him, which point he tossed that one onto the floor and picked up some other from the trunk—this one all out; got the pictures of guys in action. Weren't no way I'd be able to come up with anything could beat that.

"Here's what I'm talking about," and he pointed to a full-page close-up of some guy licking some other's whatnot.

"See that?"

I leaned over just a little; just enough.

"How well do you think *they* know each other?" he asked, looked straight at me and pushed the magazine closer so's I felt like I's being surrounded.

How should I know? I wanted to say, or *Scoot over*. But all what come out was, "Search me."

"I know you better than you think," he says and nudged my arm with his elbow. "Hmm?"

Then like we's talking about something else he starts telling me how I probably got lots of boyfriends, I's a little princess; said I never been with a real man like this before, never had a real man I done nothing with, said I got to have some Italian in me—that he could tell I get lippy. If I ever get lippy with him he said he'd speak Italian like he knowed I understood; he'd beat my ass to a pulp then love me just as hard the next morning. Kept going on and on like most the rest of them, like weren't where we was, which would of been fine if I could ever figure out just where it was they wanted to be instead. He didn't seem half as real to me as he thought he was.

"If you want me to I will," I said. "With protection."

And boy he shut that magazine quick, and pitched it past the foot of the bed, where it landed on the floor with a noise like somebody got slapped. But I paid him no mind. I reached over for the denture dams and lube out the bedside drawer. Before he could say bugger somebody or something up I was rolling a condom on him, thinking:

Must be I's still smiling. My mouth's got a butterfly cramp.

"When I see that other boy," John says, "what's his name, the one from France, the rugby player? He doesn't make me wear a condom."

I didn't know whose pack of lies he meant—no telling what the others said in the room—where they was from, how old, how turned on. And I couldn't let that get to me, couldn't let it break my concentration, so I just gone on with what I's doing. Getting my dope from Mannie on the outside was one thing: Got to do what you got to do. But this guy weren't doing me no favors. I weren't about to touch him without something standing in the way. Weren't much the Madam said I could remember

but I remember she said weren't no reason not to use a rubber in the house. So, as long as I's there, figured I got every right.

After I lubed my palm he took the condom off; pulled it at both ends so's it let sail across the room like a rubber band. He looked at me with a make me stare, folded his arms over his stomach.

"They aren't foolproof anyway. The number of times you use them a day, you might as well not."

Well my head gone empty, I just blanked. Couldn't remember nothing Madam or nobody else told me, not ever, just that I's in one of them dreams, where you's on stage and ain't even knowed you's in a play until you blinked and seen you was there: Weren't nothing to do but go on with it. Just barrin' through, and if you screwed the thing up so be it.

I told him he weren't half as big in some places as all around, like he thought. I ain't never had no boyfriend, I said, not really; just almost, right before I come to New York, in the real world I put on a lot of my head to make room for cockamamie make-believe like this here. I ain't had a boyfriend cause I never found one, and just when I found one—just when I thought maybe I could get what he seemed like I think should be so easy for me to find—it got took away. That was real, I said. That was real. So I didn't know what the hell he's talking about and he could eat shit, and not mine cause I weren't about to let him near me. If he didn't want a rubber he could call the rugby player and see was *he* game for playing without a net.

* * *

Before the place what don't exist no more it was Memphis, Tennessee. When I get to remembering without I can stop myself, it's all the flowers. That part of the circle's so many flowers. A body ain't never seen Memphis until he seen spring, what's got the azaleas running up and down just about every street, and all in between them it's iris, bright yellow daffodils and forsythia, hydrangea. Columbinella what's got seeds so tiny you can't see them and the wind blows them all over to far-flung places—so far from where they started they might of come from the place I first learned all them flowers' names and maybe like me they won't never go back. All them's something to lay eyes on.

But for the longest time Memphis was about wondering where was I going to grab a wink at night.

