

# **The Existentialist Roots of Noir: On the Literary Influences of *Shoot the Wild Birds***

A Novel and Critical Exegesis

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## ABSTRACT

The creative component to this thesis consists of a short novel, *Shoot the Wild Birds*, which addresses themes of family, purpose – both true and misguided – and responsibility. However, it is also a novel that owes a thematic debt to noir fiction, but not a debt of plot, story or character. Rather it is the manner in which noir fiction focuses on, and uses, existentialist themes that influenced my work.

The novel features Samuel Holiday, a divorced taxi driver living in Gulf Coast Florida, who misses his daughter, his father, and his old life in the mid-west. He spends his days alone, quietly trying to fight off a slow, sinking depression and, at times, wild panic attacks. When April Jones comes to stay at the same long-term cabin rentals, the two become close. However, when Samuel finally spends time with his daughter again, he comes home to find April has shot herself. Influenced by the lingering effects of finding his own father hanged when he was a boy, the mystery car that waits outside the cabins at night, and the haunting after-effects of April's suicide, Samuel's worry causes him to unravel the small steps he had taken to repairing the damaged relationship he has with Willa. After a mental - and physical - breakdown finds Samuel in the hospital he decides that what matters is doing right by his daughter.

While *Shoot the Wild Birds* is not strictly speaking a crime novel or a mystery, it does display the profound influences of a specific aspect to noir fiction, that being the existentialist principles found in so much mid-century noir.

The accompanying critical exegesis 'The Existentialist Roots of Noir: On the Literary Influences of Shoot the Wild Birds' examines several themes that are foundational principles in existentialist thinking in order to demonstrate that the fundamental tenets of existentialism are inextricably linked to noir fiction. I look to six noir novels to analyse how noir fiction is imbued with existentialist renderings of estrangement or alienation; the absence of predetermined meaning and quest for purpose; and the fissured and/or lost sense of identity that so adroitly, and habitually, depicts the despair and anxiety of the noir protagonist.

**SHOOT THE WILD BIRDS**

## CHAPTER ONE

They came at night, late, when the wind had gone and left nothing but the humid edge of the sea, sinking mangroves and lost air. The cries were wild and lonesome and when Samuel heard them he wondered why they were still awake, looking for someone, looking for something. It had been a while since they had called out that loud. Willa had been over. They had woken her and, when she realized what she was hearing, she had grinned at Samuel, happy and lost in a good way. He didn't like to think about it. His chest tightened. He tried to breathe, tried to feel the clean, midnight air in his lungs but there was nothing there, nothing but the burning weight and the airless night that crushed his chest. His heart shook, tried to escape, and then it was over. The birds kept calling.

He made a glass of ice water and sat outside. The other cabins were dark, heavy with sleep, and the moon was too thin, too weak to break through the palm trees, but out toward the highway there was the ghostly blue glow from the sign that told an empty road to come and stay a while at the Hummingbird Suites. Samuel hadn't seen a hummingbird in eight years.

It was so warm that the sweat came quickly, covering him like a thin, damp blanket. Ice cubes melted in his glass, fell into each other with that sad clatter that always made him want a drink, a good one, like the scotch his father used to drink on those cold winter nights way up north, when he was young. Mosquitos buzzed nearby, their hum so slow and lazy he wondered if they wished they were asleep too. And he could smell the Gulf, out behind the Hummingbird, pushing into the mangroves. It was a quiet smell that crawled toward the Everglades, like an old alligator running away from the sea, dragging the dead along. He listened for the rush of wind against

the palmetto fronds but only heard the dim beat of blood in his ears. He wondered if there was wind out on Cinnamon Key.

Later, he made coffee in the dark. The deep shadows calmed him and he wondered what kind of dreams he had been chasing. He had used to dream about horses all the time, long ago, when he was a boy. Sometimes the dreams were so good that, when he woke, the air around him had that wonderful warmth of horse breath on a cold winter night.

Outside the light changed, suddenly, and he went to the door. Someone was awake, over in a cabin near the pool. One of the expensive ones. The light seemed to fall out the window and spread like fire through the air. A dark shadow moved behind thin curtains and Samuel tensed. He had the impression he was being watched.

When the lights went out Samuel stood in the darkness for a minute, then switched off the music and left the Hummingbird.



## CHAPTER TWO

There was no traffic on the highway. His headlights flooded the night and sand pines flashed in the sudden silver glare and disappeared again, and somewhere behind all the darkness the Gulf of Mexico ran quickly, quietly.

He drove out to Marlin Beach and parked across from the Palm Court. The pink neon sign still burned, offered music and margaritas and merriment but the doors were shut and locked.

The sun started to come up. Pink clouds showed in the sky, edged with gold down on the horizon. Out over the Gulf the birds cried out again and the wind came. It was a warm wind that smelled like it had been out to sea far too long.

Samuel wondered if it was early enough to see the horses at racetrack, watch them for a few minutes as they woke up, before anyone came, before they had to run.

He turned around and headed toward Century Downs. By the time he got there the sun was up and he drove around back, to the stables, and parked. Samuel smelled fried food, excitement and sweat from the previous day's races.

A groom was already working, walking a gray, talking to her in soft Spanish. Samuel got out of the car and went to lean against the fence. He could hear the horses, moving, shuffling in the stables, wondering where all the land had gone. A chestnut mare was in the warm up ring, alone, and when he looked back at her, held her eye, he was reminded of that awful look his father had sometimes, when things were going badly, and left the horse alone and wondered how much time she had. A horse whinnied, spooked by something Samuel couldn't see, and he remembered when he had come out to the track with Willa, when she had seen the horses before they had to

go away, before they had to run. She loved the track, loved the horses and he thought she would have liked the mare in the warm up ring.

He stood there a while and thought about Willa, thought about seeing her again, talking to her again.

Later, as he left the track, he saw a phone booth and he pulled over, got out and dialed Willa's number. When it rang the sound was incredibly loud against his thoughts.

Scott picked up quickly and mumbled a throaty hello.

"Scott. It's Samuel."

"Hey Samuel."

"I was hoping to speak to Willa."

"Samuel. Christ man, it's not even six. She's sleeping."

"She used to wake up early."

"Yeah."

Samuel listened to Scott breathe, listened to him think, but all he heard was the soft nicker and steps of the horses in the stables.

Scott spoke again. "Look, man. You want me to go get her? Wake her up a minute?"

"No. No. Thanks though," Samuel said. "Just tell her I called okay."

"You got it. Hey, Samuel. Call back, okay? At a normal time. She'd love to talk to you."

"Yeah. I will."

Scott went quiet again. His breathing was soft, steady, and for a minute Samuel thought Scott had gone to sleep on him. "You doing okay, Samuel?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course."

After Scott hung up Samuel stood at the phone booth and listened to the dead air pop on the line. The sudden sound of hooves beating the earth came and he knew they were running already. Static hummed down the phone and he listened for a minute, listened for those voices his father used to hear, sure that they had followed him from his dreams, but there was nothing there, nothing but the sound of warm dead air, and out on the track, out of sight, horses running for their lives.

### CHAPTER THREE

That night he worked late, until the bars closed. At the Lighthouse a woman got in his taxi and frowned back at the perfect, harshly-lit coconut trees that bookended the bar. She smelled of expensive skin cream and strong cocktails and he wondered what she liked to drink. Her cheeks were very red with a fresh sunburn and he thought she didn't look old enough for the Lighthouse. He started the car. A laughing couple came out of the bar and crossed the street, not caring about the rest of the world. They kept going and disappeared into the swallowing blackness of the beach at night. The woman in the back settled in, crossed her legs and lit a cigarette. She took a long pull and let the cigarette hang out the window.

The neon blue from the Lighthouse sign made the air glow, made the air look like it might be a little cool, like it might not smell of a sun burnt day and a sweating night.

"I need to keep drinking," she said. "Do you know somewhere open late? Somewhere clean, somewhere quiet?"

"Yeah. The Noble Parrot."

"On Cinnamon Key?"

"They stay open late."

"Okay. The Noble Parrot."

He drove through the bare, quiet night, through bare and quiet streets. When he stopped at a red light there was no air to come through the open windows and he could smell her skin cream again. Roses, he thought. She watched him in the rearview mirror while she smoked. Her black dress was too nice for a night out alone and he wondered who had gone wrong.

“You look familiar,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. Her voice was hard and deep, like she had long ago grown tired of trying to be so soft and he liked the sound and wanted to hear her talk again. “Are you local?” he asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Well, maybe you’ve been in my cab before.”

“No. I don’t think it’s that.” They came to the causeway and the dimly lit world around them slipped away with the mainland. She looked out at the water, at the black void of sea. “You just have a familiar look. Like the way a big dog can remind you of your childhood even if you never had a dog at all.”

“So I look like a big dog?”

She laughed. “No. No, I didn’t mean that.” She studied him in the mirror again and lit a fresh cigarette. “Well, maybe just a little.”

When he pulled up at the Noble Parrot, Claude was out front, alone, drinking a bottle of beer away from the crowd and he grinned happily when he saw Samuel, but he didn’t say anything at all. Samuel watched the woman walk into the bar, all bright red neon and ice-cold drinks, and then gave Claude a quick wave as he pulled away from the curb.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The news started talking about hurricane season again. They said it would be a bad one this year but the last few days had been so still Samuel didn't believe it. The beaches boiled and no one was out. Nights were worse. They seemed to fall, fast and silent and heavy and Samuel thought that sometimes it felt like they were here to stay. Forget daylight and just settle into the dark. And he had trouble sleeping again and so spent the nights padding around his cabin and sitting outside. Sometimes he thought about his father and on bad nights he thought about Willa.

He stood in the dark, listened to the birds haunt the woods. A pearl sliver of moon sat in the sky, showed the palmetto fronds and the thin shadows walking toward him. Footsteps fell quietly and Samuel frowned.

The shadow stopped and Samuel could hear her breathing.

"That's terrifying," she said.

"What is?"

"That sound. That screaming."

"It's only birds."

"Birds?"

"A curlew. Well, a few of them." Samuel stared at her. She held herself though she could not have been cold. Maybe it was fear.

"Are they dying?"

"Not yet."

She came closer, like she was trying to see him, trying to decide if he was real or part of some awful dream. The birds kept calling.

"I'm April," she said.

“Samuel Holiday.”

“Holiday?”

“Like Billie.”

“Or like Christmas.”

“Yeah. Or like Christmas.”

“That drink looks good.”

“It’s only water.”

“It looks like vodka.”

Samuel shook his head. Her thin, bare arms moved gently across her body and when the birds cried out so loud the night shook, they both stopped breathing, and waited.

April gave him an easy smile.

“I don’t suppose you’ll offer a lady a drink? A real one?”

“I only have water.”

“Nothing fun?”

“No. Nothing like that. Well, I have coffee.”

“It’s too early for coffee,” she said. “And I’m all out of vodka. I only have limes. I bought enough of those to match a crate of bottles, but only the one bottle. It’s just been too hot to think.”

“And it’s only June.”

“Does it get worse?”

“Not much. But it just keeps going. Right up until September.” He took a drink and tried to see her better under the midnight shadows. Her eyes were very dark and lined with heavy circles. She had come closer and there was a familiar scent that

clung weakly at the still air, not perfume, he thought, something wild. “You’re not from here then?” he asked. “From Florida, I mean.”

“Not for a while.”

Samuel nodded.

She laughed. A small throaty laugh that was almost all breath.

“I’m glad you were awake,” she said. “I was sure that sound was something else, something just horrible. I’m glad you were here to tell me it was only the birds.”

He thought about telling her about the frogs, about how when it rained the only thing he heard was their determined bleating, their deep and panicked rage, so that even the sound of the rain hitting the roof was swallowed up. It hadn’t rained in some time. He wondered where the frogs went when the weather was clear.

She turned to him. Her eyes were steady, thoughtful, and her wide mouth looked like it wanted to smile but thought it best to hold back. Sweat brought a thin shine to her forehead and he thought the humidity was like a damn vise, it just kept squeezing, knowing it would always win. She shifted and he tried to think of something to say.

“It’s going to get light soon, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“I better get some sleep.”

“Okay.”

“It was nice talking to you Samuel.”

“Likewise.”

He finished his water and she looked at him. “You sure that’s just water?”

“I’m sure.”

“You sure seem to like it.”



“I do.”

She walked away, her steps soft, that teasing scent following behind and Samuel sat down on his porch. He had to remember to breathe. He stayed there, waiting for the dawn, and when it came, he could see her, over by the swimming pool, her arms crossed over her chest like an angry child. After a while she put a foot in the pool, moved the water with her toes. Samuel listened to the hush of the water move in the swimming pool and as the morning sky grew pink, he went back inside, quietly so she wouldn't hear him, wouldn't see him, and he sat in his bed, under the ceiling fan and remembered how Willa used to laugh, remembered that black and wild look in her excited eyes and the way she always sounded so sure.

## CHAPTER FIVE

He wanted a drink. It was the way the woman had said vodka and lime. He had been thinking about it all day, trying not to taste it in his mind. There was a softness to her deep voice, something easy and playful that was just nervous enough to make the thought of her linger. During the day he had kept driving by the Palm Court, telling himself he was just hoping for a passenger, but the only one he got was a rough old man who wanted to come out to Turtle Bay to see if his friends were fishing but when they got to the promontory it was empty and the man nodded in an expecting and sad way that made Samuel think of his father and made him want to get away from the man.

After the man paid, he just walked away although they were about ten miles from the strip, but he just slipped away into the shimmer of heat and Samuel thought about his father again. His father sometimes had the same sad look when he went fishing, when he caught something big; like he wished he was the one strung up on the hook instead of that pike. And that made Samuel want a drink as well and he had started driving toward the strip, toward the pretty neon signs telling him how perfect and cold the beer was, how fresh the daiquiris were, and he remembered April, remembered the way she had said *vodka*, like she was drinking it right then and so he turned around and drove toward the beach, looking for somewhere quiet.

That night he got home late and made coffee in the kitchen.

Her windows were dark but he had the feeling she was awake, listening, waiting for the birds, waiting for something. He put on a record and sat down in the doorway and he waited for Judy Garland again, waited to hear her sad voice sing, hear her tell him to have a Merry little Christmas and he remembered how his father had

told him the real words to the song once said *it may be your last*. His father had laughed when he told him, laughed in that old saw dust sounding way of his but Samuel didn't think there had been anything left in that laugh by that point.

In the dark he heard the happy sound of a bottle touching a glass.

## CHAPTER SIX

The last hold outs walked away from Marlin Beach, happy and salty and lost, still in the burning daze of the sunbather, and behind them the Gulf was a wounded purple color. Vivid streaks of dying sunlight scattered and faded across the sky and Samuel watched a pair of worn out girls walk by in shorts too short, with voices too loud. He turned away. Across the street, in front of the Palm Court, Claude was sitting down on the sidewalk, smoking a cigarette. He nodded to Samuel, gave him a lazy wave and a sleepy smile. Samuel gave him the thumbs up. Even from across the street Samuel could hear Marvin Gaye singing about rivers and mountains. Tammi Terrell sang back.

Later, when Samuel got home, she was awake, sitting in the wicker chair in front of her cabin. She was drinking. The ice and the glass caught the moon and showed sharp and silver through the dark. Vodka and lime, Samuel thought. There was something solitary and private to the night, to the sight of her sitting outside, alone, that made him think the night was hers and that he shouldn't be there, and he walked quickly into his cabin.

She walked toward him. He heard her steps and this time the sound of ice clattering in the glass. When she stopped walking, he heard her laugh, under her breath.

"Is that you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good." She came closer and he could smell her again, smell the warmth from her skin, and something else, something he thought she must wear but it wasn't like perfume. "I've been up all night waiting for those birds."

“They aren’t there every night.”

“Tell that to the voices in my head. I was sure I heard them a while ago but now I think it might have been some kind of echo.”

“Sometimes they just come real late.”

“So what, they wait until you’re good and asleep then cry you out of it?”

“Something like that.”

She took a sip of her drink. He heard the ice move and when she stepped closer the moon caught her so he could see the wetness of her lips. “There’s wind tonight. Not much, but there’s some. Enough to breathe.”

“There would be more at the water front, coming in off the Gulf,” he said.

“Is that an invitation?”

“What?”

“Are you inviting me out to the water front some time?” She laughed. Loud this time, loud and happy and young and Samuel’s chest pulled in on him and he thought it was one of those laughs that belonged to excited women on expensive boats and nights filled with cold wine and soft fingers on sunburned skin. “Let’s start small. Have a drink with me? I have vodka now. Almost enough for all the limes. I need a new drink anyway. Wait here.”

She flitted away, ran through the dark and then she disappeared into her cabin. His heart was going hard and then she was back. He stood up.

“Let’s sit on the step,” he said. “I only have the one chair.”

He took the drink. It was good and cold in his hand and when he swallowed nothing at all he felt like he had sandpaper in his throat. He sat next to her and put the drink down beside him. It had been a long, long time since he had had vodka.

“So,” she said. “Tell me why you were sitting in the dark.”

“I didn’t want to bother you.”

“I had the feeling you would have been sitting in the dark anyway.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

She took a long drink. The sound of her breath was calming. She didn’t say anything for a while and he wondered why that scent she wore was so familiar.

“It’s funny,” she said. “Something about this place is backward. I swear it’s quieter during the day.”

“You mean Florida or The Hummingbird?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Maybe it’s us. People talking.”

“It’s nothing to do with people.” She took a long pull on her drink.

Her face had become tight, her mouth set hard and when she took a drink, her sips were small and careful like it was the last of the vodka and she needed it to last that night. Samuel thought it would be awful to see her angry and he remembered when he was nine, he came across a vulture eating one of its own and the frantic but methodical way it went about it made him wonder if it had planned the whole thing. No one had believed him when he mentioned it. They told him the smell would have been too awful even for something as bad as a vulture.

She held her drink up, thought a minute and drank the rest of it down. The clatter of ice on the glass was loud and she took the lime, delicately, with fine, long fingers and ate it.

“Fuck.”

“You okay?” Samuel asked.

“Yeah. It the heat. Even at night, even with this bit of wind, it’s just so oppressive. Especially here, hidden by all these trees. I swear it wasn’t this bad when I was a kid.”

“That’s right. You said you were from here.”

“I was born down south a ways. Just passed Tampa. But it’s been a long time.”

“You’re not old enough for it to have been a long time.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.” She laughed and it made him feel good, like he had done something right. “But I left pretty young. When I was a kid.” She looked over at him. She smiled but there was something serious in her eyes. He wondered how she managed to think so loud and he found himself wishing something would come and stir the lethargic silence that slithered like a python to slip deep down through his thoughts and into his throat so that he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t. She leaned into him. She was warm and hard and then gone. “You must be from here. Like, right here. Born in the Hummingbird.”

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“You look like part of the furniture.”

“Old and sweaty?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re sweet.”

“I can be,” she said.

“Jasmine,” he said.

“What?”

“Jasmine. That perfume you’re wearing. It smells like Jasmine.”

“It is,” she said. “I take it back.”

“Take what back.”

“About you. About where you’re from. You’re not from here. Not from Florida even.”

“No,” he said. “No, I’m not. But I’ve been here a while now.”

“In Florida or the Hummingbird.”

“Well, both I guess.”

“I get the feeling that a month would feel like a long time in this place.”

“Not once you get used to it,” Samuel said. He pointed to a darkened cabin with a police car parked in front. “Luis has been here three years.”

“And you?”

“A little longer.”

“Then you are part of the furniture.”

When he laughed softly, in a wandering way, he felt like his father.

“You sit out here a lot, don’t you?” she asked.

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. A feeling I guess.” She pulled her hair back and tied it in a ponytail. Up close her arms were hard, bony, and when she shook her hair to loosen it the smell that came to Samuel seemed expensive and he wondered what she was doing in a place like the Hummingbird. “I almost expect to find a worn out groove under where you’re sitting. Am I right?”

“I suppose.”

“Sometimes you just need to get away from it all,” she said. She laughed softly and held up her glass like she was making sure it really was empty. “That’s what Elizabeth Taylor said when she tried to kill herself. She took a handful of Seconal.”



“Jesus.”

“I know.” She smiled.

“I just have trouble sleeping,” Samuel said.

“Try Seconal.”

He stopped and blinked and then laughed.

“The funny thing is I’m only half joking,” she said. “I have some in my room. They work wonders. But to sleep you only need one. I only take half a pill but then I’m a lot smaller than you.”

He nodded. The wind whispered in the dark, moved thin and swift through the tops of the palm trees so that they rolled and swelled in a way that made Samuel think of the ocean on a quiet night, when everything has stopped and the only thing still going is the ocean, beating in the dark, always pulling at the land. Beside him April breathed softly.

“And on that note, I’ll say goodnight. Those birds aren’t coming.”

He gave her back the glass.

“Not much of a drinker,” she said.

“Not tonight.”

After she left he waited for the birds and it was nearly morning when he heard something call out, quietly and alone, and he remembered how it felt when she had leaned against him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

He woke sweating. Slow footsteps paced outside the window and he got up, blinked at all the sun and saw Luis out the window, across the lawn, still in pajama pants and an undershirt, walking aimlessly by himself, smoking something. His clothes were too white against his dark skin and he looked up and took a long pull on his cigarette. He held it in and Samuel smelled it. It wasn't nicotine.

Usually Luis smoked that in the evening, after work, walking around the back end of the Hummingbird, almost in the trees where no one could see him and sometimes, if it was quiet and the wind was right, Samuel could hear Luis start to sing softly as it took hold. He wasn't singing this time, not yet. Luis pinched the tip of his cigarette between his fingers and wandered away.

After a shower he called Willa's number but the machine answered. Scott sounded worried, like he was sure he wasn't doing something right, and there was a lot of dead air before the beep. Samuel hung up and left for work, drove out to the beaches.

Later, around five, he found a payphone and called Willa again. As the line rang, he thought it must have been all the dreaming about horses that made him keep trying her. Laura answered and he hung up.

That night he found himself in front of the Palm Court again. The white building showed off the pretty neon lights around it and when people walked in Samuel thought the crowd had gotten younger since he had last spent much time there.

A thin woman with a blonde ponytail walked in and he remembered April, remembered the smell of her Jasmine and the sound of her vodka and lime in the glass

and he got out of the cab and went in. He didn't see the thin woman anywhere and he went up to the bar. Perfume and beer foam and cold air-conditioning drifted through the bar and the bartender gave him the worried look of someone who has had the job too long. When he smiled it was real.

"You been away?" the bartender asked.