Finally I hooked up with a place for seventy-five dollars a month. It was downtown Memphis Main Street; way past the decent houses respectable folk lived in. This was deepest downtown, busted lip of the city, few blocks up from the Mississippi. Vacant lots and hollowed-out buildings left over from the cotton trade and immigrant days. Place called **MOJO'S**, or so the faded sign hung out front said. Maybe used to be a store or some kind of business. Now it was just a blank two-story, north end of Main Street. Ground floor's one big room and a wall of windows what faced the street. Second floor up creaking stairs was strictly flophouse; two empty hallways broke off into small rooms, every room got a fireplace didn't work and a window wouldn't open. Only way to lock the doors was from the outside—so's it felt like anybody could come along and trap you in. Plaster hung from the ceiling in big chunks over a floor what weren't but splinters.

I got family in Memphis, or so I thought: Nana on my pa's side and Aunt Edna on my ma's. Across

the river into Arkansas, at *that* place, I got me another grandmama: If things didn't work out on the one bank of the Mississippi I could cross on over and try my luck with her's what I's thinking. Cause like I say, back then I thought that's how these things worked. Already I been living in Nana's house farther uptown. Ma sent me there from Omaha after Pa died, said I'd never go to college, get a job, do with my life like better peoples done. She been telling me that all along, so I didn't figure there was any use trying, on account of I got to take her word for it, she knowed me longer'n I knowed myself. She needed me out of her hair she said. *Well, good, I figured. I'll go to Memphis, where I got more family to choose from.*

I's in there pitching but turned out living with Nana weren't but a kettle of fish. Not two months moved in, come to find she wants me out. *I'm too old, I'm tired, I just can't do it,* she said, and a kind of baffle-gab without she never really explained herself. But maybe even if she tried to explain I wouldn't of understood, not from the looks of things anyhow, on account of she done a lot didn't make sense to me. Like sitting in some part of the house arguing with herself, or so I thought at first. After a while I come to think she been arguing with somebody else, like the grandpa I never met, like they got some unfinished business never got took care of before he died. She'd say her part, then she'd say his so's both of them was putting their two cents' worth into the same slot and weren't neither getting closer to coming out right. The whole house was them arguments—voices raised and fists drawn.

I tried to keep to myself, thought maybe if I stayed out of the argument I wouldn't get dragged in on it. Set up behind closed doors in my pa's old room, one he growed up in. Like to think it was just how he left it. Got its own bathroom and staircase; own separate digs in a way. I stayed up late nights tearing through drawers and cabinets, hungry for pictures or letters or just any old bits I figured maybe been his one time, anything he left behind, like the flask I brung with me from Ma's. Soon enough I felt more like him than me, so's things half made sense. Even looking out his window I seen the view he his self seen growing up. It was just like flying from Nebraska to Memphis in the plane Ma sent me off in to get rid of me quick as she could, give me my running shoes and told me to sprint. Way up there and looking down at everything it all seemed like just so many squares and rectangles, and things was just a matter of organizing; like if you stared long and hard enough you'd see how things fit in rightful order and make sense of it all, not like on the ground where everything's just one big never ending, what seems throwed together and shook up.

I set all them pictures and everything else up on shelves. Found old schoolbooks with my daddy's name wrote on the inside cover, scrawled like he just learned to spell it; set those out too, like they's picture told what he looked like when he sat for it. Yes sir I got so cozy up there like to thought of it as my own home, only one I ever got, like Ma been wrong about me not being able to start over out there the way other peoples done.

Until the day Nana walks in like she just figured out she got a bone to pick with me, says:

“So did you find a place of your own yet?” in a voice so sweet you'd think she's singing me a love song.

It was the first I heard of it, and from there things got worse. Got to be she asked every day, Did

find it. I knowed I's on my way out, I ain't stupid; I been heading there in one way or another since I could remember—ain't never even got a chance to sit down. But I didn't know Memphis, and couldn't afford another plane to go up and make sense of it for me. And I didn't have nowheres else to go, so she held out long as I could. If she wanted me to leave she'd just have to carry me out herself.

But she started accusing me of lifting things, talked to me like I been in on the argument all along. She'd get to looking for something, couldn't find it anywheres, gone around the house searching and complaining under her breath. Longer she looked the angrier she got, and she'd talk to me like I weren't working as hard to hide things as she was to find them. More than once she asked me where'd her flashlight or receipt book or opal necklace get to. I never knowed what else to tell her but to try and think where she put it last, but seemed like anything I said made up her mind I's a thief storing loot.