"Sort of," Samuel said.

"Wasn't meetings or anything, was it?"

"No. No meetings."

"Bud?"

"Maybe a vodka and lime."

The Four Tops played on the jukebox. Sunburned, white haired men studied him from the back tables, placing his face while they ate fried clams. He could smell lemon juice and, over everything, the Gulf and he took his drink out to the patio and sat in the open air. He saw the thin woman dancing with someone, draped over him. They were moving too slow for the music. Across the street the sea moved in the dark, and when there was a lull in all that noise he could hear the rolling swell of the waves as they hit the beach and they sounded much bigger than he knew they would be. Purple lightning cracked and someone else on the patio moaned at the sight, a small, sad moan and Samuel thought the person must have been sure they were alone out there. He took a drink of the vodka and lime and thought damn it was good.

When he heard the metallic clop of horses walking on pavement, he thought his dreams had followed him. Out on the street someone laughed and then the two horses walked by, policemen sitting on them, their faces almost shy, like they felt foolish about being so proud. Samuel waited for the thunder but there wasn't any.

He took another small sip of his drink and left it all but untouched, left the Palm Court and drove out to Santa Rosa and parked across the street from Willa's house.

It was almost four a.m. when he woke up and saw a light on in the house, showing sharply against the dark slivers of all that palmetto he had planted way back when. He wondered if it was Willa, awake, roaming around in the night, chasing sleep. After a while the lights went out and Samuel sat a while, across from the darkened house and remembered chasing Willa around when she woke up in the middle of the night. When the sky took on that blue electricity of the coming dawn he drove back home to the Hummingbird.

A Buick Riviera was parked under the giant banyan tree out front, near the highway, its nose pointed toward the cabins. Samuel looked as he passed it, saw the car was empty, but after he parked and went up the steps of his porch, he was sure he saw cigarette smoke trailing out the open window. He blinked at the car, sitting in the midnight shadows of the banyan trees and turned and went inside and thought if he ever did well enough, he would get himself a car like that.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Laura called him while he was cooking dinner, out back, on the charcoal grill, a sweet southern wind coming from the trees. It was the smoke he liked. The calm burn of the embers, the soft popping of the wet woodchips he threw in to flavor the chicken, and the way the smoke smelled while it curled up around him as the small flames burnt excitedly. The phone kept ringing. The sound was awfully loud, too loud for the easy evening, and Samuel thought for a minute before he went inside to answer.

“Samuel. What the hell?”

“Laura?”

“I saw you parked outside the house last night. You can’t do that.”

“You were awake?”

“Yes, I was awake. Willa was having nightmares.”

“Not about horses?”

“Horses? What the hell are you talking about Samuel?”

“Her nightmares,” he said. He waited. Smoke from the grill found its way inside his cabin and he wondered if Laura would keep talking.

“Look Samuel,” she said. “You can’t do that, okay? You can’t just come around, even at night. Christ, I don’t know if it’s better or if it’s worse, you sitting out there in the dark, but you just can’t do that. Okay?”

“How’s she doing?” he asked.

“Willa?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s good.”

“I should see her sometime,” he said. “Sometime soon.”

She was quiet a minute. “Yeah, okay,” she said. “How you been getting by?”

“Good enough.”

“Sleeping?”

“Sure.”

“Just not last night,” she said. He wondered if she was trying to catch him.

Again. Her voice was too soft to tell.

“I didn’t get off until late. Fell asleep in the car. See, *fell asleep*. Like I said, sleeping and everything.”

“Everything, huh?”

“That’s right,” he said. He waited again. His back had started to ache, near the shoulder blades, like it had before, when he was with her. She had been sure it was cancer, something bad. Anything bad. He looked at the frayed conch shell on the windowsill, at the dead flies beside it. There were new bodies every day, like they were trying hard to die. “Maybe I could take her to see the horses?”

“At the track? Not a chance. That place is awful.”

“It’s not so bad out the back,” he said.

“You and horses. Jesus.”

That hard edge had come back to her voice and he wanted to hang up.

“How about on the weekend?” he asked.

“We’re going away. Let me figure something out and I’ll get back to you.”

She hung up.

Outside the smoke from the grill lingered in the air and the coals burned brightly, red and white with heat. He wrapped the chicken in bacon and used the Cuban spice Luis had given him. As it cooked the bacon fat popped and Samuel

wished he had lime to squeeze over the chicken. He thought about asking April but it would take a while for Laura to leave his system. It always did.

He couldn't eat and instead had a glass of ice water and four aspirin. The humidity had come on strong and with it came the bugs, the mosquitos and cicadas. He covered the grill to let it burn itself out and went inside to shower away the sweat that had come on so quickly. After, he slept for two hours. It was cool in his bedroom, under the fan, and when he woke the moon had come out and showed the world in shades of pale, pearl shadows. It made him think about his father, about those mornings when he couldn't sleep and his father was downstairs, awake and restless, moving quietly.

June was hard. A degree or two cooler than July and August, but there was less wind, less rain, and there was something about the air that made Samuel think it had burned itself out.

He made a glass of water and put on *Silent Night*, listened to Mahalia Jackson worry so well, and he sat outside, by the front door, the music low and the standing fan aimed at him from just inside the door.

Across the way, April was sitting outside. He waved but didn't know if she could see him. He thought about turning the music up. It was one of those nights that was so quiet that Samuel felt like he was in a glass box, watching a moonlit world disappear into itself.

April laughed and he got up, walked over to her. April took a sip of her drink and smiled at him. It was a smile he couldn't read.

"Samuel." Her voice was soft, like she had just woken up.

"Hi again."

"Christmas music, huh?" she asked.

“You can hear that?”

“There’s nothing else to hear. Not in this place, not at this time of night.”

He listened. It was soft but he could hear it. The record had moved on to *Silver Bells* and the line about city sidewalks made Samuel think of when he was a boy and his father had taken him to Chicago. It wasn’t Christmas but it was winter and snowing and grey and they had gone to the lake and his father had told him that on the other side of the lake there was nothing but wilderness. There had been a lot of people, more than Samuel was used to seeing, and he had noticed how happy they had all seemed.

“So, do you own any music besides Christmas records?” April asked.

“Sure. One or two. Mostly Easter songs.”

“What are Easter songs?”

“I don’t know. I was just trying to make you laugh.”

“You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Okay. I’ll think of something.”

She looked him up and down. She hadn’t stopped smiling. “Can I get you a drink?” she asked.

“I brought my own.” He held up his water glass.

“I don’t have any steps to sit on,” she said.

“What?”

“My cabin doesn’t have steps like yours does. Sit here, I’ll get the other chair from inside.” She was up and back again before he sat down. “That was you cooking, wasn’t it? Earlier, on that little bar-b-q. What were you making?”

“Bacon wrapped chicken. Bastardized Cuban food.”

“The smell was amazing.”



“Yeah.” When they sat down, he noticed she had put her chair close enough they were almost touching. She didn’t have on the jasmine. “I can make it for you sometime.”

“I’ll hold you to that. And the visit to the water front. Where ever that is.”

“We’re in Florida. There’s water front everywhere.”

“Doesn’t feel like it at this place.”

“As the crow flies, we’re less than a mile. That’s why we get those birds calling out to us.”

“It’s been quiet for a few days.”

“It won’t last.”

“Something to look forward to.”

“My daughter used to.”

“You have kids.”

“Just the one.”

“How old is she?”

“Nine. She’s nine now.”

April smiled at the thought. “What does she look like?”

He thought about Willa, about that look on her face when she used to stay up late, waiting for the birds to come. “Serious.”

“Serious?” April said. “That’s a terrible answer. Never tell her that.”

He nodded and gave her a tight smile.

When she spoke again her voice was softer, “These nights are something else, aren’t they? It’s so quiet but even so I always get the feeling that someone is up, awake, sitting in one of these cabins listening to what I’m saying, trying to decide who has it worse.”

“They do.”

“Why’s that?”

“They’re stuck inside.”

“I guess you’re right about that.”

The music from his cabin had stopped and he could hear the soft, warm sounds of April’s breath. Faraway, the frogs hummed. He got the feeling that something inside her was made out of very thin crystal that would be too easy to break.

“Okay,” she said. “Go get your car keys.”

“Why?”

“I’m not going to sleep any time soon. Are you?”

“Probably not.”

“So take me away from here.”

“Like to the water front?”

“Like to anywhere Sammy. Anywhere we can breathe.”

He got up and went to get his keys and tried to remember the last time anyone had called him Sammy. Even as a boy, he had always been Samuel.

They kept the windows down and he took her out to Cinnamon Key. When they drove past the Noble Parrot it was still open and the cool red glow from the empty front deck looked inviting, but there was no music, no floating voices and Samuel remembered being there that late, way back, and the way people sat close together but never talked, never wanted to talk, just wanted to sit somewhere not too far away from someone else and drink until sleep came.

Samuel parked out at Riley Beach and turned off the car, turned off the headlights so they could see the choppy water that shimmered in the darkness, out in the Gulf.

April touched the small plastic case that hung from his rearview mirror. She took it down and looked at the photo of Willa when she was only one.

“Your daughter.”

“Yeah.”

“She has very big eyes.”

“I guess.”

April turned over the case and looked at the horse on the other side.

“Your horse?” she asked.

“My father’s.”

“No picture of your father. Just his horse.”

“I liked his horse more than I liked him. We both did.”

“What happened to it?”

“I don’t know. Not really. I guess she was put down. Too many troubles.”

“Imagine if they did that to humans,” she said. She slid the case on the dash, and then pulled her seat back so she was almost flat.

“Let’s sit outside,” he said. “It’s too hot in here.”

She nodded.

They sat on the hood of the car. The wind that came in off the water was full or salt and sea and clean, clean air that didn’t have that tired burnt smell of the daytime.

“It looks better in the day, I guess,” he said.

“What does?”

“The beach. Right now it’s all kind of lost in the darkness, the sand and the water, even the sky, it’s all just shadows.”

“I like it. There’s air out here.” She put her head on his shoulder. “Have you ever been to Pensacola?”

“Yeah. Once or twice.”

“I hear it’s great. I hear the sand is as white and as soft as can be and that the beach just goes on forever, so damn long that you can find stretches where you can’t see a person.”

“This time of year.”

“This time of year? Why’s that?”

“Too hot. Keeps the people away. Fills up some in the cooler months.”

“Then we should go, soon, before September comes along and brings all the people. Find somewhere pretty and stay the night.” She kissed him quickly and laughed.

## CHAPTER NINE

A few months after Laura had asked him to leave, to move out and get away for a while, Willa came to stay the night at the Hummingbird. She was small and looked smaller still when he picked her up at the house and they drove through the warm rain. The metallic sound of the rain that hit the car's roof was so deep it almost had an echo. At a red light he looked down at Willa. He wondered how he could get her to laugh, to come out of her head, to smile in that wandering and excited way she had as a baby, and he forgot about traffic and didn't hear any of the horns blowing at him.

After dinner, she slept in his bed and he lay next to her and told her stories about a wandering violin player, an old circus man who had only horses for friends and she didn't sleep but made him going and tell more stories so that his mind and mouth were tired and he fell asleep first. When he woke up, she was standing by the window, using the small moonlight to draw a horse with a pencil on the empty back page of a novel he had forgotten to finish.

He got up. She still had the soft smell of a baby.

"Is that a horse?"

"I can't do it."

"You're three."

"I'm almost four."

"It's not an easy thing to do."

It was hot in that never ending way of August and her hair was damp where she had been sweating, behind her ears, down her neck. He thought she looked like the wandering violin player he had made up. Her eyes were dark enough.

"Can you do it?" she asked.

“No. Not really. Not well.” He thought a minute, looked at the uneven legs that looked more like a spider from a bad dream. “My father could do it. As close to the real thing as you’ll get on paper.”

“But he’s dead now.”

“Yes. He’s been dead a long time.”

“Maybe I need to see him.”

“My father?”

“No. The horse.” She tapped her drawing with the pencil.

“You mean in real life.”

She nodded and he wondered when the sun would come up. It had stopped raining while he slept but he still heard water falling from the trees and the impatient mumble of the frogs.

“Why don’t you get dressed,” he said.

“It’s still night.”

“Just barely. And we’re awake anyhow.”

“Are we going out?”

“Yeah. We’re going to look for a horse.”

When she smiled at him, he wanted to hug her hard but he just winked at her.

Samuel tried to think where he had seen horses since coming to Florida. About a year ago he had taken a man down south and he was sure he had seen a sign for horseback riding on the beaches a bit south of Tampa.

By noon they had two hundred miles under their belt and all they had seen were motels and bars.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Me too.”

“Why are there no horses?”

“I don’t know where to look.”

“What about the circus,” she said. “They have horses at the circus.”

“I don’t know where to look for that either.”

“But we saw one before. You and mom took me.”

“That was a while ago,” he said. “They move around a lot.”

“Oh. So the circus will be gone.”

“Yeah.”

“The horses too.”

“The ones with the circus. Yes, they’ll be gone.” He pulled into a highway grill. The sun hit the windows hard so they both had to squint as they walked through the parking lot and when they got inside, they walked through to the back, where it was dark enough to see. It smelled of grilled onions and hamburger and perfume and he saw the women at the table, almost girls, all three of them dressed in those tight black skirts that let you know where the stockings ended. Willa looked at them and they smiled back, wide, wide smiles, the type that Samuel was always afraid of. They wore too much make up and when Samuel and Willa sat down, she told him she thought they were really pretty.

“I guess.”

“I like their earrings. Look at all that gold. Are they gypsies?”

“I don’t think so.”

“They might be.”

“Yeah. They might be.”

They had cheeseburgers and orange juice and his head started to ache. It was the way Willa didn’t look at him.

She ate slowly, her big eyes ringed with lack of sleep and he thought maybe he should have stayed at the Hummingbird and waited until morning and then just used the swimming pool and when she looked out the window, looked out at nothing but highway in that frowning way that let him know she was still looking for horses, like they might come on down the road, dust swelling behind them, he thought maybe he would just take off, drive her all the way to North Carolina, where he had read about wild horses that were still left alone.

A man came in, laughing, sweating, and looked around until he saw the girls. He grinned at them and started a small cigar going, and walked over, told the one with the bench to herself to scoot over, he had just won big and it was play time now. The girls all grinned and made room.

When Samuel pushed his plate away, she looked a question at him and he told her to hurry up and finish.

“You know where to go?”

“I know where to go,” he said.

After, they drove quickly. He thought if there was nothing at Century they would have to keep going.

By the time they got there the day was almost over. The heat had simmered down and the sea was back in the air again. When they pulled into the parking lot Samuel got as close as he could to the backstretch. There were people in the stands, wandering toward the exits or just standing there, still waiting to win though it was all over now. He took Willa’s hand and walked them back through the gates. There were horses everywhere.

Willa bristled and he thought maybe she was half horse herself.



They watched the horses cool down, the air heavy with the smell of their skin, of their sweat, and the sound of the hooves beat into Samuel so that he knew he would dream about them that night. Willa held his hand tight and stood still, while the horses in the ring walked in long easy circles, led by worn-out men.

When a deep chestnut filly came close to the rails and bent her head down to look at Willa, her skin still skittish, still running in her mind, Samuel thought the horse was wondering how she had gotten so lost again. She let out a deep nicker and Willa looked up at Samuel, biting back a smile, and winked. He hadn't seen her do that before.

Later, when they got back to the house, to Laura's house, the police were there, in the living room, talking to Laura, telling her it was okay, they'd find him.

Laura saw Samuel first and stood up and threw a water glass at the floor. She shouted something and the two policemen stood up, moving their belts, standing back. They both glanced at Samuel. They looked bored, like the line of worry between their eyes had been drawn there with a child's marker.

"What's wrong?" Samuel asked.

"God damn it, Samuel. Where the hell have you been?"

"Out and about. Driving."

"You were supposed to be back this morning. By nine in the morning. Nine in the god damn morning." Her breath was heavy. She didn't seem worried, Samuel thought, not anymore.

"Oh."

"Did you forget?"

"I guess."

"Come here Willa." She held out her hands.

Willa took a second. She looked at the policemen. “We were looking for horses,” she said.

One of them smiled and they both looked at Laura, wondering what to do next.

Laura frowned at Samuel. “Horses. Fucking horses, Samuel. Twelve hours late, no phone call, no nothing, because you were looking for horses. You really are your father’s son, aren’t you?”

For a minute Samuel wondered why she said it like it was a bad thing.

## CHAPTER TEN

She came to him late, when he was in bed, thinking of sleep. He heard the snap of the doorknob and when he looked up, she was standing at the bedroom door. She came and sat next to him and with the jasmine he could smell the salty warmth of her skin and the clear, antiseptic smell of vodka. He could always smell vodka. It was like smelling laughter. And sugar. The smell made him think of those wheat fields he had tried to get lost in when he was young. There was always something sweet and cold and windy about them, about the fields, and he smiled up at April when she took his hand, squeezed hard, and he saw that clear-eyed, lost and lazy expression and knew she'd had quite a lot to drink already.

She stayed sitting beside him. Her pale t-shirt was so thin he could see the long collarbone that looked like it might snap under the weight of the fabric. She lay down beside him.

"You should lock your door at night."

"What for?"

"Never know what kind of person might wander in."

"I guess I'm doing alright."

"I heard footsteps outside," she said. "Earlier. While I was in bed, trying to sleep."

"Probably a fox. Something like that."

"Big fox."

"There're more animals than people around here."

"That's what I was hoping for," she said.

She was quiet a while and he thought she had fallen asleep but when he turned to her, she was awake, watching the dim midnight blue glow at the window. She turned toward him, her eyes closed, and held onto him, her body pressed hard into his. Then she started to laugh, quietly, a breathless laugh that shook her body.

“I’m not going to sleep,” she said. “Not tonight.”

“No.”

“What do you have to drink in this place?”

“Water and coffee. I think there might be milk.”

“Choir boy. You never have anything real. I’ll have to buy you something. Hey, who’s the pot head around here. I smell that stuff almost every single night. Never see anyone with it though.”

“Luis,” he said.

“Who’s that?”

“The cop over in cabin eleven.”

“I haven’t seen him”

“No. I guess you wouldn’t have.”

She thought a minute, “A cop.”

“Yeah.”

She got out of bed. “I’m going to go get a bottle from my room. Get some glasses ready. You got ice?”

“I have ice.”

She got up, went to the kitchen and made two glasses of ice, put water in his.

She was walking back already, holding the vodka bottle. He sat down on the steps and put the glasses down beside him. She saw his water glass.

“Not going to join me?”

“Not yet.”

“Is that coffee I smell?”

“Yeah.”

“A touch early for that, don’t you think?” she laughed at herself and sat down, poured out the vodka. She took a small, cute sip that took half of what was in the glass.

“It’s never too early for coffee.”

“A doctor once told me it works like an anti-depressant,” she said. “Do you think that’s true?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’d say you have to drink a lot of it though. Too much for someone like me.”

Samuel heard the soft run of steam as the machine stopped dripping the coffee into the pot. Let it sit, he thought, let it get real strong. April sat down beside him. There was the faint smell of chlorine in her hair and he wondered when she had gone swimming. She held up her glass.

“Coo coo ca-choo,” she said.

“What?”

“Coo coo ca-choo. And here’s to you.” She sang it this time and he smiled.

“Mrs. Robinson,” he said. “You aren’t old enough for that song.”

“Sure I am. I was nine or ten when it was on the air. That’s a dangerous age for music. I used to love it so much I sang it in my sleep. That’s the story anyway. Then it turned into one of those silly family traditions where instead of saying cheers we all said coo coo ca-choo. It was funny when I was a girl.”

“And now?” he asked.

“Cheers,” she said.

“Oh. Right.” He touched his glass to hers. “No lime?” he asked.

“No. Not today. Or tonight, I guess. I’m all out. Better the lime than the vodka though.” She smiled; fresh, happy, young, her eyes wide and bright with some burning excitement he could only guess at, something eager that seemed to try to pull him along with it and he got that handful of rocks in his chest, that heavy tug, like some strong current inside of him that was trying to lure him deep down to the bottom of the ocean.

He thought about Willa.

A door slammed and Samuel saw Luis, standing on his porch, eating scrambled eggs and watching at them like they were there every morning, another cluster of canes. Samuel waved and Luis nodded at them, then grinned and walked away, down his steps and around to the back of the Hummingbird, wearing a bright, white undershirt and the heavy pants of his uniform, gun-belt and all.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

There was a race on that day and there were too many cars, too many people, all hot and sweating, hiding behind large dark sunglasses, moving toward the clubhouse with weary walks that were a little too careful, like all those people needed a drink to cut that sharp line of pain that was running around in their head, maybe a few aspirin, too. Samuel drove through the parking lot, drove past the empty guard booth and headed toward the back of the course, the rows of barns flanking him, cool and dark. He thought the barns would smell good, like hay and wet horses.

Samuel went into the barn and sat down on a bench, pulled his shirt away from his skin, tried to cool off. Down the row of stalls, out of sight, he heard a horse mumble. He walked over to see her and stood there, just outside her stall, and after a minute he moved closer, leaned against the rail and waited for the horse to come to him. It took its time. Samuel thought she looked young; young and very serious and he walked back to his car, drove over to the main parking lot to the phone booth and called Willa's house.

Laura answered.

"Hi. It's Samuel. You never called me back."

"Oh, hi Samuel. I'm good. Thanks for asking."

"Sorry. How are you?"

"Already said I'm good."

"Yeah, I know." He looked over at the clubhouse and thought about the air conditioning. "It's hot. I'm outside, at a payphone, and it's really hot. My conversation isn't going to be top notch."

“Okay. Sorry. You caught me at a bad time. Maybe it’s the heat, even here inside with all the air conditioning on I’ve just been on a real nasty streak lately. I think it’s been going on all month. Poor Scott.”

“Willa around?”

“No. Not right now.”

“When’s summer vacation start?”

“Last week. She’s out with Scott.”

“Okay.” The midday heat throbbed down on him and that damp threat of swampy air clouded his thinking. “It’s the weekend tomorrow.”

“I know. And you want to see Willa. But here’s the thing, Samuel, even if we weren’t going away, which it seems you’ve forgotten about, I’m just not sure how I would feel about it.”

“Maybe that doesn’t matter.”

“Pardon?”

“Maybe that doesn’t matter,” he said. “How you feel about it I mean.”

“Of course it matters. I’m her mother.”

“I’m her father.”

He could hear her thinking, taking her time, going over everything, getting quietly mad about it, remembering everything he had done back then and he thought maybe she was going to hang up, call her lawyer again, send another one of those damn letters. It was too hot, Laura was too quiet, and he wanted a vodka and lime, a real cold one.

Over at the track the announcer called out that the windows were open. Samuel frowned and hoped she hadn’t heard it.

“You still there?” she asked.



“I’m here,” Samuel said.

“Okay. Like I said, we’re going away for a few days. And after that we have a lot going on. And she’s happy now. Happy. Sometimes, seeing you fucks that all up, alright, and I’m not great with the idea of throwing some spanner in the works just because you have some whim. So here’s the deal Samuel, like I said before, I’ll think about it, and I’ll call you.”

“What if I call you?”

“What?”

“What if I call you?” he asked. “I’m out too much. I’ll call you. How’s Monday afternoon.”

“Christ, Samuel. I’ll call you. I’ll think about it and then, when I’m ready, when I think Willa’s ready, I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

She was quiet a minute and Samuel squinted out at the empty track, shimmering with the sun, and knew what was coming.

“Actually Samuel, you know what? Forget it. Forget everything.”

She hung up, saying goodbye as the phone went down, like she couldn’t wait to get away from him even if it was just on the phone and he remembered how she had been way back, before Willa. He tried to remember if she had been different, different with him, but he didn’t think so. He wanted to scream but felt like he didn’t know how.

He drove over to Marlin Beach and parked across the street from the Palm Court. His thoughts kept running around in circles, turning over the conversation with Laura, trying to find where he had gone wrong in talking with her.

Someone tapped on the car’s hood.

“No parking, buddy.”

“Since when?” He looked up at Luis, grinning at him from behind those big silver sunglasses. “Oh, hey.”

“Daydreaming?”

“Yeah.”

“Feel like giving me a lift down the road? Let’s go to La Casita, get a sandwich or something. I’m due my break.”

“Sure.”

Luis came around the car, checking out the strays walking down the sidewalk staring at the beach like it was a new kind of nightclub they didn’t understand. He grinned at the sun-tired faces as he got in the car. Samuel could smell the baby power Luis put in his shoes.

“It’s freaking hot in this car,” Luis said. “Why you sitting here like this, just burning up. I feel like I’m sitting in a stew.”

“I like Cuban stew.”

“Turn on the A/C.”

“I got the windows open. The wind’s good out here.”

“The wind’s good out here? You kidding me? It’s like standing in front of a hair drier. You try walking a beat for eight hours. You know I got a call this morning, around ten maybe, to check out some guy screaming about his dog over on Green Avenue. Turns out the guy was screaming because his dog was dying, right there while they were out for a walk. It was heat stroke. You believe that? I didn’t know a dog could get heat stroke.”

“He okay?”

“Yeah, I took him to his son’s house over in Salem. He’ll be fine.”

“I meant the dog.”

“Oh. Another patrol took the dog to a vet or something. I haven’t asked for an update. He’ll be alright though. He was just too big and shaggy to be out. Cat’s got the right idea. They just hide under houses until September. Sometimes I wish I could do that. You know crime goes up when it’s hot? I mean I know people go stir crazy and all that but what the hell? Who has the energy to commit some crazy ass crime when it’s over ninety degrees of pure humidity?”

“Mad men?”

“Yes. Mad men. Pull in there,” Luis pointed to an opening behind the small white, sun-bleached café. Red words were painted on the wall under the heavy iron La Casita sign, all Spanish. From the outside, La Casita reminded him of an old bar he used to go to, half in a basement, all the windows painted over black so no one would remember what was going on outside. But inside, La Casita was clean and bare and dim and there and soft, happy, swaying music came from the kitchen. He could smell cumin and fried flour and coffee, very strong Cuban coffee, and when they sat down Luis called out something in Spanish, held up to fingers, smiling all the while. Luis turned to Samuel.

“Who’s the lady I saw you with the other morning?” he asked. He didn’t smile but he looked like he wanted to.

Samuel pushed his hair away from his face. He was still sweating though it was cool in the café, cool in an easy damp way, and he felt very heavy.

“Fellow traveler,” Samuel said.

Luis waited.

“She’s staying at the Hummingbird, one of the cabins over near the pool. Doesn’t sleep much in the night. We got to talking.”

“What’s her name?”

“April.”

“April what?”

Samuel thought a minute. Luis’ eyes danced over his face, over the empty café and back again. “I can’t remember.” He heard Laura again, yelling at him over the phone and his thoughts grew numb and he had to pull himself back to focus on Luis. He clenched his teeth.

Luis shrugged. “She’s pretty.”

“Yeah.”

“Too pretty for you.”

“Not possible.”

Luis gave Samuel a small laugh. “How long she been around? At the Hummingbird.”

“I don’t know. Few weeks.”

The waitress walked to the doorway, looked outside and mumbled quietly to herself, fanned herself with her hand and went behind the bar to turn on the standing fan.

Luis cleared his throat, “So, this morning, a drunk comes up to me, looking and smelling like cheap whiskey and beer. All shaggy and shaky, right. He comes up to me and says ‘Hey, mister, somebody stole my car.’ So I say, ‘Well, where was it?’ and he says, ‘Right on the end of this key’. And I just shake my head, I’m not in the mood, right, because I was up most of the night doing graveyard around the beaches. So I say ‘Tell you what partner. Why don’t you just head on down to the police station? They got all the right forms and you can file a report there.’ And he nods and turns to go but I notice his pants so I say ‘Hey, man. Before you head down, you

better do up your fly.’ The guy looks down and groans and says ‘Aw man, they got my girl too.’”

Luis grinned and waited.

“Jesus,” Samuel said. He laughed.

“C’mon. That one is good. That is funny.”

“You told it to me last year. You need new material.”

“Shit, I just need new friends.”

“You can’t afford them.”

“Alimony is killer.”

Samuel gave a short laugh.

“Man, I’m getting tired of the Hummingbird. Last week we had someone asking about a missing girl. Another one. Rebecca van something. I was standing in front of Jenny’s office, like just another Cuban worker bee, I guess, because this old guy comes up and tells me he’s looking for a girl. I say he’s not the first guy, especially at the Hummingbird. People are always looking for runaway wives and that, like they all got a brochure for the Hummingbird. But his girl, his Rebecca, he actually said that, *my Rebecca*, is different. I told him I was a cop and the best thing he could do was file a missing persons and the creep gets all vague, says he been down that road a year ago and then he starts putting twenty dollar bills in my hand, nice new ones. Gave me a hundred dollars for ‘my time’ and slithered away.”

“That’s good money.”

“I know. But I got the feeling it was hush-money.”

“To keep hush about what?”

“Man, I don’t know. I’m a beat cop, not a detective. Tell you what, we should both get out of there, move somewhere near the water, somewhere that gets some

wind sometimes.” He grinned. “Hey, my mother has room for us if you’re brave enough. You know she’d love to have your smiling face around for a while.” He laughed.

Samuel nodded. The waitress brought out a pair of Cuban sandwiches and orange soda. Luis picked through the sandwich, opened it up and shook his head sadly and said they never did them right, he’d have to start a cooking school to teach Cubans how to cook Cuban.

“They’ve all been here too long,” he said.

“I thought you were born here?”

“I was. But I can still be critical, can’t I?” He took a bite and nodded at Samuel. “You alright?”

“Sure.”

“You seem off.”

“No. I’m good. Maybe it’s just the heat.”

“You look like you’re losing weight.”

“It’s too hot to eat. It’s too hot to do anything.”

“Tell that to my clientele. The ones that get heat wave mixed up with crime wave.”

“I thought I was your clientele.”

“Some days it doesn’t feel like it.”

Samuel reached for his orange soda and knocked it over onto the floor and Luis looked at him, hard but smiling.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

He showered and thought about April, thought about that skittish way she had sometimes and he thought about how soft her skin was. And he remembered her saying how good his Cuban chicken had smelled. He got out of the shower, dressed and checked the refrigerator. He took out two pieces of chicken, sat them on a plate and covered them with oil and Luis' Cuban spice.

He had taught Willa how to make marinated Mojo chicken, long ago. She was four and stood on the chair next to him but all she ever looked at was the chef's knife lying on the counter. He talked her through it and when he was done, when he told her she could go play she just stayed there, standing next to him, waiting for something and he couldn't figure out what.

It had gone quiet outside, the swimming pool swayed, empty again and he heard voices, muffled behind closed doors, and wondered since when did the Hummingbird get so popular. He could smell the sea and the smoke from the grill.

When he walked over to April's, stood at her open door to knock, he heard her, talking quickly, sharply.

Her whisper cut the air. "Not now. Just not right now, okay? Just leave me alone, Galye, just leave me alone for a little while."

She was sitting at the kitchenette table, holding the phone with two hands like it was getting heavy and she glared at him.

Then her face changed, she whispered into the phone and hung up softly, and he wondered where she had put all that anger so quickly.

"Samuel!" She jumped up and stopped, gave him a breathless look.

"I'm making that chicken we talked about. The one with the bacon and all."

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It takes a while to cook on the grill, but did you want some? I have enough.”

“Yes!” She walked to the kitchen counter. “God, I’m starved. I keep forgetting to go to the grocery store. I keep forgetting everything.” She filled a glass with ice and poured vodka over it, took a long sip. “Join me for a drink?”

“I will.”

“Actually drink it this time?”

“I will.”

“Good to hear. I don’t know how you go so long without having a little something. Even with what you say, about driving in the heat all day. That would make me drink more. It really would.” She finished her drink and made two more, made them bigger and started cutting up a lime. He was glad she had them this time.

He took a step into her cabin. It smelled of jasmine and mosquito spray and something else, something expensive that he couldn’t put his finger on. The room was brighter than his cabin ever was. He saw the red sunburn through her white shirt.

She handed him his drink and gave him such a proud look that he turned away and saw the drawings on the table, done in a chalky blue and pink and when he saw himself, saw something of himself, he blinked and grew warm.

“Oh!” She went to turn them over. “You weren’t really meant to see those.”

She laughed and Samuel found she had guided him away from her table and that they had drifted toward her door like he was in an unseen and fast moving current. She touched his arm and he thought about kissing her.

“Where’s this grill of yours then?” she said.

He followed her outside.



After he put the chicken on the grill, they sat out back, in cool and lethargic shadows, the smell and the smoke filling the night air. She grinned when he drank his vodka and she told him he sipped at it like a nervous boy.

She seemed to like watching him cook and he thought about what else he might cook for her. Soon she went back to her cabin for more drinks and came back with the bottle and when she walked toward him he thought she looked sweet and small, unaware of Samuel or anything else.

It was one of those nights that had full light from a half-moon that slipped down from the swiftly moving sky and cast a shadow of pearl glow over April's face so that when she ate, quietly, happily, there was something innocent about her that touched him in a way he found difficult. The air was thick with smoked charcoal and jasmine, April's jasmine, and he could make out the midnight sounds of someone still awake, watching television quietly, and there was the sound of the occasional car that hummed out on the highway.

"This is amazing."

"Good."

"No. I'm not just saying it. This is really good." She put her hand on his. It was warm, soft, and she turned away, smiling to herself.

Across the Hummingbird, in the dark, someone laughed at the television, low and tired.

"What else are you good at?" she asked.

"I used to be good at riding horses."

"Really?"

"I grew up around horses."

"Where?" she asked.

“The mid-west. We moved around a bit.”

“Me too.”

“You don’t seem like a mid-western girl.”

“No. Not that. I moved around a lot too. Sometimes, it felt like a new school every year.” She nodded at his plate. “You aren’t eating your food or drinking your drink.”

“I drank my drink.”

“Just the one.”

“So far. This one can linger.”

He leaned back. The moon had gone behind the clouds and her face had gone dark. He could see her mouth, her lips, parted like they were lost in the middle of a pleasing thought.

“Why Florida?” he asked. “Why’d you come back?”

“To get away from too many marriage proposals.”

“Really?”

“It felt like that at the time.”

“Felt like what?”

“Like they were everywhere. Men, suitors, whatever you want to call them. I couldn’t breathe and everyone seemed to think I was crazy for saying no.” She took a drink and exhaled, a loud, warm breath that made him think of a horse waiting for its turn to run. “Let’s talk about something nice.”

“Marriage and flattery aren’t nice?”

“Not to me,” she said.

“So you never married,” he said.

“I never married.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not a fan of divorce.”

“I hear that.”

She smiled at him. “Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage.”

She laughed. He liked the sound. It was low and came from deep inside of her and he wondered if she had ever been a smoker.

“Put on some music,” she said. “Even that damn Christmas music you always play.”

“How do you like Judy Garland?”

“Isn’t she the girl from *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay. Put that on.”

He went inside and took out the record, put it on and waited to hear her voice. He closed his eyes. His chest hurt, like there was something long and heavy that had become tangled up inside of him and he thought about Willa, thought about seeing her and the tangle inside of him tightened. The sounds of happy, steady bells came from the record player and he sat down on the floor and felt old and heavy and hot, far too hot.

He heard April’s footsteps and she came inside, sat down beside him.

“So that’s her?” She took a sip of her drink and held the glass out to him.

“Here. Take a sip,” she said. She waited while he drank. “She’s singing Jingle Bells. Why does she sound so sad?”

It rained that night, softly, and they stayed awake, inside Samuel’s cabin, the calm beat of the rainfall on the roof swallowing the world outside and she fell asleep, on the sofa, next to him. She made him feel rough, feel bigger than he was, and later,

the nervous, equine flicker of thought left her face and he wondered what she was dreaming.

When the rain stopped, Samuel picked her up and moved her to his bed. She opened her eyes, lost and lovely, and fell back to sleep without a sound and he left, drove out to Santa Rosa. The wet roads caught the lonely blue light of the coming dawn, and a tropical blur of orange threatened the edge of the sky, bled into the dark clouds and he knew it would be very hot later. He pulled in across the street from Willa's house. All the windows were dark.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Families and couples smiled as they walked down La Huerta Boulevard and seagulls waited along the worn wood rail on the pier. The pier seemed to hang in a void, the black sea behind it, unseen, waiting. His father had had eyes that black; eyes that wandered away, in his mind, when he sat quiet at the dinner table but still a thousand and one miles away.

Later, when he went out to Cinnamon Key and lingered near the Noble Parrot, he wanted a drink, a strong one, and he wanted to have it alone.

Instead, he went down to the beach, sat near the water and thought about Willa, about when he used to put her to sleep in the middle of the night. Sometimes he fell asleep first and would wake later to find her watching him with dark eyes that were too old for her.

A man was asleep on a bench near the beach and when Samuel smelled the horses on the man he stopped and looked down at Claude's worried sleeping face.

Samuel touched him on the shoulder.

"Claude?"

Claude blinked himself awake, sat up and grinned sleepily.

"What are you doing way out here?" Samuel asked.

Claude shook his head, trying to remember. "Joined some party of tourists. They were buying."

"And they brought you out here?"

"Yeah."

"The Noble Parrott?"

"At first."

“You show them around or something?”

“Oh, they knew where to go. I guess they just wanted some local color.”

“And that was you.”

“Well, they were buying.”

Claude still had the wheat-colored stains of horse manure on his boots and he shuffled them together like he was trying to get it off. He rubbed a hard hand over his big dark head, looked out at the Gulf and shook out the night.

Samuel sat down next to him.

“They take off? Leave you here?”

“No, man. I left them. Got tired of their laughing. No one laughs that much in one night unless they got something missing inside them.” He thought about that, pinched his forehead above the eyes. “Maybe kids.”

“I can drive you back to Century if you like.”

“You going there anyway?”

“I was thinking about it.”

“Need to get you a job out there, man. You’re always there anyhow.”

“I got a job.”

“Driving. I guess that’s a job.”

They drove back, Claude riding in the front with Samuel, their windows wide open. Claude turned on the music and smiled.

“Who’s that? Doris Day?” Claude asked.

Samuel nodded. “That’s right.”

“Man, I fucking love Doris Day.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Samuel found April sitting on his porch, in the shade, smiling behind large sunglasses that made her look like a small, heavy-lidded girl that had had too much sun and too much drink. And she was sweating. Even in the jean shorts and worn out alligator tee shirt, she was sweating so that her skin gleamed smooth and hard and she crossed her legs and pursed her lips. Her legs were hard, athletic and healthy and they were far too sporty for the lay-about girl sitting there on his porch.

“New Orleans?” he asked. He came and sat down on the steps right beside her. He smelled shampoo and wondered if all that damp gleam was from the heat or if she had just showered.

“Pardon?”

“Your shirt. That alligator. It says New Orleans on the bottom.”

“Oh. Yeah. I lived there for a while.”

“That’s near Biloxi, right?”

“I guess a few hours’ drive. It’s not far.”

“You don’t look old enough for all this living in different places.”

“Good.” She laughed. She was drinking a bottle of beer and she took a sip, held out the bottle to him but he shook his head no. “Where’d you get to the other night?” she asked. “I woke up alone in your bed.”

“I went to see my daughter.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“I guess it’s a figure of speech.”

“Did you get to see her?” she asked.

Samuel shook his head. An iguana sunned itself on a rock beside the driveway. It gave him a hard, critical stare.

“Maybe next time, don’t go there at four in the morning.”

Samuel nodded.

She gave him a cookie cutter smile while she thought hard about something. Her shirt clung to her body in a pleasing way and he reached out, let his hand rest on her leg. Something in her seemed to vibrate. He realized she had music playing, in his cabin, something fast, and he listened carefully. It was Diana Ross. *Love Train*. When she turned it into a real song.

“Hey, let’s get out of here.” She said.

“What?”

“Let’s get out of here. Take me out. Show me the sights. Sometimes a girl needs to make some noise, have some fun. Let’s get some dinner and some drinks and pretend we’re tourists for a night. Act a fool.”

He wanted to stay home but Samuel took her to the north end of Marlin Beach for dinner, to a Puerto Rican café he used to go to with Willa, when she was younger. When they walked April kept his hand in hers and walked close to him so that his arm brushed against her sides, against her hips and he felt an animal warmth coming from her. They sat in the back of the café and she checked out at restaurant, happily, and, when the drinks came she grinned and drank quickly.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had Puerto Rican food,” she said. “What’s it like?”

“I like it. A lot of pork. Rice and beans. But it’s not like New Orleans.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not like the red beans and rice from New Orleans. Not as rich.”

“Oh, right.” She finished her cocktail and smiled to the waitress for another.



“Did you like it there?” he asked.

“Where?”

“New Orleans?”

“Oh. Yeah. It was great.” She said it vaguely, like it was a fast fading dream she wasn’t sure she had ever dreamed.

“How long did you live there?”

“Maybe a year. I worked in a bar in the French Quarter.”

“I can’t picture it.”

She frowned and took a long sip on her new drink. A candied cherry sat in the honey-coloured cocktail and she plucked it out, ate it. A girl walked by and smiled at them and went to sit with her parents. Her father put his arm over her shoulder, pulled her in for a lazy hug, his black eyes on the door like he was about to go through it and never come back.

“So, why don’t you see your kid?” April asked. “I mean, like, have her on weekends and all that.”

Samuel took a sip of beer. It was very cold and felt good.

“She told me she wanted to run away and I said so do I. Her mother found out and put an end to things.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he said. “Close enough anyway.”

“Would you have run away? I mean really have run away?”

“Yeah.”

“Where would you run away to?” April asked.

He thought a minute, looked over at the father with his girl. The father was gone now. “Somewhere clean, somewhere quiet.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Luis was outside, smoking grass. Someone laughed and Samuel sat up, his back sore, his jaw still tight, like he had been sleeping angry. He had come home late, around three, and seen April through her window, her face happy about something as she listened to loud music and then he quite became exhausted, like he had been out driving since Mexico.

Outside, Luis coughed, Samuel got up and went through his records, tried to find Dean Martin, but his head hurt and he put on the Bing Crosby that was near the record player.

Samuel made two cups of coffee and went outside. The heat hit him first and then the sun, and he wondered how July was going to be. He walked to the clearing behind his cabin. Luis saw him, took a long drag and nodded, smiled then started coughing. Samuel handed him a cup of coffee. Luis was still in his patrol uniform.

“Won’t they smell that on you?” Samuel asked.

“No.” Luis shook his head. “I’m just coming off duty. All this is going to the dry cleaners later. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Man, it’s hot.”

“Not even July.”

“Think it’ll be wet this year.”

“Not from what I hear,” Luis said. “Say, when you going to get an answering machine? Your phone was ringing off the hook last night, before I went on.”

“Oh.”

“They called more than once. Just let it ring on and on each time.”

He thought of Laura, took a sip of coffee and tried not to think about Willa.

“You okay?”

“Sure,” Samuel said. He tried to remember if Laura had the number of the front office. Jenny would have put a note on his door.

Luis took a long pull, inhaled and set his coffee down on an ironwork table that was too old for anyone to use. Rust fell like red dust into the grass and Luis licked his fingers and pinched the hot end of his joint, put it out and then put it away in a red and white Altoids tin.

“You listening to that Crosby guy again?”

“Yeah.”

“I like this one. It’s better than some of the records you play. I ever tell you though, that with all this Christmas music you always play, well, it got me thinking. Actually it was only a week or so ago, and it was late so I could hear everything. I mean, you were quiet, but I could still hear because everything was so damn still. And you had something going, something nice. *Silent Night* and all those songs. A lady singing. But what I’m wondering is why is it fine, I mean one hundred percent fine and accepted for a grown man to believe in God, my God, to go to church and all to talk to this God, but if this same, sensible man thought that Santa Claus was real, the world would peg him as a nut job. There wouldn’t be no two ways about it. They’d say he was crazy, feel real bad for him, all that nice stuff. Try to explain how it’s just history, something for the kids.”

Samuel looked at the gold cross hanging around Luis’s neck. “You starting to question your faith?”

“I’m a cop. I’m trained to question everything.” Luis winked at him and started to laugh. Then he took his cross and kissed it, “So I don’t get into any trouble,” he explained. “*He* knows these are just smoking thoughts.”

Samuel laughed quietly and finished his coffee. Luis squinted though the sun wasn't in his face and his black eyes became thoughtful and Samuel got the feeling Luis was giving him a once over, deciding something in that cop way of his. Luis nodded, took a sip of coffee and poured out the rest into the grass. He gave the mug back to Samuel.

"I need some sleep. I been dealing in dead pigs all night."

"Dead pigs?"

"Not cops. Pigs. Real pigs. I didn't know they could bleed so much. Shit. I don't want to think about it anymore. I'm going to sleep and when I wake up it will be a pretty night with wind and happy people that need a uniform to make them feel safe while they drink on the beach."