Then calls from Ma: The phone rung echoes through the pitch-black halls of the house. She heard from Nana about things missing and made a case against me long-distance; told Nana watch out for me and my sticky fingers, told how I'd stole stuff from my own pa on his deathbed and weren't no telling where I'd stop if someone didn't stop me before I couldn't stop myself.

Mostly I kept on trying to keep to my own. Nana's house was big enough to get lost in anyhow, at least for a while. I gone up the steep steps to the attic, where years of boxes was stacked along the wall, full of family things. Dug through them, found things like a navy medal of my granddaddy's, missing toy parts from games left pitched by aunt or uncle whasisname; put all them things on the sill of a window looked down at the front yard. Figured: *Long as I keep it all up here I can make like it's my own without it's stealing.* Stared at them and the green of the lawn behind them like they's one solid something I made myself.

But Nana always found me. Wondering where I got to sent her into fits, acted like I left the room before she's done talking to me. She'd call out all over the house until I answered—I could hear her underneath me somewheres, we was two ends of a tunnel calling through the dark for the other. Usually I's walking out the attic door when I answered. Out the attic door and right into her. Course she got on to me about being where I weren't supposed to be, looked at me with her eyes wide and the head backed away a little like she didn't trust me. It was extra proof of my criminal nature.

Finally I had to leave. She just asked one too many times when was I on my way, and weren't nowheres in that house I could go to get away from it, not without she thought I's somewheres stealing something else she lost her own damn self. After all that time living with her, she still ain't cleared out drawers for me to put my things in. I still got everything in my bag, like from the beginning she knowed I weren't there for long. If she seen I touched anything or put it where it weren't before, she got on to me about changing things around, said I's trying to confuse her. Got to be I's afraid I'd come home to the locks changed and that blamed on me too.

* * *

And that done it. Mr. Wingtips put in a call. If we was in a play, he wrote it, and he didn't take kindly to me changing the lines. How dare I this and that? What kind of place was this? Did we want the

police called in on us? *Look, Madam told him, we can't make the boys do anything in the room. It's between you and them.* Then she offered him another session with somebody else on the house, and when she got off the phone she said I better start taking orders or my two minutes was up; said the only reason anybody ever picked me was I didn't look a day over fifteen, but then I gone and ruined when I opened my mouth. I's either going to start doing what she said or I's out of there. From now on I'd have to sit in the phone room with her, between johns.

"If that's what it takes," she said.

For the rest of my time there I's on the couch across from her desk, and when I weren't playing nodding out I watched her crazy busy on the phones and at the monitors like popcorn on a skillet. All six phones ringing at once, and seemed like everybody asked the same questions: How many you got to choose from, what they look like, what's their names, how much, and sometimes did we get into this or that rough stuff, like we's as excited about it all as they was.

If anybody knowed their lines it was Madam. She said the same things to everybody.

"We have five handsome young men to choose from, we're located in the upper Fifties between First and Second Avenues in a lovely, well-appointed townhouse furnished in the Executive Style: Our prices are one-fifty for the half hour, two hundred for the hour," and blah blah blah.

I heard it so much it was sheep I counted in my sleep.

Then on about us guys, or peoples what sounded like us only better-looking. We was generally all American frat types, and if that didn't work she just give us another name, said we was the exotic kind and jacked the price up. She tried to set up an appointment, saying we was so busy with school and fr stuff and exotic whatnot that we was hard to pin down, but most of the johns just said they'd call back when they was in the area, like we didn't know they worked right around the corner.

On a shelf over the phones was three black-and-white monitors, One for manning the street outside the building, one for the quick hall between the two front security doors, and one for the living room all of it scrunched fat by the cameras. To most anybody it wouldn't seem like the Madam's paying them no mind at all. But she could just as easily notice a chip of paint falling off the door or a fine landing across the street as a masked man with a gun. Between the phone calls and the johns at the door and the other guys what come in to pay up, she trained them eyes on me, got herself worked up telling me straighten out, until something come in or sounded off to interrupt her. But don't you know weren't none of it would get me off the hook.