Luis walked away and Samuel looked over to April's cabin. Her curtains were drawn. Samuel hoped she was sleeping.

That day he tried Willa's number every hour or so, between fares, when he found a phone booth. He couldn't think of who else might have called him, who else Luis might have heard.

At Rambling Joe's gas station and pulled in, parked in front of the pay phone. A thin man with a sixty-year-old sunburn stood at the front door, smoking a cigarette. Samuel nodded, took a handful of quarters and went over to the phone. He dialed.

When Willa answered the wind blew right out of him.

"Hey buddy."

"Daddy." She said it like the word was an old memory. A good memory, he thought.

"I've been calling all day."

"We were out. We went to the beach."

“Which one?”

“Mission Beach.”

“You have a good time?”

“Yeah.” She moved the phone away from her mouth and when she said *It’s daddy*, she sounded faraway and worried. She came back, “Hey, mom wants to talk to you.”

“Sounds good. I’ll talk to you soon, okay buddy.”

“Okay.”

Laura came on. “Samuel.”

“Hi Laura.”

“I was trying to reach you yesterday. I called a few times.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. You should get an answering machine, you know.”

“I always figure if it’s important, a person can call Jenny at the Hummingbird’s office. She’ll take a message.”

“Yeah, well, I guess.” She took a breath and Samuel could feel her itching for something. He had always felt it, even way back when they were together. But he never knew what she was itching for. “But I’m glad you called. You’re impossible to get a hold of. I was thinking about what you said, about your wanting to see Willa and I think you’re right. I think it would be a good idea. It would be good for her. Hell, maybe it would even be good for you.”

“Okay,” he said. “Thanks.”

“We’re going away for the fourth of July. We’re going up to Scott’s fishing cabin to spend a week with the mosquitos and whatever else lives in a swamp. So maybe before then, this week or early next week?”

“I’m good any time,” he said.

“How about Friday?”

“It’s Sunday today?”

“Yes, Samuel, it’s Sunday today.”

“So in five days,” he said.

“Okay. Do you want to pick her up?”

“Yes. What time?”

“How does ten work?”

“That’s good. Friday at ten.”

“Okay, bye Samuel.”

“Bye.”

When he hung up, he was sweating. His shirt was soaked through and his heart was pounding. The old man was still smoking, and Samuel nodded and walked into the store and took a beer from the back fridge. He went to the counter to pay and the man walked in.

“Just the one?” the man asked.

“Just the one.”

The man nodded and hit the register with a hard finger. Samuel paid and opened the beer and drank most of it down as he walked back to the car. It was cold and he remembered when he would spend a night going through a whole case, like he had a job to do and nothing was going to stop him.

He called it a day and drove back down the empty highway. There was a fire out of sight, and the smell was in the air, quiet and nostalgic and dangerous and when Samuel slowed for a turn a raccoon was standing in the middle of the road, staring at him, looking angry, like Samuel had just ruined his day.

When he got home April was waiting on his porch, wearing a pale blue summer dress thin enough to show the rise and fall of her chest. The soft powder blue set off her hair and softened her tan and he thought she knew it and knew it well and when she smiled at him he went warm.

She stood up and kissed him, quickly, on the cheek. Her lips were very soft. She laughed. A real, solid laugh that sounded like a run on a new piano and then she kissed him again, on the lips, hard this time and when she lingered, he felt how warm she was.

“Okay,” she said. “It’s my turn to cook. I can make spaghetti. Only spaghetti. What are you staring at?”

She picked up the grocery bag and walked into his cabin. He turned around, half expecting an audience and then followed her into his cabin.

“I swear, even though you leave your windows open, I can always feel your old thoughts, thoughts you had last week, last year maybe, just floating around this cabin.” She found a pot and put water on to boil. “It’s like you’re haunting yourself.”

“You like Dean Martin?”

“I’m not *that* old.”

He put on *A Winter Romance* and turned on the lights but April squinted and told him they were too bright, they would ruin the night and she switch them off and left on the living room lamp on.

“Over head light is very unflattering to a lady,” she said. “More Christmas music?”

“No. Well, sort of, I guess. It was a winter album. Not just Christmas songs. I like *Baby It’s Cold Outside*. It always makes me laugh.”

She looked at him like she didn't believe him and then laughed quietly, shook her head and kept on cutting garlic, mixed it in with diced tomatoes. She held the knife too hard and he got the feeling she didn't cook often. When she found him staring she laughed and told him to knock it off but he didn't know what she meant.

"Pour me a glass of wine," she said. "I got white wine and it's probably warm by now so maybe throw in an ice cube or two. And have a glass with me."

He thought a minute and nodded, poured them both a glass of wine. It was dry and bitter and she poured some into the frying pan with the garlic, tomatoes and chili. She salted the water, put in the spaghetti and smiled at him over her shoulder, told him to sit down, relax, but he didn't know if he could.

Later, they sat outside, on the front porch and ate quietly. She had taken off her bracelet and he picked it up, fingered the winged pattern on it, the delicate silverwork and the turquoise stones.

"I got that in Mexico," she said. "A lifetime ago."

"In Mexico, a lifetime ago," he repeated.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"No," he said. "No. This is pretty."

She stopped eating and thought a minute and then poured herself more wine.

"I got that in Acapulco. It's on the Pacific."

"They have casinos there?"

"What? Casinos?"

"For you to work at?"

"Oh, no. I was working in an art gallery. I must have moved there a week after I was done with school. There was an ad in the *New York Times* of all places, required reading for our family mornings. But when I saw the ad, I called the gallery that very



day and took the next plane out of there. One of the shows was a silversmith exhibition. That's where the bracelet came from. I need more wine."

Samuel looked at her, confused.

"Wine, honey," she said.

"Bottle's empty."

"Did I drink it all?"

"Not quite."

"You need to drink more, Samuel."

"No. Not now. I'm seeing Willa on Friday. I don't want the drinks to linger."

"Hangovers don't last that long."

"It's not hangovers I'm worried about," Samuel said. "It's that awful feeling that comes along with it. The old thoughts that come back and stay around a while and then you can't sleep and so you think on it too much, all night long, and it gets worse."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He tried to laugh. "I have no idea."

"You nervous about seeing your girl?"

"I guess."

"Well don't be," she said. "How old did you say your girl was? Nine? Ten? Something like that. Well, just think back. What did you think about your own father at that age?"

Samuel nodded. He heard the flap of heavy wings somewhere in the dark, something big, flying away fast, and he wished he could follow.

"Seriously," April said. "What did you think of your father when you were a kid?"

“I guess I thought he was Superman.”

“See what I mean?” She put her hand on his. It was warm and soft. She pushed her plate away and came closer to him. She took his hand and kissed it and held it to her cheek and when he looked at her she had her eyes closed, like she was somewhere else. She jerked away. “Oh no. I just thought of something. Superman killed himself.” She laughed loud and the sound carried in the night.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh.” She wiped her eyes delicately. “But it’s true. Superman killed himself. Well, the actor did. The real Superman, the one from the old television show. Shot himself in the head or heart or something while a party went on downstairs.”

“Christ.”

“Well, bad example after all. You know, I’m really going to need more to drink. Must keep my fluids up in this heat. I’m going to run over to my room for the vodka. Get us some glasses ready.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Samuel gave up driving and went to the Palm Court and got a dull smile from the bartender. The patio doors were closed to keep in the air conditioning and there was a daytime darkness that Samuel only found in the neon bars of Florida.

“Twice in a month,” the bartender said. “You’re getting to be a regular again.”

“Sure.”

“Vodka and lime?”

“No. Just a beer. Give me the coldest Budweiser you have. And a fried oyster sandwich.”

The bartender looked Samuel over for a minute and nodded to himself, went away and left Samuel alone at the end of the long, quiet bar.

The beer was incredibly cold and Samuel drank half of it, quickly, put money down on the counter and told the man not to worry about the fried oysters, he wasn’t hungry after all.

“The oysters are already on.”

“Then let me buy you a sandwich.” Samuel put down another five dollars and tapped it gently.

“Okay. Want a go cup for the beer?”

“No. No thanks.”

He drove out to Cinnamon Key and parked in the shade of the wild palmetto across the street from the beach. Samuel could still taste the Budweiser.

That night he drove past the Nobel Parrot. He heard the hum of quiet music, of voices and air conditioning and a long dark figure stepped into the street, raised a hand to him and when he stopped she got in, lit a cigarette and smiled out the window. She pushed her black hair out of her face and he watched her in the mirror. He had driven her before. She was still freshly sun burned.

“I’ve driven you before,” he said.

“That right?”

He nodded and started the car. She took a pull on her cigarette and after a minute looked up at him, in the mirror.

“I remember,” she said. “I told you that you looked like a dog.”

“An *old* dog.”

“I meant it in a nice way.”

“No other way to take it. Where are we going?”

“Take me to the mainland.”

“There’s a lot of mainland.”

“I haven’t decided yet. I just needed to get away from there.”

“From the Noble Parrot?”

“I don’t know.” She blew her smoke out the window and leaned her head a little so the wind made her hair dance. Samuel remembered the autumn his father had taken him to see a circus three times running because he had liked the way a woman’s hair moved when she came out grinning wildly, ridding her horse, the flashing red and yellow lights of the big top chasing them even though the horse was too fast and when the horse reared up the woman smiled in a way that Samuel knew meant she had forgotten there were people around her, watching her, and later, after the show his

father had taken his around back to see the horse and when Samuel touched it, her heart was still racing around that ring.

The woman in the taxi sat back, finished her cigarette and opened the ashtray in the door. "There was just a guy in there, sitting by himself at the bar, but he had one of those faces that just made me really fucking depressed. I couldn't take it."

"Okay."

"You ever get that?"

"Yeah."

"You ever get like that?"

He looked up at her. Her eyes were very dark. "I hope not."

"I got it," she said. "Take me somewhere where everyone is happy."

"Disney World is only a couple hours away."

She laughed and lit a new cigarette but let it linger in her fingertips.

"You know the Palm Court?"

"Yeah, I know it. That'll be fine," she said. "What's your name?"

"Samuel."

"Samuel. Pleasure to meet you. I'm Jane."

"Jane?"

"That's right."

"You don't look like a Jane."

"That's because you're thinking of Jane Fonda."

"How'd you know?"

"Men your age always do."

He laughed and thought maybe she got it right.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Claude was the only one working at the stables that early and when Samuel saw him Claude nodded, ran a hand over his face to rub away the night and left the gates open. The smell of wet hay, damp from dew, was very strong. Samuel walked in and went over to the gelding that Claude had moved into the walking ring. The horse huffed, like it was snowing out and he was trying to keep warm and when Samuel leaned against the rail the horse lowered his head and nickered once or twice before coming closer. Samuel put a hand out but the horse stayed out of reach. In the stalls another horse was kicking and the gelding walked away, to the other side of the ring, and waited for the day to get going.

Samuel went over to the stalls. The name Small Secret was up on the chalkboard and he looked in at her. She wasn't small at all. She pawed at the ground and looked at him with brown and hard-thinking eyes and he opened the gate, went in, took a brush from the wall and started to rub her down. Her muscles tensed and he remembered when he was a boy, when he first touched a horse and wished he could be the same as them, be as strong and clean and still and he had wondered how they got all that power just from eating grass.

Small Secret stood still and he kept brushing her and he listened to the steady sound of Claude sweeping, coughing sometimes in a quiet, nighttime way and when Samuel put away the brush the horse pressed into him, put her nose into his chest in a rough way he thought was half a threat. He rubbed her neck and ears. There was a healthy chestnut shine to her coat.

Laughter came from outside the gates and Samuel walked out of the stall, saw the hot walkers and grooms coming in, getting ready, and he waved like he knew

them. When he drove back to Marlin Beach he could still smell Small Secret, like she was in the car with him.

When he got home that evening April was sitting at the edge of the swimming pool, still in her bikini, still wearing sunglasses though the sky was soft and chalky with a lilac dusk. Her hair was still damp and when he waved she just stared in that blank way of dark sunglasses and he wondered if she was asleep. The water moved in the pool and the sound of wind ripples made Samuel think of falling coins.

April picked up a drink and grinned at him, took a long sip and waved him over. He pulled up a deck chair and sat near her. She held up her drink.

“Vodka?” she asked.

He took the glass and took out the slice of lime and ate it and remembered when Willa was a little past one year old, when he had taken Laura and Willa down south, hoping to get to the Florida Keys, but a storm had come that cut off the roads so they stopped outside of Florence and stayed for three days in a wind-blown motel where they could hear the rain beating against the sea all night and every day the three of them ate in the motel restaurant and had key lime pie for desert, Willa having small determined bites of Laura’s.

Samuel gave the glass back to April and thought there was too much vodka in the lime. But at least it was cold.

April stood up. She was very tall from where he sat and when she looked down at him, smiling absently, he felt like a child.

“Let’s go out to eat,” she said. “My treat. I want something fried and salty. It’s all this damn vodka I’m drinking.”

“I thought you were trying to keep your fluids up.”

“Well, now they are *too* up. I’m going to get dressed. You think of somewhere. I’m just sure you must know all the right spots.” She took a sip of her drink, gave the glass to him and went into her room.

Soon, April came out in white shorts and a blue sailor top and he thought she looked like one of the tourists who came down in January for two weeks of fast spending. But her tan was too deep now and even with that great wide smile her face was too serious.

When they got into his car Samuel saw Luis, on his porch. A match flared in front of him and he lit his cigarette. Luis took off his gun belt, set it on the small breakfast table and walked down onto the grass. Samuel waved and Luis held up a hand in greeting and went out behind the cabins and disappeared into the deep violet darkness of the coming night.

“You know him well?” April asked.

“Well enough, I guess.”

She nodded and thought a minute and when they got out onto the empty highway she said she would hate to ever be a cop.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s the things they see. Imagine reading the newspapers for eight hours a day, seven days a week, but without any of the codes or so-called good taste censorship the papers must do. Take away all the happy stories and just read the bad ones, all day, every day. And to top it all off, nobody likes a cop.”

“Luis is a good guy.”

“All the same, nobody really likes a cop,” she said. “On the plus side, the uniform is rather cute.” She laughed, loud and happy with it.



When they got to Marlin Beach they went into The Palm Court she held his hand. They ate a basket of fried fish and crab cakes.

April took his hand and placed it on her leg, high up, where her shorts stopped. He could feel the heavy pulsing of her blood and she looked away, quickly, but held his hand a little tighter, pressed it into her legs a little harder.

Music came on the jukebox, an old Diana Ross song that had come out in the seventies, when she went out on her own.

“Is all the music in here so old?” April asked.

“I think so.”

“I love crab cakes. These are great. They don’t fall apart or anything. I used to make great crab cakes.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Mm. When I was a teenager, we’d have parties, drink, skinny dip, probably listen to this very same record and try to find someone to kiss. Most kids just brought beer or hot dogs or something. I always brought crab cakes. I thought it would win me some hearts.”

“And?”

“Never the right ones,” she said. She waved out at the bar for a fresh drink. When it came she sat back. “Diana Ross, huh? Did she ever do a Christmas Album?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh god,” she laughed. “I was kind of joking but you know, I’m not all that surprised you know that.”

Samuel nodded. “With the Supremes. In the sixties.”

Her drink came and she raised her glass to Samuel, “Coo coo ca choo.”

He tipped his beer bottle against her glass.

She put a finger on his lips. He could smell coconut hand cream. Her finger was very soft against his mouth and she looked at him very seriously. The neon signs behind the bar made her look flushed, red-faced and excited. Her mouth was open, like it was waiting.

“Hush,” she said. “You’re talking too much.”

He blinked at her. “What?”

She laughed and touched his cheek. Gave him a small kiss with dry lips and took a long sip of her vodka.

“It’s sarcasm, Sammy. That’s like solid currency in my family. And they have a lot in the bank. You don’t talk too much. In fact, you don’t talk enough. There’s something about you, but even when you do say something I have to check twice because I’m sure you’ve been sitting here in total silence. I like it when you talk. There’s something comforting about your voice. It’s familiar, like from long ago though I know we never would have met each other.”

“Oh.”

She started laughing.

“God, I hope that’s a joke,” she said. “Look, are you going to eat that piece of shrimp? You’ve just been holding onto it like you don’t know what it’s for.”

“I don’t like shrimp,” he said.

“Then why are you holding it?”

“It’s so fried up I didn’t know what it was.”

She picked it away from him with two long fingers.

“You seem like you’re somewhere else,” she said.

“I’m seeing Willa on Friday.”

“About time,” she said. “That’s good.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“What? With your daughter? Play golf.”

“Golf?”

“Absolutely. Kids love golf. The mini golf places are great. There’s a whole strip of them south of here, just on the coast so everything looks pretty. She’ll have a great time. Make sure you let her win.”

He took a sip of beer. It was still cold. He looked at April and thought she didn’t seem like a mini golf kind of person. Real golf, maybe, but not mini golf.

She moved close to him and he felt the hardness of her shoulders, like there was nothing but bone under her shirt.

“You smell good,” she said. “You smell like you’ve been out in the country all day or something.”

“I was at the track this morning. Brushed one of the maidens.”

“Maidens?”

“A horse,” he said. “A horse that hasn’t run yet.”

“How do you know it hasn’t run yet?”

“She told me.”

April frowned.

“And I saw it written down on the board,” he said.

She nodded. She finished her drink and raised her glass up and nodded to the bartender.

Samuel thought she could handle herself well. By closing time the Palm Court was crowded and, over the hum of all the tired voices Samuel, could hear music coming from one of the bars down the block that played live music most every night for young tourists. April smiled vacantly into the crown as she finished the lime from

her last drink. She ate it delicately with white teeth that looked too small, too straight, and when they left she held his hand a little too tightly, put too much weight in it, and he knew the drinks were bringing her down.

They crossed over to the beach and sat in the sand. It was dark and there was no moon, only a running black void and the lulling whisper of the ocean.

“I can still smell them,” she said. “The horses, I mean. Even here at the beach I can smell them on you. I like it.”

“Me too.”

“Let’s go out there.”

“Where?”

“To the race track. To the horses. Introduce me around.”

“It’s almost four. There won’t be anyone to meet.”

“I mean introduce me to the horses. What are their names?”

“I don’t know. They come and go. I guess the one I brushed this morning was called Small Secret.”

“I just love those crazy names they give race horses. Why not call them Socks, or Buster, or one of those regular animal names.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. Get up. Let’s get out there before there are too many people.”

When he got near Century Downs, he turned off the highway and April woke up.

They pulled into the parking lot and he rolled over toward the back to the stables. He parked and listened. Out of sight, in the dark, a horse nickered and then whimpered. They walked down the shedrow, past empty stalls until they found a dark,

dark mare, her eyes wild, almost white with worry; maybe, Samuel thought, with anger and, when they came close, she moved away, back deeper into her stall, so they couldn't see anything but a wet-penny glimmer, here and there, from her eye, from her hide.

April leaned into the stall and waited. Samuel could smell the cold, wandering scent of vodka, smell the wheat fields of his childhood.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Come Friday he was early. He hadn't slept, but he was too nervous to be tired. He parked down the block from Willa's house and squinted at all the blue sky. At nine thirty he saw her, down the block, standing on her front lawn. He thought her hair was darker now. He started the car and drove up to the house.

She was still small, still had that skinny look like her body couldn't keep up with her bones, and when she saw him she gave him a small, fast smile and came over to his window.

"You're early," she said.

"You too."

She nodded and looked back at the house, waiting. Sweat beaded her nose.

"You getting in?" he asked.

She held up a finger. When she looked at him he felt sick and gave her a smile.

He heard Scott shout out and looked up, saw him coming down the walkway.

"Samuel."

"Hi Scott."

"You're early."

"I hope that's okay."

"Sure, sure." He put a hand on Willa's shoulder and told her to give them a minute, wait in the shade for a second. He leaned down and gave Samuel his Paul Newman smile.

"Where's Laura?" Samuel asked.

"She's out."

“Okay.”

“I thought maybe it might be a good idea, if she wasn’t around this time just now. You know, might suddenly change her mind, see something that sets her off, like last year.”

“Okay.”

Scott was starting to sweat out there in the sun. His looks held up. He was still trim and tidy and had to try hard to be serious. But he could pull it off.

“How you doing, Samuel?” he asked.

“Good,” Samuel said. “Hot.”

“You look tired.”

“It’s this heat. I think every one’s tired.”

“I hear that,” Scott said. “Sleeping alright?”

“Yup.” Samuel wondered why they always asked about his sleep. Maybe it was code for something they hadn’t let him in on.

“Okay. Okay. That’s good.” He lowered his voice, “Drinking these days?”

“Not enough.”

Scott looked a question at him and then laughed quietly. “Which way?”

“Either way.”

“Screw it. Get out of here. Have fun.” He stood up and waved at Willa.

She was in the car, beside him, in a second. Scott walked away, back to the house and Samuel turned around, left Santa Rosa, started north and he wondered if he just kept going how far he would get.

“Was he checking up on you?” Willa asked. Her voice was soft. It was higher than it used to be and it didn’t sound right.

“I guess.”

“Mom probably made him. I don’t think he really cares for it.”

“It’s alright.”

They made the highway, left all the small homes and careful gardens of Santa Rosa and soon there were wild palms and sea grass outside the car and he looked over at Willa. She was watching him. He could smell the ocean and the laundry detergent from her clothes. He reached out and cupped the back of her neck. It was thin and long. When the highway joined up with the Gulf, came right up next to it, she looked out at the flat, blue water.

Samuel was sweating and his heart was going hard.

“I don’t know about that,” she said.

“Don’t know about what?”

“What you said before. About it being alright for Scott to check up on you. I don’t know about that.”

Samuel nodded and couldn’t think of what to say. His hands were sore from holding the steering wheel so tight.

“How you been?” he asked.

“Good enough.”

“You ever play mini-golf?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a place up here. They got mini-golf. Thought maybe we could do that.”

“Okay.”

“Get some pizza after?”

“Okay.”



They played slowly. There were other children, other families, playing, shouting, running quickly through the course and Willa watched them, her eyes dark and thoughtful and Samuel remembered how she used to give him a similar look, when she was one or two and he tried to do something silly, tried to get her to laugh. When they came to the fourth hole it was set up like a long barn, with unnerving plastic horse heads hanging over half stalls and Samuel squeezed his putter and wished he had just taken her out to the track, bought some sugar cubes and let her go nuts with the horses, with real horses, let her see them dance.