"I've about had it," she said. "You know you're the laughingstock of this house, don't you?"

I's ready to laugh *with* her, but she weren't smiling. She lost plenty of money on me, she said, and pretty damn quick I'd have to do my job in the living room and behind closed doors with the johns. I's out of there and she really meant it this time.

"You're more like everyone else who comes in here than you think; looking to get something for free. All you want is money and taking care of but you have no intention of earning it. I've given you a room of your own to live in, food from my cupboards to eat as you please," and huff huff, puff puff. "But this is a hotel to you, isn't it? Just a hotel and we're all your room service. You think you own

this house?"

Later, in the living room, my only chance to get away from her, I started thinking how nice living on my own'd be. That's why I come to New York in the first place, on account of living with somebody else never worked out. Some reason—beats me—I just fell into this job. If I ever wanted to be on my own I needed money: The other boys was right on that count. But I didn't know how to get the sessions. I knowed what the Madam told me: Look the johns in the eye and laugh when you hear them talking like it's the best joke ever. But I knowed at least some of what they said weren't supposed to be funny. I got tripped up trying to figure out where to put the laughs in. Maybe that's why I weren't no good at this.

I started thinking about other things and couldn't stop from drifting off, doped up as I been. Looked at the sunflowers set out on the coffee table and thought about down home Memphis, how the ones there grows six or seven feet. Then how it seemed like I ain't seen my Nana in as many years. Remembered her house—dark monster of a thing—trying to get inside that last time I gone over. For all I knowed she could be dead, rotting somewheres inside, them doors locked on me forever.

I tried adding up how many sessions would it take for me to make it back to Memphis to try her again. But I lost count when I remembered the slim pickings I got for tricks there anyways, guys who just as soon dump me off at the train station with my things stuffed in a bandana and tied to a stick. They don't care exactly what happens to me. Least at the house I got somebody looking out. No, it wasn't crazy to think of going back to Memphis, since anyways I more or less just come from there. Wouldn't be in the Madam's or New York neither one if it wasn't for how bad things turned out in that good old Tennessee and that other place. By now my Nana wouldn't even remember me.

While I been thinking all this, the john picked somebody and they got up to leave, and where I was come rushing back to me. Boy beside me snapped his fingers in front of my face, said, "You better come to. You know she's watching on the monitor."

Sure enough, the Madam's voice come in over the intercom; screamed "Get down here"—made all the guys in the living room jump.

"Good luck," somebody said like they only half meant it. Everybody got a turn with her sometimes. If you didn't know how to sweet-talk her it weren't nobody's fault but your own.

She's on the phone when I come in and got another one resting on her shoulder; seen me before I even full through the door. With her free hand she jerked a finger towards the couch and rolled her eyes the same direction like to say I better park it. And when she got done with them calls and told one of the other guys get down there and man the phones, he was there lickety. Now she rolled her chair to the couch, shoved her face into mine, looked mean at me a second, said:

"I mean, I'm just not wasting my time with this. I've got plenty of boys who need work. Plenty call here every day looking for it, and the ones who have it want more. You're sitting up there like you're in a different time zone."

She took a breath, sized me up. And I flinched, on account of she got this way of looking at you made you think she aimed to hit you even when she ain't lifted a finger.

“Now if you want to keep your arms and legs, and you want to go on living here ... you better get your smile on and keep it on. As long as you live in my house under my roof you do exactly as I say. Want to try your luck on the outside? I know what you’re thinking, right? Think you can go out there and make your own way, think you won’t have me breathing down your back. Everything will come up roses? You be my guest. You’d last five minutes out there. You think it’s so bad in here, it’s worse than you can imagine for someone like you outside, somebody who can’t play it straight for two seconds. But you don’t see that, do you? Don’t see it, and won’t, until you see it for yourself, right? So you be my guest. You have about two minutes left here.”

I knowed she meant it, least the part about my arms and legs, cause I heard the stories; about the chairs flying and her choking peoples up against the wall. “Tough love,” one of the boys said. I knowed if you got something to say to her you waited until she left the room. So when she give me the get-go, I cursed her all the way up the stairs back into the living room, shut it off neat once I stepped through the door.