A blond girl walked in front of them, frowning obliviously and Willa stepped away from the hole, came next to Samuel. He put a hand on her head and took it away quickly.

“You still living at that same place?” she asked. “The Hummingbird? Out by Sandino?”

“Yeah. I’m still at the Hummingbird.”

“Your friend still there? Luis?”

“He’s still there.”

Music for young people was piped through a sound system but it got swallowed up too, and Samuel looked across the street, over at the sea, and when it moved so that the sun caught it the water became white and Samuel was sure that it would burn a man to touch it.

They came to something that might have been a whale.

“So I guess we aim for the mouth,” he said.

“And it comes out the other end.” Willa nodded to the slope behind the whale.

“Not a lot of thought put into that plan.”

It took them a while to get through the course. Samuel thought about the jokes he used to tell Willa but they all fell flat in his head. After, they went for pizza down the road but she didn't eat much. Over on the beach the seagulls wandered around like old men who had lost their way on purpose.

"I heard the birds the other night," he said. "At my place. They were going nuts. Remember how much you used to like them?"

She nodded.

She was looking out at the beach. She was very still. She always had been.

"What did you think of the golfing?" he asked.

She nodded again and met his eyes. "I guess I don't get it."

"What?"

"Golf. Mini-golf. I don't get it."

He suddenly felt very tired, and he remembered all the nights, awake, in bed, listening for birds.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm not sure I get it either."

She put her hand on his, absently grabbed onto his finger and looked back out the window.

"You want to get out of here? Go get some key lime pie?" he asked.

"Oh yeah." This time there was a faraway calm to her smile and he knew he finally got something right.

He drove quickly out to Cinnamon Key, to the Napoleon House café. Wind came over the key from both sides and shook the old wood frame of the café and they went and sat on the deck that hung over the water. It was bright and the glare from the water was hard and Samuel thought they both needed ball caps and sunglasses and he saw that Willa was as brown from the sun as he was.

Willa smiled, "They still play that classical music here."

"I can't even hear it."

"Young ears." She tapped her earlobe.

"What is it?"

"Piano. Only piano. It's good."

When the waitress came they ordered key lime pie and lemonade and Willa told him she had tried making it, a few times, with her mother, but it always came out bad, too sour and the meringue might as well have been shaving cream.

"Baking is hard," he said.

"Yeah." Her face went serious again and then her eyes shone, became too clear.

"Christ."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Six month," he said. "Six months is a long time."

"More than six months. Almost seven this time."

"I know." His head hurt. "I didn't have much choice."

"I don't believe that."

The pie came and the waitress tried hard to be funny, told them that so many old people move to Florida because they want to get themselves acclimated for hell. Her accent was still thick with Cuban but she told them she was born right on Cinnamon Key and Samuel got the impression that she wanted to stay, sit down with them and talk all afternoon.

When he watched Willa, talking to the waitress, smiling softly, her eyes bright, he knew she had forgotten about it and he hoped she would forever but later,

when they drove back to Santa Rosa to drop her off, she was quiet again and finally, near her house she looked over at him.

“I don’t believe them either,” she said. “What they said about you. I don’t believe them.”

“They tell you something?”

“No. I found out anyway.”

Laura was on the porch, standing there like she knew just when they would arrive. Her hair was blonder now, and she was still so small and thin that from a distance she would look like a girl, but when Samuel waved at her and she waved back, gave him a good smile, there was still something about her that made Samuel wonder if she had been around forever.

“You think maybe you want to do something again? Soon, I mean. Maybe in the next week or two?” he asked.

“Not in six months?”

“Not in six months.”

“What will mom say?”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Yes. Call mom on Sunday. She’ll be in a good mood on Sunday.”

“Sunday. Okay.”

“I don’t want to go to the fishing camp for the Fourth.”

“Why?”

“All these people are there. It gets pretty loud for a place that should be quiet,” she trailed off and shook her head at the thought. “Call her on Sunday.”

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and jumped out of the car, ran up to Laura and they both waved at him as he drove away.

He left his off-duty sign on and drove up the coast highway, almost made Pensacola, and with all the windows open he felt like a horse chasing after the pink and blushing sky. It was after dark when he came back home to the Hummingbird.

Luis was over by the swimming pool, standing near the water, smoking a cigarette. A real cigarette.

Red and blues lights blinked, in a panic, against the night. The darkness tried to come in from behind the trees, tried to spill silently down from the low and heavy sky, and a pair of uniformed cops stood near the pool, talking to each other, nervously, looking at Luis now and then while he smoked and stared into the swimming pool. A paramedic brought out the stretcher.

**JULY**

## CHAPTER ONE

They left late, after four, when the worried, swollen glow of the blue and red lights moved out onto the highway and gave the shadows back to the night. Luis had gone earlier, nodding at nothing at all when the uniforms guided him into the back of a patrol car. Soon the coroner's van followed and for almost two hours there was the soft static and shuffle of the department working through the night. When the camera flashed in April's cabin the light echoed out across the Hummingbird and there was nothing to hear but dull voices wishing they had nothing to say.

Samuel watched, sitting in the darkness on his porch, on the steps. Once or twice a uniform looked over at him but Samuel didn't know if he could be seen in the shadows.

After they left Samuel waited a while. The stars seemed to take their time in finally coming out and it was quiet in that way that made Samuel sure something was out there, in the night, waiting for a sound to lead the way. He could smell the sea, and jasmine. He got up and walked over to her door, touched the police warning sticker they had sealed across the door. There was a heavy, almost burnt smell in the air. It was too dark to read what was on the sticker but he got the idea.

Over in the dark a door closed and Samuel wondered who else was awake, and what they had seen, what they had heard. Normally, he would have asked Luis.

He took a shower and lay down in bed. His breath became shallow, like the air had turned to water and he couldn't take it in anymore. When he heard the birds, sudden and angry, tearing a hole through the night, he thought about Willa. They kept calling. Warmth crawled across him. The cries grew louder and he thought about when Willa had stayed the night, three years ago, more than three years ago, and she

had woken him up and said that the birds needed help, she was sure of it and he hadn't known what to do.

That afternoon, when the air was sweet with the smell of frying bacon, coffee, and the cautious, alcoholic laughter of someone having a late breakfast, a patrol car dropped Luis off, left him standing in the sun in the middle of the driveway. His white t-shirt clung with sweat and he blinked, distractedly, like he had just woken up to find himself in a stranger's house.

Samuel waved.

Luis looked at him a while, his dark face pinched against the sun, and then he walked over. He stopped in the shade, a few feet in front of Samuel and turned toward April's cabin. When the laughter came again Luis winced.

"Sorry about your friend," Luis said.

Samuel nodded. He thought about the crisp cream sheet that had been over the stretcher, the loud bang the legs made when they collapsed to slide into the coroner's van. "So that was her," he said.

"Yeah. That was her." Luis sat down next to him and took out a package of Camels, tapped out the cigarette and lit it.

"Why'd they bring you out?"

"She used my gun."

"She used your gun? You mean on herself? She used your gun on herself."

Samuel spoke slowly. He wanted to say all that again, say it normally, but he just nodded. He kept nodding.

"Yeah," Luis said.



They sat quietly a while. The man laughed again, out of sight, behind the row of cabins at the swimming pool, it was forced, like he was going to have a good time no matter what.

“No one talking about it yet?”

“I don’t think anyone knows.”

“Jenny knows.”

“I haven’t seen her.”

“Okay. Good.”

“So what happens now? To April.”

“Someone will try to find her family. Let them know. They’ll probably start with you. Jenny too. See if you two know her family.”

“I don’t.”

“Someone will come by all the same. They have too.”

“Okay.”

“They had to suspend me.”

“Why?”

“She used my gun. My service weapon.”

“So?”

“Just one of those things. I left it on the table. It should have been put away. That’s what they say.”

“You in trouble?”

“A little. I was high, too. They didn’t say anything, didn’t get me to test out or anything, but all the same. Sometimes a small thing follows you back home later and gets you. Mostly, though, it was my gun.”

Luis stepped on his cigarette butt, and pulled out another one. When he lit it, the match flared and the smell was similar to that odd burning smell Samuel had noticed earlier, at April's door.

Samuel exhaled, hard. "Jesus Christ."

Luis nodded and touched the small cross at his neck.

It grew hotter and the sun came closer. Samuel tried not to imagine April's bloody body.

"What happens now?" Samuel asked again.

"Medical examiner will take a look today. Confirm suicide. Notify next of kin. Jenny will have to deal with that room."

"Confirm suicide?"

"Yeah. It's standard."

"What is there to confirm?"

"It's just standard, Samuel." He stepped on his cigarette, picked both the butts off the ground and held on to them. "These are awful. I don't know why I smoke them. They're just awful." He stood up. "I'm going to have a nap, man. One of my colleagues comes to talk to you later, you can come get me. Like for emotional support."

"Emotional support?"

"That's the words they use at work."

"Okay."

He started to walk away and stopped, turned back, "Hey Samuel. You sure you okay?"

"Good enough."

Luis nodded.

“Luis,” Samuel said, “Who found her?”

“Me. I was out back, smoking, when she pulled the trigger. The sound was like a fucking cannon out here at night.”

“No one else came over to look?”

“No. I went to get Jenny, let her know, and she was hiding. Scared shitless. But she stayed in her cabin.”

“Okay.” Samuel nodded and looked ahead at nothing. “Talk soon.”

“You bet.”

By sunset Samuel grew tired of hiding from his own thoughts. He cleaned the hardened fat and ash out of the charcoal grill and listened to the sound of the swimming pool, listened to the water lap at the sides like it was waiting for someone, and later, when the sky began to melt into faded twists of purple and plum smoke, he saw Jenny, walking out toward the highway, holding a long brown water snake. She threw it out onto the highway, an easy underhand like she was throwing coins into a fountain, and walked back to the Hummingbird.

## CHAPTER TWO

When the detective came Samuel was out back, getting the grill started. He had been to the butcher on La Huerta Blvd and had bought two sirloin steaks, not thinking, not wanting to think. Mosquitos buzzed at his ears, mad about all the smoke. Children played in the swimming pool and when they laughed Samuel wondered how much blood would be on the walls in April's cabin.

"Knock, knock."

Samuel looked up at the detective coming around the cabin. He was old, Samuel thought, too old to be walking around in this heat, asking about dead people. His hair was thin, pale and weak like dead straw, and he was thin enough that his shirt hung on him like a boy who had suddenly stopped growing. But his eyes were blue and lucid, like they would be quick to laugh, like April's.

"You're Sam Holiday?"

"Samuel. Yes."

"Hey Samuel." He held out a hand for shaking. "I'm Detective Ross. Luis told me I'd find you here."

"Yeah. I thought you'd be out here yesterday."

"Me too. The doctor took a while on this. On account of the gun and all."

"Because it belonged to Luis?"

"Well, because it was a gun. Ladies don't often use a gun. Pills and Poison usually. Well, pills. Far and away it's pills. Holy shit, it's hot back here. You got air conditioning inside? Can we sit in there?"

"I got a fan," Samuel said. "Air conditioning broke a while back."

"I guess no one's in a hurry to do repairs in this place."

“I guess.” They walked inside, sat in the kitchen. Samuel turned on the fan.

“Thanks,” Ross said. “So you know this girl, ah, April Jones, pretty well then?”

“Some. I didn’t know her last name was Jones.”

“She give you a different one?”

“She didn’t give me one. I guess it just never came up.”

“Ok. Jones is what she told the manager here. You ever meet any family? Know where they live?”

“No. Neither. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. A name like Jones, well, unless she’s from a town of eight people, we’d never find her folks. She married?”

“No.”

“Sure of that one, are you?”

“She’d had proposals. Turned them down.”

“That so?”

“I guess.”

“Okay,” Ross said. He was sitting in the chair like he half expected he would have to jump out of it and he smiled when he saw the turntable. “That’s a good system.”

“Yeah. I like it.”

“The girl seem down to you?” he asked.

“No.”

“No?”

“That’s right.”

“Think you would notice?” Ross asked.

“Apparently not.”

“Yeah. Don’t sweat it. No one ever does. Not unless the person is stock piling Seconal. But this one used a gun. A god damn gun. With a lady.”

“She had Seconal.”

“Come again.”

“She had it. I don’t know if she was stock piling it, but I know she had it. She offered me some.”

“Why was that?”

“I have trouble sleeping.”

“It’s over ninety degrees. Everyone’s having trouble sleeping. I’ll have to check her room again. I didn’t find it before.”

“I can help you look.”

“No. It’s a mess in there. No one should have to deal with that shit. You sure she had Seconal?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Okay.” He stood up, held out his hand and Samuel shook it again. “You were out, right? When it happened.”

“Yeah.”

“Probably for the best. I mean, it’s bad no matter how you cut it, but at least with Luis finding it, well he’s been trained for that kind of thing. Meant to have the stomach.”

“He in trouble?” Samuel asked.

“Because of the gun thing? Yeah, he’s in trouble, but it will pass. She took it from inside his house, from the kitchen table, so it’s not like he left it over by the swimming pool or something. He’ll be fine in a week or two. Do desk work for a

month or so. He'll get to enjoy some air conditioning instead of walking around outside all summer long. People go nuts in the summer."

Ross walked over to the kitchen counter and looked down at the steaks Samuel had left out to dry. They were salted and a pat of butter sat on the top of them.

"Those look good," Ross said. "Thick. You expecting company?"

"One was for April. I wasn't thinking."

"That happens. Even on the job. A while back one of our sergeants kept assigning work to a kid who had done the same thing. Took him about six months to get used to it. Funny thing though, when somebody up and quits or moves away, people get used to it right away." He walked to Samuel's record player, picked up the Doris Day Christmas Album. "You like these more than cassette tapes?"

"I have some tapes for the car."

"Yeah. Me too. Not Doris Day though."

### CHAPTER THREE

Samuel's father had been to Florida, once, when Samuel was nine, for three or four weeks, chasing work that wasn't there, and when he got back up north, he talked about all the wind, the way it followed him all over the place and how even far inland it had smelled of the sea. When he talked about Florida, told Samuel about it before bed, like it was some kind of bed time story, he got that soft and laughing look in his eye, and his hands would fidget, absently, like they were trying to get back down there, back down to Florida.

That night, when Samuel drove out to La Huerta boulevard to get away from the Hummingbird, to get away from the creeping pressure that quietly slipped out of April's closed door, there were lucid, cold cracks of blue in the sky, some secret magic that Samuel was sure his father had told him about, long ago, in those bedtime whispers, his hand, rough and moving slowly over his forehead.

He bought an ice cream from the Dairy Queen and sat at a picnic table over the beach. Women laughed nearby, still wet from their nighttime swims and far away, down the road, was the blunt sound of rock and roll music from one of the nightclubs. When one of the swimming women came closer, still laughing, her voice had the same deep ring to it as April's, like she had something sarcastic to say but was saving it for herself. Samuel closes his eyes. His thoughts rocked, like he was falling into rushing waves, far out in the ocean.

He heard April laugh, long and happy, and when he opened his eyes the women were all gone and he was alone.

He finished his ice cream and wondered if Willa was still awake.



Knotted thoughts ran through his head all night, while he drove up and down the coast, looking for a late night fare; thoughts that led nowhere and only made him seasick so that when morning came, he had the feeling he had been drowned once or twice already and, somewhere inside of him, April kept laughing.

When the sun was up he went back to the Hummingbird and went to April's cabin. He stood at her door, read the police notice, the polite lines of an active crime scene though they had said it wasn't a crime at all. He tried the door but it was locked and he had a sudden desire to kick it in, to kick something. He expected to hear the sound of ice hitting glass while she made a drink, told him some vague tale about what she had done, where she had been, tall tales of too many truths butting into each other, but when he knocked there was nobody there. The sound was sharp and mean, and he sat down in the wicker chair beside her door and something inside of him seemed to quiver, like his body was trying to get out from under his skin, and he remembered the way his father's horse had been, running up and down the fence, near the house, then suddenly standing still when she saw Samuel, but when he looked in her eyes Samuel knew there was nothing still inside of that horse, nothing still at all.

Across the way, Luis opened his door and stepped out onto the porch. He sat down and Samuel realized he hadn't been seen. Luis lit a cigarette and Samuel got up and walked across the lawn to Luis. He could smell bacon and when he got close he could hear it, frying in the pan, the heat turned down low so Luis could smoke a wake up cigarette while it cooked.

Luis frowned at Samuel, "Where were you?"

"By April's."

"You met Richard yesterday?"

"That detective Ross?"

“One and the same.”

“Yeah, he came by.” Samuel looked over at April’s cabin. The sun was behind her building and the long morning shadows reached out in front of it. He tried to imagine April walking over, quietly, in the dark, coming to get that gun from the kitchen table. It seemed like a long way to go. Especially when there was a bottle of Seconal right there in the room with her.

“I talked with my partner last night,” Luis said. “He came by to make sure I don’t get too used to the good life. You know what I’m missing right now? Some boy beat his father so bad, the old man went to the hospital. Kid was fifteen years old and his father wouldn’t let him go out with his friends after eleven at night. So the kid kicks his father in. How is this suspension I’m on meant to be punishment? They even got me on pay. You want bacon and eggs?”

“Okay.”

“They want me to talk to someone. A psychoanalyst or something like that. Tell them how I feel about April killing herself and using my gun to do it. I spoke to the girl once, for about two minutes, when she was looking for you. How am I supposed to feel about someone I didn’t know?”

“I don’t know.”

“How you hanging in?”

“Good enough.”

“Good enough.” Luis laughed softly.

“What day is it today?” Samuel asked.

“Sunday. Why?”

“I have to call Laura.”

“Might want to wait until normal people are awake,” Luis said. “Say, you see your kid the other day?”

“Yeah.”

“Go okay?”

“Sure.” Samuel nodded. He could smell jasmine. “She doesn’t like mini-golf.”

Later, Samuel brought his telephone outside, onto the porch, and sat down. Luis had come over and was reading the newspaper on Samuel’s steps and when Samuel sat down at the small table, Luis looked at the telephone, nodded and went back to his paper.

Samuel thought about asking to see Willa again, asking to see her so soon and he remembered the last time he had asked to see her so often, remembered the quiet contempt in Laura’s voice when she had told him there wasn’t a chance in hell, told him he wasn’t fit, not after what had happened.

He had been swimming when it happened. Alone, after sunset, out at Cinnamon Key. There had been a nervous red glow, far away, out at sea, and Samuel had swum after it a while and then stopped and looked back at the land, at all the headlights that burned through the dark as cars drove down the street, at the blur of flashing signs that spotted the road, where the bars and taverns and motels were. The sea was cool so far out. It ran quickly, heavily, around him. He could still smell the coconut hand cream he had bought for Willa. They had used it, together, using too much in that curious way of a seven year old, while they ate dinner at the Napoleon House. When she had gone quiet for a while, longer than usual, he cupped the back of her neck, felt that young animal warmth and then she asked him if he ever felt like running away.

“What? When I was a kid? No, not really. It didn’t cross my mind. Go away, sure, explore some, but not run away.”

“No,” she said. “Not when you were a kid. Now. Do you ever feel like running away now?”

He thought she would know right away if he were lying. “I guess. In a way. Sometimes.”

“But you won’t.”

“I won’t.”

And out there, alone, treading water in the dark, the sea pulling him away with its current, pulling gently, like an old friend so he wouldn’t notice until it was too late, he remembered the look in her eyes.

He had seen that look before, in old animals who didn’t have much left in them, in his father, that December, a little before Christmas when he stared at the Christmas tree all night, alone in the dark living room of their old house. And then he couldn’t breathe. The sea pushed into his chest, tied tight knots in his stomach. Air popped around him.

It felt good to sink. He came up again and the air popped until it was all gone and he closed his eyes. The smiling sea swallowed him again, into the dark. He heard the welcoming thunder of running horses.

The next day he came to, in a hospital, surrounded by bright white walls and windows and a worried woman he didn’t know but who did not believe him when he told her there were better ways for a man to hang it all up.

The hospital called Laura and she came that morning. Walked into his room and sat down and just looked at him in that awful, bitter way and tried to find the hardest words she could. Her eyes were pale in that white room, and even though she

tried to come across angry he didn't want to look away. Her mouth twitched but she didn't speak for a long while. People talked out in the hallway and when a nurse walked in, she looked from Samuel to Laura and back again and walked away quickly. Outside thin, weak storm clouds drifted through the pale blue sky.

“What the hell Samuel?” She stood up, ready now. “Seriously, what the hell?”

Samuel shrugged.

“That's something your father would have done?”

“Gone swimming?”

“You know what I'm talking about.”

“I'm not sure I do.”

“Shut up.”

“Okay.”

“It's not the first time you've tried something like this, is it?”

“I didn't try anything.”

She let out a small laugh and looked out the window. When she stood up Samuel wanted to see her smile, a real smile that was mostly on the inside and up at the eyes. He hadn't seen one of those in a long, long time.

“You can't do that Samuel. You just can't. It's not fair. It's not fair to me and it sure as hell isn't fair to Willa.”

“I already told you...”

She held out a hand for him to stop and shivered, like she was trying to shake him off. “Shut up. Just listen, all right? I don't want any part of your shit. Of whatever you have going on. I won't have any part of it and neither will my daughter. You get me, Samuel? You need to take some time, okay? Take some time out from everything, from us, from Willa. Get your shit together before you see Willa, okay?”

Get your shit together before you end up infecting her. She's so damn impressionable sometimes. Do you understand?"

He just looked at her. When he tried to breathe the air was too hot for his lungs, too thin, and he shook his head to tell her *no* but she was already looking away, wishing he wasn't really there.

She turned back to him, her eyes bright with held back tears and he thought about Willa, thought about her seeing him, seeing through him, and when he left the hospital, it was a long time before he finally called Laura and asked how Willa was doing. Laura wasn't happy to hear from him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Samuel called Laura that Sunday night, from the racetrack, after seven. There had been a race earlier but most of the traffic had cleared out, the parking lot was almost empty and he could smell hay and horse manure in the wind. People were still drinking at the club house and when the line rang he turned his back to the buildings.

Laura answered.

“Hey. It’s me.”

“Samuel.” She sounded surprised.

“When do you leave?”

“Pardon?”

“For Scott’s cabin. When do you leave?”

“Oh, tomorrow. Look, we are just eating dinner, what’s this about?”

“Willa.”

“What about her.”

“I was thinking maybe I could see her again. Soon. Maybe when you guys get back from the cabin. Something like that.”

“Is that right?”

He could hear her thinking. There was that squeeze in her silence and he wondered how she got to be so good at arguing. Before they were married, when they lived up north, her mother had told him she could argue air out of a paper bag just for being there. She laughed when she said it, like it was cute, and for a while it was.

“Twice a year isn’t enough,” he said. “It’s not good for anyone.”

“It’s not *anyone* I’m concerned about.”

“It’s not good for Willa.”

“God damn it, Samuel.” And then she went quiet for a minute. When she spoke again she was softer, thoughtful, “It’s dinnertime, Samuel. We’re eating. Call me back next week, okay. We’re gone until Wednesday night.”

“Sure. Okay. I’ll call Thursday or Friday. Can you tell Willa I called?”

“Yes, Samuel, I’ll tell her.”

On the drive back to Marlin Beach Samuel passed three eighteen wheelers, all driving together. They had the Ringling Brother’s logo and he remembered when his father had come down to Florida all those years ago and when he came back he told Samuel he wished he could have taken him along and maybe they would never have come back.



## CHAPTER FIVE

After work Samuel went to the Palm Court and drank half a Budweiser, at the bar, watching the news. Children were missing. Run away, or worse, and when the news showed a photograph of a fifteen year old boy that had been gone a while, Samuel thought there was something already hollow in the boy's eyes and he thought maybe it was for the best that the boy had disappeared. Behind him, in the bar, people talked, their voices loud, happy, already drunk and getting drunker and Samuel could smell beer and suntan oil and aftershave and he thought there were too many people, too many tourists, even in the Palm Court. On the television the police talked about doing everything they could but not getting anywhere and Samuel pushed away the bottle of beer and left, drove out to the Hummingbird.

He showered and tried to sleep. It was quiet, like the night was waiting for the birds to come back. Later, when he heard the soft shuffle of footsteps in the grass, Samuel looked out his window and saw a vague shadow walking out near the trees, then the sudden orange flare of a match, the short billow as it lit something and was shaken out and then Samuel saw the cherry of whatever Luis was smoking. Half an hour later he heard Luis start his car and leave the Hummingbird. Samuel took another shower but the sweat kept coming.

Dawn came. The damp smell of dew and mist hung over the Hummingbird.

Across the lawn he saw April's door, and he remembered the time his father had been sitting in his bedroom, late at night, when Samuel was twelve. When he sat up and spoke to his father it took a while for his father to answer and then they had gone out, driven over to the Larsen place, the snow like clean cold bones coming out of the earth, and they'd sat on the hood of his father's car and finally, a good while

later, the horses came, running over the snow, the heavy breath catching in the wind and then his father had started laughing. The horses slipped out of sight, ran into a valley and soon they were back again and they came closer this time, running hard. Samuel asked his father if the horses knew the two of them were sitting there and his father told him he hoped not.

Shadows moved across April's door. He expected the door to open, expected her to be standing there, waiting, and so he left his house, got in his car and drove away, going fast, wishing he were one of those horses he had seen with his father, beating the land underfoot.

That night Samuel, after work, Samuel drove south, all the way to Willow Reef, the orange sunset bursting into the Gulf of Mexico beside him, and he pulled in at the Mirage Motel, the small row of rooms nestled up against the beach, palm and pine trees lined up out front, protecting it from the highway.

He stayed the night at the motel, in the air conditioning, and listened to the small waves hit the beach and to the college kids out in the parking lot, drinking beer, telling stories, their voices bursting with something Samuel had never had.

## CHAPTER SIX

Samuel stayed down at Willow Reef for two days, in the air conditioning, watching silent television. On the Fourth of July there were small fireworks out over the Gulf and the motel boiled crab and shrimp and tried to get a small party going and Samuel listened to it from his room.

When he got back to the Hummingbird he showered and put on clean clothes and made a strong pot of coffee and scrambled some eggs. He had not eaten much at Willow Reef. Children were playing in the swimming pool and a woman was watching them, vaguely, from a lounge chair, her face angular and skeptical behind mirror sunglasses. She had her blonde hair in a tight ponytail. When she took off her sunglasses, she looked confused, like she didn't know how she ended up at a place like the Hummingbird with so many kids. Samuel scrambled his eggs in the butter.

April's door opened and Samuel stopped. Detective Ross stepped out, looked at Samuel's cabin and then stepped back inside and closed her door.

Samuel turned the heat off under the eggs and stared at the shut door. His skin started to crawl and he wished he had stayed another day down at Willow Reef.

He heard steps on his porch and then Luis called out, "Knock, knock, Samuel."

Samuel opened the door. Sunlight struck down sharply over the Hummingbird grounds and the air was thick with unseen steam. Luis grinned at him with sleepy eyes. He was sweating already. When the children screamed out, they both winced.

"Come in."

"Thanks. Ross talked to you yet?"

"No. I saw him, though. He's over in April's place now. What's going on?"

“Something’s off,” Luis said. “I don’t know what it is, but something’s off. Ross asked me about some pills she had, and he asked about you.” Luis looked at Samuel as he served out the scrambled eggs on two plates. “You told him she had pills?” Luis asked.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think he found them yet.”

They sat down at Samuel’s kitchen table and picked at their eggs.

“Does it matter?” Samuel asked. “If he finds the pills or not. Does it matter?”

“I don’t know. It might. Ross doesn’t like inconsistency.”

“Inconsistency?”

“Sure. Little things can nag for a lifetime in this line of work. If she had pills, why didn’t she use them? If she had pills, where are they now? The morgue tells us the gun was at a funny angle, almost pointing down when mostly in these situations it would be found pointing up, like this, because people want to get the brain so they don’t feel anything anymore. That’s the point of it all, right? Also the gun slipped from her hand altogether. That’s just small things, but they start to feel off, and Ross is going to need to reconcile all these small things and all the things I don’t know about before he lets it go. You going to finish those eggs?”

“No.” Samuel slid his plate over to Luis.

“You make good eggs. Better than my mother even. And she can cook. Don’t know how you pass these up.”

“I’ll eat later.”

They sat quietly. Outside, in the sun, the children shouted, breaking the baked stillness in the air. When a door slammed Samuel, he wondered if Ross was still

inside, looking for that Seconal and he remembered the teasing way April laughed when she offered them to him.

Luis was watching him, thoughtfully, his dark eyes somehow switched off in that cop way that made Samuel feel like he was facing a black television screen.

“You good, Samuel?” Luis asked.

“Yeah.” He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Luis grunted.

When Luis left Samuel waited for Ross, outside, on his porch, in the shade. He wanted April to come over and sit with him, to bring one of those cold vodka and lime cocktails, heavy with ice. By late afternoon the woman and her children had gone away and Samuel walked over to April’s cabin and knocked on the door. He listened hard for Ross but didn’t hear anything.

When he walked back to his cabin, he saw Luis and Ross sitting on Luis’ porch, smoking cigarettes.

Ross grinned at him, his blue eyes bright and Samuel walked toward them. Ross mumbled something to Luis, stood up, and came down the steps to Samuel. He put a hard hand out and they shook. He held Samuel’s hand for an extra second.

“Holiday. Couldn’t find you yesterday.”

“I was out mostly,” Samuel said.

“Okay. Hey, walk me over to my car.”

“Sure.”

Ross walked close to Samuel. When they gently bumped shoulders, Samuel could feel a hard buzz on the detective and he thought that Ross must sleep as badly as he did, must stay awake at night, thinking of all those things he had missed, of all those small things that didn’t reconcile.

“There aren’t any pills,” Ross said.

“Luis told me.”

“You sure she had them?”

“I’m sure she had some. I don’t know how many.”

“You told me last time that you didn’t notice anything odd about her, didn’t think she seemed worried or anything.”

“Only about the birds.”

“Pardon?”

“She was worried about the birds. They can be loud here at night. Night hawks and curlews mostly.”

“Okay.” Ross stopped walking. He nodded once. “These birds worry many people?”

“I wouldn’t know. My daughter likes them.”

“Right. Well. You notice anything along the lines of visitors? Ever see her fighting with anyone? I’m looking for what some might call stressors. My captain taught me that term just last week. He was proud of it.”

“Can’t say I ever saw her talk to anyone but the man that tends bar down at the Palm Court.”

“He an old boyfriend or something?”

“He’s a bartender.”

Ross sighed. His shoulders fell. His face was bright with sweat and he looked like he wished he could just keep slipping down into the ground. “I wish I could find an old boyfriend. They always make things so easy for us.”

“Sorry.”

“Hey man,” he grinned again, stood straight. “Not your fault. Right? I’ll just keep pulling at it.”

“I thought it was suicide?”

“Not yet. Not until I say so.”

“That right?”

They stopped at a pale blue sedan and Ross opened the car door, stood for a minute looking at the Hummingbird, looking at April’s doorway. “She ever talk about where she was from?”

“I think she said she grew up down near Tampa. Maybe she said south of Tampa.”

“Ever mention Connecticut?”

“Connecticut? No.”

“Yeah. I had a feeling that’d be the case.”

“Why?”

“She had a Connecticut driver’s license. Issued nine or ten months ago.”

Samuel shook his head. A television came on in one of the cabins.

Ross put on his sunglasses and frowned at the driveway. “What *did* she tell you, Samuel? Luis told me about your late night talks. He said you looked close. What did you talk about?”

“We talked about the weather.”

Ross gave the road a wide smile, half of him still hidden behind those sunglasses. “Jesus Christ.”

“Okay.” Samuel nodded. “We made a few jokes, we listened to music and she told me about spending time in New Orleans, working in Mexico. I don’t think she lived long in either. We met four weeks ago and I didn’t know her well.”

“Yeah,” Ross said. “No one did.” He lit a new cigarette and waved the smoke away from his face. “Sometimes it seems like the world’s trying hard to forget someone. You ever get that feeling?”

Samuel thought about it. “Yeah.”

Ross pulled away, turned onto the highway and then he was gone.

Samuel chased work that night. Waited outside the Lighthouse, and later the Palm Court, while tourists lingered in the street, blinked at the midnight air and then changed their minds and went back inside.

After three, when the bars closed, he drove a woman who smelled of peppermint to a motel on Cinnamon Key. She fell asleep before they came to the causeway, that fresh candied smell still strong, even with the wind that ran in from the sea and when they got to the motel and he woke her she held herself and gave him a curled, nasty look that made him worry about her. After, he parked out front of the Noble Parrot.

Somebody cheered inside. A small handful of stars had come out and when the breeze came, Samuel realized it would be morning soon and he called it a night and started for home.

He made it back to the Hummingbird before dawn. The quiet made him think of his father, of the way he used to sit in the kitchen before the world woke, near the window while the sky blued, the air around him oddly crisp with thinking, and once, when Samuel was eight and had woken early as well and came looking for him, he had told Samuel that it was the only time he ever thought his thoughts were really his.



Samuel made a cup of coffee and sat outside, on the porch. There was car over in the parking lot, alone, facing the row of rooms by the swimming pool. Cigarette smoke came from an open window, curled in the air and soon another twisted cloud came out and tried to fade away with the end of the night and Samuel's stomach tightened. Those long luxurious lines of the Buick stuck out in the parking lot. The shine of the hood and the wide windscreen, hidden in darkness, were too clean, too fresh and new and Samuel took a sip of coffee but his mouth had turned everything sour. He stood up, frowned, and walked toward the Buick. He held up a hand, walked quicker, and the Buick started up, the soft motor coughing, and it reversed, turned out onto the highway, and was gone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Jenny was out by the highway, standing under the Hummingbird Suites sign, her face pinched against the sun. Samuel pulled off the road and rolled over to her, looked up at the sign, tried to see what she was seeing. The white and blue paint had blistered a long time ago. It was too hot out on the road with all that black tar burning up the heat. Samuel nodded at Jenny.

“Hey, Samuel,” she said. She didn’t look at him when she spoke. He thought she got too thin every summer, her shoulders were showing so much bone in that tank top. She kept frowning at nothing at all.

“Working on your suntan?” he asked.

“No. Just taking a break.”

“Out here?”

“Yeah,” she said. She wasn’t wearing her glasses and deep grey circles showed under her eyes. She exhaled, whispered to herself, said *goddamn son of a bitch*. “I thought they would clean the mess up,” she said. “I thought the city would send someone by to clean the mess up in cabin. They just closed it for a few days. Let all the stains stick in really good and then said, ‘here you go, all yours.’ They didn’t even take the mattress. You know what they did, they left me a telephone number for some fool who won’t come out until next week and charges too much anyway.” She thought a minute then said, “Shit. Luis told me. You were close with her, weren’t you?”

“Just a little.”

“I’m sorry, Samuel.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

She shook her head and turned around, walked back into the Hummingbird, back into the shade. Samuel followed. The car smelled of fake leather and a hot engine. He parked under the banyan tree. When he looked at the other cars on the grounds, he didn't see the Buick. Not now, not when people were awake. He left the car windows open an inch.

Children shouted out from the swimming pool and the blonde woman with the mirror sunglasses was in the lounge chair again, frowning. Behind her, the door to April's cabin was open. Jenny went inside and shut the door. His head swam, just slightly, like he had stood too quickly and he wished he had stayed out at Le Huerta boulevard, chased down some pie and iced tea, tried to find somewhere to take Willa that she might like. But she already liked the Napoleon House.

He went inside and started the coffee machine and when he came back out Jenny was standing at the door to April's. Her mouth hung open, trying to get more air. When the woman at the swimming pool started talking, mumbling in a vague but incredibly loud way, Jenny shut her eyes, tight, and Samuel got the feeling she might kick them all out of the Hummingbird. Maybe even burn it all down.

Jenny went back inside and Samuel stared at the empty doorway a while. He left the coffee and made a glass of ice water and walked over to April's cabin, stepped inside and saw Jenny standing at the foot of the bed, the almost black burst of blood on the wall behind her.

The blood had run down the wall and dried. There were no sheets on the mattress, only those awful, dark patches up near the small headboard and the stains were thick enough that Samuel knew something hard, something sharp, had come out of April as well. Pieces of her had stuck to the wall and the wet smell of damp rot and

gunpowder hung in the room. Samuel wondered how so much of April could have come out with the one shot.

His throat started to come up in itself.

“Holy shit.”

Jenny blinked, lost.

“I’m going to throw up,” he said.

“Toilet’s just there,” Jenny said.

He didn’t move. He just looked at all the blood.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“What?”

“Let’s go. Let’s get out of here. Leave the window open and call that number the cops gave you.” He put down the water glass and took her hand. She came easily.

Samuel didn’t sleep that night. He didn’t want to and later, when he put on a Frank Sinatra album the music was all too loud, pushed his thoughts around in ways he didn’t like and he switched it off and went to the kitchen. He turned on the small lamp and made an old Cuban marinade Luis had shown him years ago, one night when Willa was over. He squeezed limes over crushed garlic and cumin and when he got out the chicken the smell brought back April’s room, brought back all of April’s blood and he put everything in the garbage and brought the bag out to the dumpster in the parking lot.

A light was on in a room near the swimming pool and when he walked back to his cabin he saw it was April’s and he thought they must have left it on when he pulled Jenny from the room.

Later, well into the night, Samuel thought he heard someone crying softly and he stood outside, in the deep shadows of the Hummingbird, and he thought he had to get out of there.

It was a good night for driving. It was one of those quiet southern nights that hid a loving brightness behind the shadows in the sky, that offer an easy, languid release that was better than a third or fourth vodka and lime.

Samuel drove out to Santa Rosa, his radio off, and he passed by Willa's darkened house three times before finally parking across the street. He looked at her bedroom window, near the corner of the house, and he remembered when he had lived there, when he had come home late, after all the bars had closed and when he went to look into Willa's room he saw her lying there, a melting midnight pearl moonlight on her so that he could see that her eyes were wide open, watching the window. He had taken her out that night, leaving quietly so as not to wake Laura, and they got ice cream from an all night gas station and then went out to see the horses at Century Downs. They sat there on a bench out behind the stables, the happy smell of horses all around them, the sky waking over the running track and she ate half of her ice cream and gave it to him, then fell asleep against him.

Palmettos swayed against the house. Samuel wanted to walk over, knock on the front door, wake her up and go get ice cream, or maybe drive down to the Florida Keys and look for the best Key Lime pie in the state. Tell Laura and Scott to take the week off. He smiled tightly and wondered if Laura still had her hunting rifle and he wondered if Willa would like target shooting down at the amusement park in Easter Parade. He had taken her there years ago, not long after the divorce, when her face was always dark and quiet, trying hard to think things out in that moody way she had even back then, more so back then, he thought, and she had liked all the bright red

and golden light, the happy voices that floated through the nighttime and the gypsy woman who kept winking stoically at her, and Willa asked Samuel if the lady was the gypsy queen from the bed time stories he told her.

Over at the house, at the front windows, shadows moved behind the glass, black against black. Samuel's skin crawled across the back of his neck and he waited. He was sure something moved again.

He switched on the engine and flashed his brights, twice, quick and sudden and then turned it all off again. The sound of the starting car settled quickly, disappeared and all he heard was his heartbeat. It was loud and fast, like it was trying to get away from him again. He watched the window. He thought Laura might come out the front door and come over to give him hell and he wanted to get out of there quickly.

A light flashed back at him, twice, quick and sudden, and he sat back and fell asleep.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

He came home in the afternoon after driving a snowbird down to Pine Bay and waiting for him while he talked to the water, his face worried, keeping some secret that made Samuel think about April.

Detective Ross was sitting in the chair outside April's cabin, staring at the empty pool, squinting at the glare that bounced off the water. He didn't look up when Samuel parked and walked over to his place. He kept frowning. April's door was closed.

Later, Ross was still there, still thinking, still brooding at the empty pool. He wondered when Jenny would tell him to go away, that he was bad for business.

Samuel wondered if Ross had found the Seconal yet. He put on a record and took a shower, a long, hot one, and when he came out Ross was gone. The record had stopped and the air popped in the speakers. Mosquitos hummed as the sun went down.

That night he sat outside, on his front steps, drinking water and wishing it was vodka. But he didn't have any limes.

He could smell cigarettes and he got up, walked out back and looked into the night for Luis. When his eyes took in the dark he saw him, standing still, the small red cherry burning out by the trees. Samuel waved but he couldn't see if Luis waved back. The cigarette smelled like a cigarette, nothing else. Samuel walked over.

"You keep smoking these cigarettes, you'll get addicted. Get cancer."

"You gotta die of something."

"So they tell me."

"Think I'm getting used to them," Luis said. "It's not as good as the real thing, but it'll do. Keep me out of trouble."

“Speaking of, how’s that all going. Your suspension.”

“Over come this Friday. Then I’ll be on the desk. Everything blows quickly over in this heat. There’s always something else, something new, and they need all the men they can get. Summer always hits the brass like a tired surprise and they blink at the roster and everyone’s on. Ross even brought me my gun already. Confirmed she used it. Because it needed that extra confirmation. Christ, man. Sometimes it feels like these guys just make work up so they don’t have to do work.” He started laughing, quietly, then it turned into a soft cough. “Shit. I left it on the counter again, door open and everything.” He shook his head. He pinched it out between his fingers and threw it away. “Fuck it. These are shit. I’m going to go for a walk. I need to unwind.”

Luis walked off, went out toward the highway.

Samuel stood still a minute, thinking. He could still smell April’s blood. It made him want to swim in the sea, go very far out where it was cold, where the water moved fast and had never been touched and he wanted to fall down into the water, go deeper and deeper where it was clean, where he could sleep.

He was sweating and breathing hard all of a sudden. His throat was dry and he slapped at a mosquito and walked over to Luis’ cabin. The front door was open. It was bright inside, and he walked in and saw the gun on the counter. When he picked it up he was surprised at how little it weighed. He palmed it easily. He thought the gun might have that burned smell from April’s cabin but it only smelled clean. He put it in his mouth. He liked the taste, found it familiar, like an old horse who needs a bit to know everything is okay. He put it right at the back of his throat, like April had, far back enough that his eyes watered and he looked up at Luis, standing in the doorway, smoking a fresh cigarette.



Luis flicked the cigarette at him, said *asshole* very quietly, and turned around and went back out.

Samuel looked at the gun. He wanted to put it in his mouth again, just think with it in there for a minute. He didn't know what he wanted to think about. He set it down on the counter and left.

## CHAPTER NINE

Thursday night was good on La Huerta. The stores stayed open late and families wandered around, looking at the sea, looking at the sunset, and the tourists all started drinking early so that by sundown they already had the softly drunken hush that comes before a second wind. The sky was a loud, lurid pink that hummed with static, like it had learned it all from those neon signs that lined all the bars and Samuel parked his car and went out to the hot dog stand on the pier to get an ice cream. He got in line and the women in front of him smelled of coconut oil and cigarettes and dime store perfume. They looked worn out and happy with it.

He ate his ice cream walking. Around him, children rambled like they were about to take off, run away, just keep moving like those horses out at the track wanted to do. When he was young his father had taken him to out to the races and from time to time one of them would give up on the track, find a weak spot, find an opening and just tear out of there, running hard, dirt coming up behind them and the jockey holding on tight, knowing he had lost it all, and when they were gone, when things had quieted down, his father was always grinning, laughing in that quiet way.

He saw Scott, alone, sitting on a bench, his long athletic legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. He looked like a playboy whose luck had run out, like someone in the thirties who saw the depression coming and was thinking about all the ways things were about to go wrong, but somehow still found a humor to it all, and Samuel remembered that Scott had lost his first wife, up north, a long time ago. He had heard about it from Willa, when she was five years old and wanted to know what a widower was. Scott never talked about it, never seemed pull the fact around with him like some

people do with a death, but from time to time, when Samuel saw him, looked at him quietly, Scott looked like it had just happened.

A boy playing on the fence climbed high and looked over at Scott like he was showing off for him and Scott gave him a good smile. The boy climbed to the other side and hung over the ocean until he got bored and went to play with a dog. Down on the beach the seagulls flocked, calling loud, while a woman threw French fries at them. When she was done the seagulls hovered, making sure it was over and the woman laughed and walked over to sit with Scott and Samuel realized it was Laura. She leaned her head on his shoulders and after a minute he put his arm around her. Her dark hair danced over her bare shoulders. She was small enough to fit nicely into the corner of Scott's body and when she closed her eyes she looked like she would be happy to stay there all night. Scott kissed her head absently and Samuel walked away and left them alone.

When he drove away he passed them again. Laura looked through him, seeing something in her mind, and Samuel kept driving and tried to remember the last time he had seen her so happy.