Then I started brainstorming about how I’s going to make it on the outside, get out on my own—finally and really on my own—where I wouldn’t need nobody and couldn’t nobody tell me what to do.

* * *

Red hair, freckles. Blue eyes.

I kept looking away from him as we gone, watched peoples thinking maybe I could catch sight of whoever he was supposed to meet, or figure where the two of them was going. All I knowed was another second his man could show up and then where would I be. He got that look to him like waiting, mind on other things barely listening, barely there. Whereas the thought of being anywheres else scared the daylight out of me, and not just on account of I’d be that much closer to dope, which I weren’t about to go back to, no matter how hard I got the shakes and shits. I’s taking swigs from them joke bottles on the sly, whenever the cramps got to be too much, and just following him through the carnies once done told him my life story—elbowed my way through the crowd to keep up, every step thinking *What can I come up with to make him stick around?*

Walking down the midway, manic rows of stands on either side, followed by the calls of barkers trying to get us or anybody else to step right up to this or that booth, where the prize or promise offered was more likely’n not some overblown stuffed animal got felt polka dots for eyes, furry thing hung captive from a rope at the neck, down from a roughed-up lip of awning, some got bright pin tongues what lolled out like they been choked. Below them and inside the dark of the booths was the targets; circles inside circles red and white, scuffed yellow ducks floating down a stream; a row of cardboard Dobermans what moved straight across a wall until they reached the end of the line, turned over on theirselves, and started back to the other side. More than once I stopped long enough to get taken in by the racket, only to find I’d near lost track of Red. Suddenly I’d snap out, remember I weren’t the kind to stop and wait. I’d turn looking for him, seen first the mosh of bodies and carnies litter folding in on itself, afraid I lost him until at last—some kind of luck I got—I spotted him ahead

getting swallowed up.

We ended up at the cramped group of tents, center of the fairgrounds. Wide-stripe canvas, red and yellow roped to the ground at the corners and sloped except for the centers where they pointed reached for sky or roller coaster or Ferris wheel behind them. Round the bottom edges they was worn brown from dirt and kids sneaking underneath to get a free show. Outside each tent a sign advertised what you could see inside if you got the mind and money to. Red looked at a few of them sideways, couldn't be sure which ones, until finally he stopped, his gaze come back to me, and he said:

"Don't see him anywhere. You know, if it was him couldn't find me he'd be awful mad—I'd never hear the end of it. Time's money, he'd say: That's the way they is. But here I am trying to find him see him nowhere, 'specially not where he said to meet him, and what difference would it make how angry I am? I guess some people's time's more expensive."

"I know **just** what you mean," I said, getting closer to one of them signs: **SEE MADAM ROSA** in bright green letters, so bright I figured maybe they'd catch his eye and put it on me.

"And when he finds me—and it'll be him does the finding as far as he's concerned, no matter who sees who first—I'll have to hear for a while, or the whole time we's together, how impossible I am for my age or somebody like me, cause see: They got their own ideas about who you are, they got it figured out, and they'd tell you all about it at the drop of a hat, whether you ask them to or not. He'd say I been looking all over for you, like I been hiding from him when really he just makes it onto the scene whenever he damn well pleases."

"You want to go inside?" I asked and pointed to the tent what promised Rosa.

Done already asked him a ways back did he want to ride the roller coaster, take my last five bucks and get on, mostly so's I could get him up there to myself. Told him they'd let us go through much we wanted, long as there weren't a line and everybody else on wanted another go. But he said no, and when I asked again he snapped at me I's a pain in the ass on top of being the liar and thief my ma called me and "so's your old man." I jumped him and we was in a bitch-slapping fight before I knowed what hit him, got me a few swings in for my ma's good name, even though weren't but later I seen she wouldn't of done the same for me. When it was all over, which's to say I took one last swing and set sail over him on account of just then he bent over to pick up the pack of Marlboros who dropped out of his pocket, he offered me one of them cigarettes and said he didn't half mean it. Said I should keep my five bucks: I'd need it sooner'n I could get rid of it. Said he got so much stuff on his mind he didn't know just *what* he been thinking or saying. I's welcome to hang around he said, even though he spent the past couple hours telling me to get lost; long as I promised to make like I didn't know him once his man got there.

Now, he looked at the sign, at me, and at the tent next to the both of us like for the first time, and quick, said:

"Don't give up, do you? No. No time. What I really wants to see the Gator Boy. Got real alligator skin it says."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a postcard he bought somewheres in the carnie, black

and-white snap of “Alligator Boy” what showed him standing front side of a tent in his skivvies. Stood straight up and pinched hard between the eyes like he’s in the worst kind of pain, got skin so scared looked like it was mud caked on good; dry and brittle and set to flake off. Just as quick as I seen Red shoved it back.

I moved away from where I been leaning on the sign, over the part what said **You must be this tall to enter**, got a picture next to it of a clown holding out his hand to show the size of born short and slapped down flat.

“Won’t take but a few minutes,” I says. “And you ain’t got any one place you’s supposed to meet him. Just the fair in general, right? And he’s late anyways so let’s go.”

* * *

I figured I’d make one more stop at Nana’s house, big stack of bricks looks like a castle unless somebody lets you in. Hitched a ride with the crazy man down the hall at Mojo’s, set to get the last of my things I been getting bit by bit since I’s kicked out. I rode passenger seat in his El Camion clunkety straight up Union Street until it turns into Walnut Grove in a better part of town.

Dan, crazy man—crazy driver—brung his parrot in the car, parrot perched on the neckrest of the seat between us. Whole drive Dan and the parrot singing to each other, Polly want a cracker sonatas, capella whatnots, to the point I wanted to ask about the radio—like, Do it work?

Maybe Nana would invite me in—“sit down, you hungry?”—and like nothing ever happened she be in the kitchen whipping up whatnot. Or maybe she’d still think I’s a burglar, come to steal just about anything from her just about for the sake of it; see me coming and run around inside shutting all the doors and windows heavy-bolt. Last time, she shut the door in my face. When I come by to ask her for the window unit air-conditioner she offered to borrow me one time—finally made it over to talk her up on it so’s I could maybe shove it in the window at Mojo’s—it was like she never offered, like I just come to steal or beg for whatever she got, even stupid things neither one of us got use for. When I tried to point out I’s only asking for what it been her idea to give me, she said:

“Now Jed. Doug ... I mean...”

And to help her, mostly cause it was hot enough to burn a polar bear’s butt on her doorstep, I told her my name.

“Earl,” she says, and let out a huff like how dare I interrupt her. “Now I’m going to have to ask you: Have you found my opal ring and necklace?”

I stepped back a little—foot or two—just so’s she could be sure I weren’t aiming to pounce.

“No, I ain’t, and I still don’t know what neither one looks like.”

I didn’t have the first idea what she’s talking about but it ain’t made no difference to her. She gone right on like you’d maybe talk down to a dog what can’t say nothing back, whether it done what you thought or not. And by that time I’s the kind of dog makes it easier. Dog talked to that way again after again gets a look to his eyes like he knows what you’s full of, no more doe eyes hid under lids loving you still no matter: He looks you straight up and in them eyes, in that look not letting you away, see

right through you to whatever wall you got on your side, says just get this over with and don't think don't know.

"Well if you can't find them, maybe the police can help me."

So I took my leave, told her maybe she *should* call the cops. "If that'd make you feel better. But I'm afraid I can't help. I *do* want to thank you for all you done, and I'll be seeing you."

Now here I was, Mr. Stupid trying it all over again, in an El Camino turning finally off Walnut Grove, wide four lanes bordered by forever green trees, into froufrou Chickasaw Meadows, past all the black maids waiting at the curb for the bus to take them back downtown. To get my mind on something else, I thought back to once a long time ago when Nana told me Memphis streets was laid over old Indian trails, covered up what them Indians done just like down by the Mississippi where the army turned an Indian worship mound into barracks during the Civil War, hollowed out the inside of the view of the river and hid in it where all you seen was dirt walls, tin canteens. "*Leave it to civilized folks to make a custom cell out of a view,*" I thought out loud. Dan nodded like he knowed what I was talking about. But maybe he did know, on account of the time he said the whole country's like that the Indians got it first and then whitey took it away, kicked them off the land, or anyway give them the corner, said sit.