He worked until midnight and went home. The car smelled of white wine and the expensive skin cream his last passenger had worn and somehow, very faintly, of peppermint that made Samuel think of how his father always bought too many candy canes at Christmas so that he would have plenty left over afterward and whenever he came into Samuel's bedroom at night, to say goodnight, or to sit beside him quietly a minute if he thought Samuel was sleeping, Samuel could always smell those candy canes and something else, something cold, like his father had been outside, walking through empty mountains though the land was flat for hundreds of miles.

The Hummingbird was quiet. After a shower Samuel sat outside. There was a very dim glow at the edge of the window to April's cabin window. He expected to see shadows move, expected someone to be in there but after a while he knew someone had just left a lamp on when they had run from the room.

When he woke up it was still dark. His heart was going hard and he had to blink several times to make all the blood on his walls go away.

He could taste the gun, feel it push down into his throat, and he could smell April, smell that fine, delicate jasmine, smell the cold vodka and lime and when he heard her laugh he got up and washed his face with cold water. It didn't help. He could still hear her, feel her warmth on his neck. And he could still see the blood, all of it, sitting dark and heavy against the wall, like one of those hurricanes that followed the coast had settled inside of her and finally broken out and nothing about it seemed right.

Inconsistencies.

He laughed softly at himself.

After he dressed, he made coffee and stood in the doorway. April's lamp was still on.

He walked over and tried the door and it opened. When he stepped inside and stood in the dark, he could smell it all, the blood, the jasmine, the salt that had dried on her skin, and he felt like he had been played a false hand but he didn't know why.

Samuel had walked in on death before, when he was young.

Bile soured his mouth and the seemed to pop in front of him. He turned around, left, closed the door and walked over to his car. When he pulled onto the road, headlights came on in his rearview mirror, suddenly, like the car had been there a while, driving dark, and had just turned on the brights. Samuel pressed the gas, went

up to seventy-five, eighty, the dark flying by him, the tall palms waving in and out of the light in front of him.

When he calmed down, he was almost at Marlin Beach. There was an easy touch of pink in the sky, and Samuel kept driving.

There was a car two blocks back, catching up. Samuel tracked it in the mirror a while and then tapped his breaks, pulled in and waited for it to pass. The car stopped a block away, sat in the empty road, the motor running.

A seagull sat on a darkened streetlamp, watching Samuel, its white feathers flushed from the pink sky, and when it called out and Samuel screamed. He hit his horn, hard, held it down so it broke the morning.

Behind him the car started up again. It came toward him, picking up speed, and when it shot by him Samuel saw those new, long lines and knew it was a Buick Riviera, a dark blue one.

## CHAPTER TEN

Laura was in a good mood when he called and she told him to swing by on the weekend, anytime at all, to take Willa out. He arrived Saturday morning, early, to see Willa waiting out front, on the sidewalk, her face dark and thoughtful, as though she thought he might just keep on driving. When she walked around the car and got in he thought she must be small for nine years old.

“Let’s go,” Willa said.

“I should say something to your mom first.”

“Just wave. She’s still at the door.”

Samuel waved at the darkened doorway. Laura stepped out quickly, waved at him and went back inside, shut the door.

Willa was looking ahead, at nothing at all, her hands holding tight to the seat near her knees. Samuel put the car in gear and when he left his hand on the gear stick, she put her hand on his and left it there.

“You got roses on?” he asked.

“Rose water.”

“It smells nice.”

“Are we going to golf today?”

“No. Not today.”

“Okay.”

“You eat breakfast yet?”

“No.”

“Want to go get some pie? I heard about a place south of Tampa with good Key lime pie.”

“Key lime pie for breakfast?”

“What? It’s got eggs. Fruit even.”

She shook her head but she smiled.

“Remember when we went to the horse race track?” she said.

“Yeah. That was a while ago.”

“About three years ago.”

“Yeah, about three years ago.”

“It was nice out there,” she said.

“Yeah. I think so too.”

“Scott told me you go out there a lot. He thinks you should get a job out there.”

“I couldn’t do it. I like going there. I like seeing the horses. But being there all the time, I don’t know. I think too much of it might get me down.”

“Why?”

He thought a minute, “All that running in circles.”

“And that gets you down?”

“Something like that.”

They headed toward the coast. Thin, white clouds swept the sky and when they came out on to the highway there was a solid slate sky out over the sea, and far, far away a storm thundered into the Gulf.

Samuel turned on the radio, tuned it until he a husky Cuban voice telling him things he didn’t understand.

“Do you like this?” he asked. He tapped the radio gently.

“Is it Cuban? Mom listens to something like this.”

“I think it is,” he said. “What do other kids listen to?”

She looked at him and furrowed her brow.

“Okay,” he said. “At school or something. What do they listen to at school?”

“Nothing that I understand.”

“Nothing you understand?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay. How about my music? Those Christmas songs I always have on. Do you understand that music?”

“I understand it,” she said. “Sometimes it gets me down but I understand it.”

“How can Christmas music get you down?”

She gave him a funny look and he nodded.

“You haven’t grown much since I saw you last,” he said.

“It’s only been a week.”

“I know. I like it.”

Roadhouses and cheap motels flew by out on the highway, trying to get as much out of the sea as they could. He could hear Willa thinking. He wanted to ask her about the night he had flashed his headlights at the house but he couldn’t find the way in.

“You remember going to Palace Playland? Down at Easter Parade. Just you and me.”

Willa shook her head. She tied up her hair, put it in a smooth ponytail, and she did it so quickly, in such an old way, Samuel frowned.

“I remember fire,” she said.

“Fire.”

“Yes. I remember sitting somewhere with you, in the dark, near a fire. I think you were behind me. Also, there’s all the times we’ve gone for pie.”



“Fire and pie. Jesus Christ. I need to get my act together. Try to make some good memories for you.” He shook his head. “Fire and pie.”

“I like fire,” she said. Outside, in the Gulf, the sky darkened and deepened as the storm grew silently, so far away. “Pie’s pretty good too.”

She had been five when they went down south together, just the two of them, the one time he had taken her for a whole weekend. It was winter and the temperature had dropped some and they stopped at a beach side motel, a low aqua-colored building right near Everglades National Park, right before sunset and they had gone walking along the water’s edge and he had told her about camping up north, when he was young, told her about following rivers until dark and she wanted to hear more, wanted to hear about him as a boy and she listened carefully while he built a fire out of driftwood and the night disappeared into the darkness that the fire burned away. She fell asleep and he stayed there, letting her rest her back against him, while the fire died out and after, when he moved to pick her up, to carry her back to the motel, he saw she slept with a rough frown on her face and he thought he had fucked everything up. That night, while she slept, he sat outside of the motel room, under the weak pink glow of the motel’s sign, his stomach pulling itself into hard knots and finally he walked across the street to the all night bar and sat in a booth near the window, where he could see the door to his motel room, and had a Budweiser that had never been cold. At the counter a man kept running his hand over a skinny woman’s back while she talked at him in the simple minded way of an angry drunk, and when somebody started shouting Samuel left, his beer barely touched, and went and sat in the dark motel room across from Willa and around daybreak he slept for a couple of hours until she woke him up, hungry. When they left in the morning there were police cars in front of the motel, in front of the bar over the road, young uniforms standing

around, like teenagers who had been forced out of bed too early in the morning and he asked the clerk what had happened but the woman looked down at Willa and told him he didn't want to know. He said something vague about the bar being a bit rough and she told him *honey it didn't happen at the bar*.

In the car, Willa crossed her arms. "Are we going for pie today?"

"I was thinking we might but now I'm not so sure."

"We could go camping. Have a fire."

"We'd need the night for that."

"That's okay."

"Let's not push it."

"Why not?" she said.

"Also, it's too hot for a fire. We'd melt faster than ice cream."

"Not if we were up north."

"No. Not if we were up north."

"We should go some time."

"Yeah," he said. "I'd like that."

He took her down to Easter Parade and a cold electricity that tore open the sky every now and then, showing bright and silver in the dusty purple sky. He could smell the rain. Willa sat beside him like she was waiting for something but he didn't know what. He looked at her hands, at the pale blue nail polish that had been partially picked away by nervous fingers. They moved like they needed to touch something they hadn't found yet.

The rain came in a thin, salty mist and when they pulled up at the Palace the parking lot was empty and the high yellow gates were closed. A painting of a wild

haired clown smiled down at them and Samuel thought it looked angry and he thought he knew how it felt.

“Damn,” he said.

“Closed?”

“Just a sec.” Samuel jumped out of the car and ran to the gate. He saw the chain, saw the sign that said closed for the season, that said it would reopen at the end of August, and then he pulled at the door anyway. He looked around, saw Willa in the car, alone, waiting for him and he thought that it was still too hot, that the rain was just burning up when it hit the ground so that he was breathing in steam and something small in his chest began to burn, slow and steady, stealing all the air. “God damn.”

He ran back to the car.

Willa smiled at him, “Hey, let’s go out to the pier at La Huerta. Let’s get ice cream and wait for the storm come in. I think it’s going to be a big one.”

“It’s raining.”

“So what?”

“Okay,” he said. “You got it.”

Even with the rain they made good time. They got ice cream and sat out on the pier, under the awning behind the hot dog stand and waited for the storm, but they only got a warm and lazy rain. When the sky cleared quickly Willa looked out at the water a while and then said she didn’t trust it.

“What? The water?”

“No. The sky. All this clearing up. See how way out there the lightning is still going? I guess it’ll come later. I hope I’m still up.”

“Ask your mom to wake you.”

She shook her head.

Later, they went out to Cinnamon Key for dinner and had rice and beans at the Napoleon House. The sky was still dark, still falling down into a smoked purple sea, and they listened to the violin music coming from the bar.

When Samuel saw the car out on the street, parked by the café's door, the long, dark blue hood shining like it had just come in from the rain, he stood up. His chair scrapped the deck hard.

"What's wrong," Willa asked.

Samuel looked out at the car, shook his head. "Wait here."

He walked through the café, along the bar, the waitress looking at him, smiling at him and then faltering, trying to find something else to do while the quiet violin music ran swiftly from the radio, being chased by the orchestra. Samuel swallowed. He squeezed his hands tight. His hard, heavy knuckles tried to punch through his skin.

He pushed open the door. His heartbeat rocked in his ears.

A skinny man in a thin undershirt looked up at him from the driver's seat. He took off his sunglasses and frowned at Samuel.

"Hey."

Samuel looked at the car. Something inside him fell over. "What is that?" he asked. "A Thunderbird? A Ford Thunderbird?"

"The car? Yeah."

Samuel leaned forward, made himself breathe. The sky kept coming on down, choking the land.

The man shook his head at Samuel. "You got my food or what?"

"What? No. No, I don't have your food."

“You came out here just to see the car?”

“I love a Ford.”

“Who doesn’t?”

Samuel looked over at the deck, at Willa. She was standing, looking at him, trying not to let anything out of her face. She wasn’t very good at it. Not yet.

Seawater rushed by under the deck, knocked against the pilings, against itself. He gave her a thumbs up and after a minute she winked at him. She was good at that.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

When the rain came it was loud and sudden but it didn't last and two days later, when Samuel was driving along Marlin Beach, looking for a fare, the world was shockingly bright, sunlit and so damned dry that he wondered if it had ever rained at all. The sand swept itself along with the weak wind, left the beach and made a fine mist of bone-dry dust over the streets and the few scattered summer tourists looked more thirsty than usual.

He went to the Palm Court for lunch and ordered a Budweiser and when the barman asked him where his lady was, he didn't understand.

"Mrs. Vodka and lime."

"Oh. She couldn't make it."

"Too pretty for you any way."

"I know."

He sat in the back, in a booth. Sunlight came through the front windows but was quickly swallowed up within the bar and a few men sat at small tables, talking to the game on the television. Samuel ordered onion rings and oysters but when they came, he couldn't eat and he left them for the flies. Later, when the game ended, a heavy man with a buzz cut stood up, looked around and went to sit by himself in a corner of the bar and when he waved away the bartender Samuel wondered how much he had lost on the game.

Luis walked in and stood at the doorway pinching his eyes, waiting for them to take in the darkness. He was in uniform. It always made the voices slow down a minute. He saw Samuel and walked over, sat down and took an onion ring.

"Saw your cab outside," he said.

Samuel nodded and pushed the basket of food over to Luis. He took a sip of the beer and waited. He wondered how Luis could look like he had cooled down already.

“The county is gonna bury April tomorrow,” Luis said. “I been trying to find you. Give you a heads up. Thought maybe you would want to go. It’s not like a funeral, though. She’ll just be put into the ground. These things can be pretty sterile when no family or anything comes to make a claim.”

Samuel nodded. Luis stared at him, waiting. He took another onion ring and Samuel looked away.

“Does that mean Ross made a decision?” Samuel asked.

“It means he got told to move on. You know she had more than one name? April, I mean. April Jones and April James. Jones at the Hummingbird and on the license, but James with her bank. Ross finds that and even so he gets told to move on, time for something bigger and better.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Usually it’s something that’s in the news, that’s making the county look as simple-minded as we are. Or it could be something smaller, something like, well, last year, we had some dope fiend kid got killed. Drug related no doubt. Maybe he was dealing, or maybe he wasn’t paying off debts, I don’t know. But after not even a week, the case gets put aside because someone at city hall wants to find out who broke into his daughter’s place. She wasn’t even home. He said, no joke here, he said ‘No one can rest until my daughter can sleep at night’. So things get pushed aside, the detectives are told to move on. All they want are closers.” He stopped speaking and frowned at his thoughts, tapped the table gently with two fingers, the lean muscles along his arms twitching; a brown flicker of skin that held the same

patient and sudden strength panthers had. Panthers used to be everywhere, Samuel thought, all over Florida, hiding, waiting, and when he had first moved into the Hummingbird all those years ago one of the residents, one who had been there too long so that some days Samuel thought he was older than the trees, used to sit outside in a low hanging canvas chair and tell Samuel about how he used to hear them, hear that sudden, sharp yell really late at night. Now they were all but gone and the state had decided they were the state animal. He had seen one, years ago, out walking with his father.

Luis sighed, took Samuel's beer and held it up with a *may I* look. Samuel nodded. Luis took a swallow and pushed it back. "That's not very good."

"I like them when they're cold. Really cold."

Luis nodded and looked out over the bar. "You good?" he asked.

"I saw April's room."

"That was not a good idea. You should have talked to me about it or something. I could have told you about it."

"Why was there so much blood?"

"Because people have a lot of blood in them."

"But this was a lot. Too much. It didn't seem right."

"You seen a lot of this kind of thing?"

Samuel thought about it and grunted quietly.

Luis took another onion ring. "I think sometimes these things, when you walk in on them not really knowing what it will be like, well, I think they can seem bigger than they are. I don't know. Half my family is completely superstitious, but sometimes, when I walk into a room where someone died in a real bad way, I swear that they're right and that something is hanging behind, like something we can't see



or hear but it's right next to us, screaming. But Cubans are nuts. I should have been a ball player and not a cop. Does any of that make sense?"

"Yeah," Samuel said. "I saw you play soft ball last year. You would have been a great ball player."

Luis tried to laugh, but it got caught in the air. "You got that right."

"I wish it would rain again. All this sun is making me dizzy."

"It'll pass."

Samuel laughed softly.

Luis sat back. He looked tired, Samuel thought, and not from lack of sleep, from something else, tired in a way that softened the usual burning of his eyes, like he was busy chasing too many thoughts. He played with a coaster, flipped it against the table a few times and then smiled up at the bar. He kept smiling even though there was no one up there. A Beach Boys song came on the radio.

"Why the names?" Samuel asked.

"Say what?"

"Why did April have different names? Use different names?"

"The bank told Ross it must have been a clerical error. James and Jones look a little the same, she was pretty enough that someone might not focus on their job."

Luis frowned.

"What do you think?" Samuel asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know, man. I'd guess she was hiding. Don't ask me from what." He frowned. "Maybe from a bad husband? I don't know. It's just some thoughts. She had some broken bones, broken a while ago so it could be from skiing or whatever they do up north, or it could be something else. And there's the

hard part, it could be from anything else and I don't really see how anyone of us down here is ever going to know."

Luis let out a long breath and shook his head. He looked at Samuel to say something but just stood up instead, gave Samuel a punch on the shoulder and left the Palm Court, stopping at the doorway like people did, getting ready for the air.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Samuel found the Nat King Cole Christmas album and listened to Cole's sweet smiling voice tell him about Jack Frost and spying children and he remembered reading that the song was written during a hot summer, written as a way to keep cool and he wondered if it had worked.

When he heard someone walking, in the shadows, out of sight, he thought it was April, coming to ask him where the birds had gone.

Samuel stood, tried to see April, tried to see someone, anyone and he turned off the music and waited. He heard the crickets start up and then came the mosquitoes. When they all hushed again Samuel stepped out onto his porch and stared over at April's cabin. It was still closed. In the vague morning shadows he could still see the yellow police tape.

There was a sudden thud and Samuel's skin tried to run away on him.

He saw Jenny, walking away from the banyan tree. He whistled softly and she looked up, confused, and then started toward him. When she came close he saw she was holding a hoe and a long snake with its crushed head hanging, its mouth open, useless.

"Jesus Christ."

She held up the snake. She looked at ease but Samuel didn't trust it.

"Cottonmouth," she said. "I saw it last night, running into the banyan tree. I was waiting there a while."

"Usually you just throw them across the highway."

"Not a cottonmouth. I can't stand a cottonmouth." She smiled up at him.

"King snakes are good though."

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said. “How big is that thing?”

“Not too big. Maybe three or four feet.”

“Jesus Christ.”

When she smiled at him again, her eyes far away, he thought she had enjoyed it, enjoyed finding it, waiting for it.

She nodded toward April’s cabin. “The police called me the other day. Told me they had wrapped the whole thing up.”

“I heard the same.”

She shrugged. The dead snake swung in her hand, and he thought all that muscle still looked like it was waiting to strike. “I don’t know,” Jenny said. “It’s weird, but I guess I expected more fanfare for a dead person.”

“Fanfare?”

“Something. I don’t know.” She shook her head. “My mother died a few years ago. Cancer. She was seventy-two and pretty sick. People made more of a fuss about that. They were surprised. Like it was a shock they didn’t see coming.”

“Yeah.”

“Shit. It’s getting late. I gotta get rid of this bad boy before anybody wakes up. Don’t want to scare away the money.”

“Aren’t I money?”

“You don’t look like you’d scare, Samuel.”

He liked that thought.

That day there was a steady, warm wind and the sun was very bright. When he drove around Marlin Beach, squinting at the easy glare of the sun off the sea, Samuel

thought about those blistering days up north, at the end of summer, when the world smelled of hot soil, like it had been travelling for days, over the prairie grass, under the sun. And he thought it was a good day for a vodka and lime.

Samuel pulled in at the Palm Court, behind a dark Buick, a Riviera. He looked at it a minute and his thoughts tangled up and he forgot to breathe, forgot for so long that his thoughts thinned out and the air popped and it felt good. It felt like drowning and he wanted to keep going down and he remembered falling asleep in the snow one winter, when he was a boy, and the frozen, lulling numbness that warmed him as it slowly killed him.

He took a breath. Sweat ran down his chest and covered his face. The salt stung his eyes and he thought it was too damn hot to die.

The Buick sat empty. The windows were open and Samuel got out of his car, looked around, at the door to the Palm Court, closed to keep in the air conditioning. Even so he could smell crushed ice and candied cherries and stale cigarettes. The Buick gleamed in the sun, like it had been washed and waxed once a week since coming off the line. The inside was clean, only a folded up road map on the dash.

Samuel waited but nobody came, nobody looked at him leaning against the Buick and after a while he decided the owner must be in the Palm Court but when he went inside there were only five or six men who didn't look like they could afford a car like that.

The bartender nodded at him and then crossed his arms the way he did when some college boy had started too early and needed to be told to get out, quickly and quietly.

When he left the bar the Buick had gone and Samuel thought a minute then kicked his car, hard, felt the shock jump up his leg. He wanted to scream but didn't really know why.

That afternoon there were Buicks everywhere. They choked the roads and they choked Samuel. His eyes burned and his head ached and when he tried to speak, tried to ask a fare where they wanted to go, his mouth was dry and sour and he couldn't get anything out and finally he gave up and drove out to Sandino Beach, waiting for the Buick that never came, that never followed, but even there, at Sandino Beach, with the soft wind and the low lavender sky pulling in the night, his head throbbed, his thoughts ran too quickly for him to follow and he took off his clothes and walked into the water until it was deep enough and cold enough for him to lie on his back and let the sea take him.

Seagulls circled, flew low and easy, took their time in deciding what he was and he closed his eyes. Small waves fell into themselves and over on the beach the water dragged at the land, pulled it back underwater.

When he swam back to shore, he had a long way to go.

After, he drove toward Santa Rosa, toward Willa, but when he saw the headlights of the car behind him turn as he turned, slow as he slowed, the hum came back into his head, and he pulled over on the side of the highway and cut the engine. The car passed. It was an old one, loud and trying hard to get through the night and after it was gone Samuel stayed on the highway, in the dark, and no one else came.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Willa sat next to him. Again. Already. She was smiling, absently, squinting out into the sun. She looked like she wanted to laugh and Samuel wanted her to.

Even Laura had been easy on the phone, laughing at him in that old teasing way she had when he said he wanted to take Willa down south, to a place he had heard about that had Key Lime pie that made the news in Miami.

“It’s a crab shack, just near Tampa.” He had told her.

“A crab shack.”

“Yeah, but it was the pie that made the news.”

And then her laughter came and it still had the same effect on him, still made him want to do something to hear it again and he felt proud and foolish and flustered and she told him, “Sure, Samuel, sure, take her, give her some dinner too but don’t be too late.”

Willa grinned at him. “What are we doing?”

“Getting some pie. After that it’s your call. What do you feel like?”

“I don’t know.” She thought a while. They turned away from the Gulf and the heat swallowed them. Even in the shade, under the heavy oak trees that lined the highway, it felt like the air had been sitting there for a hundred years, stewing. “Not the movies.”

“Don’t you like movies?”

“I love movies. But not right now. Not today.”

“You got it.”

“You cook a lot right?” she asked.

“I cook.”

“You ever make key lime pie yourself?”

“I tried once. With you.”

“I don’t remember.”

“You were young. It was only a year, maybe two, after, after I moved into the Hummingbird.”

“Was it good?”

“No. It tasted like soggy flour.”

She nodded. Outside, the world flew by and the heat cooked the musky smell of the wetlands. Samuel tried to relax, tried to sit back in his seat.