He parked the El Camino at the foot of Nana's driveway like I asked him to.

"I'd get out, you understand, but I got the bird here," which was fine. Still, I told him circle the neighborhood a couple times, without making it too obvious-like.

"If I's standing here like I never left this spot when you come back round, don't be fooled; don't mean time's playing tricks on you. Means I ain't been any luckier this time than ever, been turned away again and I's ready to go."

He backed out the driveway barely looking over his shoulder; front of the car dipped hard at the curb so's I thought he'd lose his tail end right there in Nana's driveway, sure that'd do her for a heart attack. But save for the scrape of metal along concrete weren't no big sound but that Polly squawking a few feathers darting out the window.

I walked up the cobblestone sidewalk runs snaky through the grass in Nana's yard, come up to her door, big arch thing, solid wood set behind locked wrought iron and a pane of glass. Sucked in the smell of hot asphalt off her driveway, held it, then ding-dong.

No answer for what seemed so long that Dan's El Camino'd be rounding the corner any minute. Then the inner door swung open, and there's Nana big bifocaled like nobody's home, hiding most of herself behind it like maybe here in broad daylight she's dressed for bed. Took her a few minutes to gather who I was, didn't seem to recognize me and her fish eyes got all bent out of shape behind her glasses. I thought maybe she expected I'd talk to her through the glass and wrought iron of the security door, but I weren't about to. I just looked at her deadpan and harmless as I could think to until her hand reached careful for the lock, clicked it to the side, and peeped the door open just a slight crack like I could slip through what I got to say by letter.

"Hello, Nana."

She searched herself for my name until I guess she could come up with anything at all.

“You know, Jed, your mama’s been calling here every day worried sick about you. Where are you living now?”

Which was big phonus balonus. Like it made no nevermind she kicked me out, like anybody was calling anybody else about me except to make sure I been going just as rotten as they always said I would or was. I done told her a dozen times before but anyways I told her again where I’s set up.

“Downtown, Nana: Got me somewheres downtown.”

“Nice place? You have everything you need down there?”

“Yes. Reckon I’s fine—just fine. It’s a nice building downtown right off the river. I got me everything I need, a fireplace even. Don’t work but it got marble all around it. And a mirror up above.”

She smiled, and I knowed that smile. Same one she used when she really couldn’t be bothered but she didn’t rightly know what else to say; way she used to look at me before I gone to live with her and when she seen she weren’t half the happy granny she seemed like.

“Well, that sure is nice, Douglas. It is.”

“Everything’s fine. I just stopped by for a how’do,” I said, turning to go, on account of I could see whatever I come here for weren’t going to work out; figured whatever she still got of mine she could have—just take it. We said our good-byes after she told me to call my ma and tell her how I’s getting along.

“Your mama really does love you, now you know that,” she said when I turned to leave. I looked back and weren’t even sure she said it, couldn’t even be sure she’s ever there. Already she gone back inside and locked the iron door.

* * *

Don’t take an idiot to figure what I done. Instead of waiting for her to give me the pink slip I left on my own.

One day when I asked her could I make a run to the store she sent me with a list of things the boys all wanted from the outside—mostly the usual, smokes and sodas; handed me a wad of twenties to take care of it. Before I left I gone up to my room, got together some of my things; not much but what I could take with me, put them in the scram-bag I brung when I first come to the house, stuffed the bag up under my shirt so’s the Madam wouldn’t see it on the monitor. Stopped, looked around. Told myself: *I won’t never be back here again* and good riddance.

On the outside I called from a pay phone to say I weren’t coming back. She yelled and stomped and banged things around on her end; told me I better not even *think* of it. Nothing to think about she said cause I done decided: *I can make it on my own*. Just remember, she told me, when you’s broke and got nowheres to go, “you can’t come here.” Well that’s just great, I told her, so good of her to tell me what I already decided myself. Didn’t need her or nobody else to tell me I’s leaving for good. I got my plans, I’s going to work for myself, be on my own—screw living somewheres I got to follow stupid

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