The crab shack, Hurricane Hank’s, was off the highway a ways, beside a flat, stagnant lake and a sign that told them what kind of fishing there was to be had it in and that Hank’s had the best beer, bait and boats for miles around. Rock music came from Hank’s, turned down low. Willa held Samuel’s hand as they walked in. There was a two-lane shooting gallery beside the building with fresh target paper and Samuel stopped a minute to look at it. He expected to smell gunpowder but he could only smell hickory and bacon grease.

They sat down at a table by the window, looking over the lake and the old fly-screen warped the world outside.

“You want lunch first or something?” he asked.

“I’m not too hungry.”

“Just pie?”

“Just pie.”

The girl who brought it to them wasn’t much older than Willa and she had the habit of smiling and blinking, like she had just woken up from a wonderful dream and didn’t see the world yet. And it was so quiet out there they could hear the odd



chopping sounds of the lake, of the swamps, like the trees were popping and he remembered finding his father standing outside the house one winter, late at night, and his father told him he was listening to the trees explode but Samuel was too young and too tired to understand and he thought it was dream talk.

She was a tidy eater. She always had been. Even with ice cream cones, melting in seconds in the Florida heat.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“It made the newspaper?”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t see why,” she said. “I think maybe the Napoleon House is better.”

“Yeah. I think you’re right.”

“But it’s pretty nice out here. With all these trees and that.”

“Did you want to get a boat? Go fishing?”

“I hate fishing.”

“Me too.” Samuel winked at her and she winked back. After they had iced tea and sat quietly and she put her hand on his, absently, like it was always there and she was so quiet for so long he wondered what she was thinking about. “Hey,” he said.

“You ever do any target shooting? Your mom used to love that.”

She shook her head.

“They have air rifles here we can rent. It’s not the Palace Playland, but all the same.”

“What’s an air rifle?”

“A bee bee gun.”

“Like a toy?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.”

When he watched her shoot he thought she looked familiar but he didn’t know why.

The sky darkened, the shadows came and chased away the dancing green light and Willa aimed easily, her face thoughtful and sweet. There were small salted lines down the back of her neck where the sweat had dropped and Samuel could smell rose water on her again. She was a very good shot.

“You said you haven’t done this before.”

She shook her head.

She took another shot and then held up the rifle for him, done with it.

“You’re almost as good as you mother,” he said. “You like it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t see what there is to like.”

He had heard his father say the same thing.

Willa pulled at her shirt. The metal sky was close and heavy. “It needs to rain.”

“Hey, I got something for you. It’s in the car. Let’s go.”

On the highway Samuel gave her the package. She opened it and looked at the cassette tape.

“You have a tape player, right?” he asked.

“Mom and Scott do.”

“Okay. You might like this.”

“It’s not Christmas music,” she said.

“No. They’re called Simon and Garfunkel. A friend of mine listened to them a lot when she was about your age. I guess that was a while ago.”

She put it in the car stereo. When *Mrs. Robinson* came on, she listened carefully.

“Who’s Joe Dimagio?” she asked.

“A ball player. Baseball.”

“Did he die?”

“No. He does coffee commercials now.”

“I think I’ve heard Scott talk about him.”

“Probably.”

“Why does he ask where he is?”

“I don’t know. I think he just means heroes are getting hard to find.”

She nodded. “And this song is from a long time ago?”

“Yeah.”

She looked out the window while the tape finished. When they got back to Marlin Beach there was a rusted sunset out over the water. There were still some stragglers on the beach, children trying to make the day longer, men and women trying to get just a little browner, a little prettier. The smell of fried food and grilled hamburger made Samuel hungry.

“Do you like it?” He asked. “The music I mean.”

“It’s not bad,” she said. “But it’s strange to listen to it with you, in the car and all.”

“Why?”

“It’s not Christmas music. You always relax when you listen to carols.”

“I do?”

She nodded.

“Want me to put one on now?”

She nodded again.

“Here,” he said. He put on Judy Garland and they listened to her sing *Have Yourself a Merry little Christmas*. When she smiled out at the beach Samuel sat back and told her that he thought it was the best song in the whole damn world.

They had hamburgers at the Palm Court, out on the patio, while the sun went down into the sighing golden sea. Gold was different in Florida. Different from the crisp, easy gold of the north, of Samuel’s childhood, the gold that always came at the end of the summer, like it was trying to keep the winter away for a few more days. For a minute Samuel worried that maybe he hadn’t been thinking, that maybe he shouldn’t have taken Willa into a bar for dinner. One of the regulars, a small wind-blown man who always held onto his green fishing cap like it was a security blanket, looked at Willa a while and finally he smiled, winked. She winked back and he started laughing quietly to himself, alone at his table. Behind him, pink neon signs tried to sell rum to a handful of beer drinkers. The pink glow made Willa’s skin look dark, like she had spent an old woman’s lifetime under a desert sun. He wondered what animals she dreamed of. And he wondered if she still remembered the birds, out at the Hummingbird, crying at the night.

“You haven’t been around lately,” she said.

“Huh?”

“At night. In your car. You haven’t been around.” She picked at her food. They had been sitting there a while but she had only eaten a little of the hamburger. He had eaten less.

“I’ve had a lot of night runs this week.”

“Oh.”

He took a sip of tea. Out on the street a woman laughed. He heard high heels on the pavement and the rattle of the air conditioning unit working too hard. There was a bare and brittle knot in Samuel's throat. Willa kept looking away.

"I wasn't sure you knew about that," he said.

"Okay."

When he tried to breathe there was nothing there. The knot grew, tied him up inside and he pushed away his food.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Luis was outside, smoking a cigarette, making Jenny laugh. Someone had come and spent two days turning over April's cabin, making it new again, and the door stood open for the air but the air wasn't moving. It hung, static, like it was hiding from the sun. Samuel had slept for three sweating hours and when the horses came to his dreams and ran over him, he didn't wake, not until they were gone and the land was empty. He got a glass of water from the kitchen and listened to the Hummingbird. Jenny laughed again. Luis lit a fresh cigarette. Further away, inside one of the cabins, someone had the news on. Samuel wanted to hear the horses again.

Luis was walking back to his cabin, alone, the sun burning bright overhead, that deadly Florida yellow, but Luis didn't look hot. He was like that sometimes. Samuel could sit with him in the humid summer heat for an hour and Luis would be dry, his shirt still perfectly pressed, like he lived in an icebox.

Two men sat at the table by the swimming pool, playing cards, one mean eye on Luis. They both had those ageless faces of men who had repeated their last year of high school too many times, whose body had aged faster than the rest of him and when Luis disappeared into his cabin they both stood up, and one of them nodded to Luis' police cruiser. Samuel thought they would check out soon.

Later, when Samuel went outside to start the grill, the men were still by the pool, still playing cards. They looked so sour that he didn't know what would be worse, winning or losing to them. He cleaned the old ash out of the grill and set new charcoal bricks inside, threw on a handful of seasoned woodchips he bought sometimes at a fishing store. After he lit the grill he went back inside while it warmed

up and he made an iced tea and tried to read the newspaper but his mind wouldn't sit still long enough.

Before dark he wrapped a chicken breast and lime in bacon and when he went out, he saw the card players leaving Jenny's office. They had military style bags but Samuel thought there wasn't anything military about them and he nodded as they walked out to their car. Soon they were gone, spooked away by the sight of a police cruiser and Samuel wondered what they were running from, what they were hiding from.

And he wondered why April hadn't been spooked away if she was hiding too.

After dinner Samuel drove out to Cinnamon Key and lingered a while in front of the bars, but it was too hot, even so late. Some of the bars stayed open all night on Fridays but even so no one was out, not even on La Huerta Boulevard and down at Marlin Beach he saw a young man all in white, walking up and down the strip, his face pinched against the bright colours of all the daiquiri bars and cheap beer taverns and restaurants, and Samuel got the feeling the man was looking for something that was very far away, like he thought he was still in California, listening to the Pacific, but the streets had changed on him. Sometimes, when she was too tired to care, April had that same look.

The man in white stopped in front of the Palm Court. Samuel pulled up at the curb, outside the Palm Court, and tried to remember when he had last seen it so quiet. Even late, just before dawn when most everything was closed, there was always that subtle hum of life, some silent pulse. But not tonight. Even the Gulf had given up and Samuel looked over at the darkness and thought maybe it had been so hot that all the water had just dried up. The man in white turned to Samuel and blinked at him a few times.

“I don’t have any money,” the man said.

The man held up his hands, turned them over like a blackjack dealer showing his hands before leaving the table.

“No one pays for magic anymore,” he said. “Not out here.”

Up ahead a streetlight turned red but there was nobody there to stop.

“Okay.”

The man’s face brightened, “Okay?”

Samuel nodded and got out of the car. “Yeah. Come on.”

The man followed him into the bar and looked around, “There’s a place called the Palm Court in New Orleans,” he said. “It looks different though.”

“How so?”

“Well, they keep the lights on.”

“There’s lights in here.”

“Those little pink and blue things are signs, not lights.”

“They do the trick.”

They sat down at the bar. The man waited for Samuel to decide between Budweiser and vodka and lime. When Samuel asked the bartender for vodka the man held up two long fingers. They drank quietly. A small warble of conversation came from down the end of the bar, from two older men and the bartender as they commented on a fight on the television. One of them was the regular who had winked at Willa and he was squeezing his fishing hat. He noticed Samuel and the man in white and he nodded to them then went back to the fight, but Samuel got the feeling the old man was seeing something else in his mind’s eye.



The drink was good. It was cold and sharp and he closed his eyes a minute. He wondered if Willa's cheek hurt the same as his did when it brushed against his father's stubble.

When Samuel opened his eyes the man in white was gone and a new vodka sat in front of him. The ice had already melted and down at the end of the bar the small group had broken up. The fight was over and a wired anchor was interviewing one of the fighters.

The old regular was still there, nursing his drink and after a minute he looked up at Samuel, let out a silent sigh and raised his glass to Samuel. They both drank. Out on the patio the bartender was sweeping away the sand. Soon another fight started on the television and the old man watched a while and then looked over at Samuel.

"Where do they find so many people who want to fight all the time?" he asked.

Samuel shook his head to say *I don't know*. The old man nodded. His white hair was short but even so it looked combed and Samuel wondered if the man ever wore the hat, or if he just always kept it with him, just in case.

The bartender back came in and poured more bourbon into the old man's glass and looked at Samuel. He shook his head and the bartender took his cigarettes from the register and went back outside.

"You fell asleep for a little there," the old man said.

"First time for everything."

"You mean falling asleep in a bar, or falling asleep at all?"

"Take your pick."

The man gave a soft laugh. "Try bourbon."

"Next time."

“Do you smell roses?” the man asked.

“Roses? No. Not right now.”

“I do. I swear I smell roses.” He took a long swallow of his bourbon and then rattled it to move the bourbon over the ice. “Okay, it’s my bed time.”

“So the bourbon really works?” Samuel asked.

“It works.” The man got off his stool. He was taller than he had looked and Samuel thought he must spend a lot of his time out on the water, in the sun, squinting at the glare. He picked up his glass and held it up to Samuel. “Coo coo ca choo.” He finished his drink and put it down on the bar, hard.

Samuel put his vodka down quickly and looked at the man. “Say that again?” Samuel asked. The old man was walking out the door already, holding his hat.

The door swung shut quietly and Samuel blinked a few times.

“Jesus Christ.” He got up and ran outside but the streets were empty. The bartender was sitting on the curb in front of Samuel’s car, smoking a cigarette, waiting for daybreak.

Samuel looked at the streetlight. It was still red and he wondered if it had been red all night. It was quiet enough that Samuel was sure the bartender could hear the running beat of his heart and Samuel waited, listened hard, but he only heard the soft crackle of the burning cigarette.

“The man who just left, that tall guy with white hair who was watching the fight with you in the bar, you see where he went?”

“Who, Rod?” the bartender asked. He stood up and rubbed his face. “He left?”

“Yeah, just now.”

“Okay.”

“You know him?” Samuel asked.

The bartender frowned. "I know his name is Rod and he drinks bourbon," he said. "But that's about it. Why?"

Samuel thought about it. He wondered if his dreams were following him out of his sleep, making him hear things that were never there. "Hell. Never mind. I need some sleep."

"And I need to close up for a few hours. Is there anyone else still in there?"

"I can't remember."

"Yeah, I hear that a lot." He laughed to himself and stepped out his cigarette and walked back into the bar, leaving Samuel alone on the street. The traffic light turned green and Samuel got in his car and drove around the beach, looking for something, looking for anything, and just before daybreak he gave up and went back to the Hummingbird.

He washed his face with ice-cold water, but he kept hearing April laugh.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sunday morning, early, Samuel called Willa from a phone booth on La Huerta. The tide was out and a raw, untouched, smell came from the sea. There was a man, thin and dark and aged by the sun, sitting alone on a bench, drinking a bottle of beer, looking at the sky, still dreaming. The slow way he drank the beer made Samuel think it must taste better than good. The phone rang and Samuel waited. He half expected Willa to answer.

Scott picked up, said *hello* like he had been waiting for the call.

“Scott. It’s Samuel.”

“Hey Samuel.”

“Am I calling too early?”

“No. I’m up.”

Samuel thought he sounded like he had been up a while, maybe all night.

“Well, I was hoping to talk with Willa.”

“She went to Fort Lauderdale for a few days. Laura and her.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t think she really wanted to go, but it’s hard to say no to a mother, I suppose.”

“I suppose.”

“I never had to deal with that. Makes me lucky I suppose.” Scott was quiet a while but Samuel didn’t say goodbye, didn’t say anything. He heard Scott take a drink of something. “Will’s been pretty happy these days. Well, as much as a girl like her shows these things. You know what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“Keep up the good work Samuel.” He laughed quietly and Samuel heard him drink again and suck in air at the end of a sip, the way ones does with a good cocktail.

“Hey Scott, you doing okay?” Samuel asked. It made him smile.

Scott laughed again, hard this time. “Call back tonight Samuel. They’re due back before six, so call after that. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He hung up.

Over on the pier the thin man was still sipping at his beer every now and then. He gave Samuel a wide smile and nodded. Seagulls sat on the railing, quietly, and it was early enough that there was still pink in the sky, slowly burning away. Samuel thought about Scott, thought about the odd laughter in his voice and those drinks he was sipping.

The man looked at his beer a while before taking another drink. Samuel remembered his father doing the same thing, with his scotch, in the living room at night. He took forever to get through a single drink, looking at the glass between swallows, the window beside him open a few inches so he could hear the horse outside nicker at the darkness. When the horse got too quiet for too long his father would worry, his drinking would slow, and he would stare at the scotch, waiting, thinking, something inside of him tied up tight until they could hear the horse again. April had done that, he thought. On quiet nights, her drinking was slow, easy, like she was having a good time and didn’t really need it but when she heard them calling out from the dark, heard those wide, worried cries, she drank like she needed it, like it would make them all go away. He didn’t understand that. Who would want them to go away?

The thin man finished his beer and walked away. The seagulls seemed to follow him and Samuel heard horses running through his head. They stayed there all day, running fast while he worked, while he drove too many sun burnt tourists from beach to beach, from bar to bar, pounding the land, and finally he switched on his off-duty sign and drove out to Century and parked beside the grandstand. The track was empty, and he walked around to the backstretch, walked through the shed rows. The low, dusty buildings were quiet, like the world had finally given up and gone away and there was something clean about it all that he hadn't seen before. He walked all the way back toward the dorms and then over toward the track.

There was a quarter horse tied up in one of the pens. Tied up twice to keep her down. Her brown hide still shone with sweat, like wet wounds across her back, open wide, and she tried to move, first left, then backward but the two ropes held her. She let out a low noise he hadn't ever heard from a horse before and Samuel left quickly, got back into his car and drove all the way out to Cinnamon Key and it was after nine o'clock when he finally called Willa from a phone booth and Laura told him he could see her Thursday morning.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Headlights swung across the Hummingbird and Samuel stood up, scared. The car rolled in from the highway, a long low sedan, and stopped. After a minute the engine switched off. The moon glinted off the windscreen and Samuel tried to make out the model of the car. It wasn't a Buick.

Somebody moaned gently.

Detective Ross got out of the car and looked around and then walked around to the passenger door. The moans slipped into a quiet song and Ross reached inside and helped Luis out of the car, helped him walk across the path to his cabin. Luis sang some sweet Cuban song Samuel had never heard before, walking like his feet wanted to slid him the other way, slip off back down the empty highway toward town before anybody saw him. He held onto Ross, tightly, the way a drunk does when they don't like being drunk. They went inside and Samuel was alone again, listening to the night.

Weak laughter came from the dark. A wayward laugh that rolled away from Luis' cabin and Samuel realized that in all the year he had never seen Luis drunk before, not really, not on drink, and he thought something about it seemed off.

Soon Ross came out. He was so quiet Samuel didn't notice him until Ross walked by the swimming pool. He looked like a lost ghost, floating through the Hummingbird. He stood in front of April's cabin a minute, then lit a cigarette and sat down in the wicker chair by the front door and finished smoking. When he was done he put the cigarette into the ashtray, stood up, waved at Samuel and got in his car and left.

Samuel went to bed but he didn't sleep until morning, and even then he didn't sleep long before he woke up, screaming, shouting something he didn't understand.

He went to town early and took a fare all the way down to Tampa, but came back up alone. It was one of those days that was so hot and so still he thought his skin might run away on him and find an icy vodka and lime to sit it, and later, when he drove by the Palm Court, the crisp taste of vodka already on his tongue, he saw a Buick Riviera pulling away from the curb, going the opposite direction. When it was gone, he pulled over and went inside the Palm Court, the air conditioning hitting him hard. The bar was almost empty. Two women sat in a booth, drinking daiquiris, fanning themselves even inside, carefully not looking at the rest of the room. Samuel sat up at the bar next to the bottles of Mexican beer sitting in a bucket of crushed ice. When the bartender came over, he ordered a lemonade.

"Lemonade?"

"Yeah."

The bartender nodded.

"Hey, that guy from the other night, you said his name was Rod, has he been in lately?" Samuel asked.

"Probably."

"Does he come by here a lot?"

"I don't know. I don't keep track."

"Okay."

"He owe you money?"

"Money?" Samuel shook his head. "No. Why?"

"He seems to always be owing somebody money. Not too much or anything, but all the same. Just one of those guys who is always a step behind." He nodded at



Samuel, thinking something faraway, and the women waved at him and held up their empty glasses. Samuel thought they were in a rush to get drunk, to chase away their busy, pale, northern thoughts with ice and coconuts and alcohol.

On Lincoln he got flagged down by a college boy who wanted somewhere to drink, somewhere they wouldn't send him away and Samuel took him out to Cinnamon Key. At the Parrot the boy stayed in the car a minute, thinking. Sweat darkened the chest of his blue shirt and Samuel thought the boy would be sweating even if it were snowing. He paid Samuel and tipped him well and when Samuel turned around in the street a black shadow dashed across the road and he remembered when his father had taken him to Wyoming and they drove most of the night and when they crossed the state line the road seemed to be full of running shadows, of animals out for the night, and his father told him they were like anyone else, looking for a good time and he had pulled the car over and switched it off and they sat a while, their breath catching the cold air, circling in a pale mist, and when Samuel's eyes got used to the dark there was a coyote standing in front of the car. He hadn't known they were so small. Finally, when it let out a small yip, his father laughed and they drove on quietly.

He saw Claude, walking across the causeway, walking toward Cinnamon Key, smiling to himself like he was in the middle of a good dream and Samuel didn't want to stop, didn't want to wake him, and he kept going. In his mirror he saw Claude stop and check out the sky and then light a cigarette, like it might stop the night from stealing him.

On the way back to the Hummingbird the highway was almost empty. A few scattered headlights moved through the dark, gliding in that never ending way that made Samuel want to go, drive north on empty nighttime highways and never stop,

not once. The heat of the night fell on him, tried to tie him up and when he remembered that in the morning he would see Willa he smiled and drove faster.

The blue light of the Hummingbird's sign hit the highway in a quiet, happy way and Samuel pulled in and sat in his car. Crickets called out. It was quiet. Even the crickets sounded wary, and over at April's, the do not disturb sign hung from the knob and he wondered where the hell all the birds had gone. Finally, he got out of the car, rubbed his face, and when he was halfway to his door he heard footsteps, fast ones, and he blinked out at the night, at the Hummingbird and saw someone walking away from April's. Samuel frowned. A car door closed and the motor started up, and he saw the Buick, over near the front office, backing out quickly.

Samuel called out and raised his arms and the Buick turned away at the Hummingbird's sign and slipped onto the road, and he ran for his car.

The highway was empty.

Samuel pressed the gas, got up to eighty, ninety, and then he was over a hundred, but the Buick was gone and he was chasing his own light. The palm trees, beaten down from all the hot days, flashed by in a haunted blur and Samuel couldn't breathe and he didn't care. The road seemed to shrink into itself and his chest began to burn. Somewhere the sky began to bleed and Samuel knew he was getting close and then he saw the dim, hazy red lines of the Buick's taillights.

And the red lights began to float, slowly crossing his vision. He blinked sweat away from his eyes but it kept coming and the air around him thinned out until it was all gone.

Outside, the trees came and went. Suddenly the Gulf took over. He wanted to drive straight into the water. His heart hit him, deep inside, hard.

He kept going.

And then the world was gone.

**AUGUST**

## CHAPTER ONE

Often, when he slept long enough, deep enough, he dreamed of Willa. She was younger and, sometimes, the dream was half memory, so that when she looked at him, her face thoughtful and almost frozen, something running fast deep inside of her, the knots tightened across Samuel's chest.

Even when she smiled Samuel got the feeling he was falling, always waiting to land.

They had gone to Sandino beach, long ago, when she was five, almost six, and she couldn't stay out of the water. She had learned to float on her back, her eyes closed, something of a smile on her face as she moved with the small swell of the sea. He felt the sunburn on his shoulders. Willa's hand was out and he let her find his finger. She grabbed it. Her eyes were shut tight.

They went back in to the beach and he made a sunshade out of the towel. A thin man with sunburned skin, threw a net out into the water. He grunted when he cast it out and the net landed gently. The old man lit a cigarette and looked over at Samuel and Willa and nodded at them, gave them a smile, and started pulling in the net.

"Did he catch anything?" she asked.

"Ask him."

She shook her head.

When he dragged the net in he pulled it right to him and held it up for Willa to see. Something flashed in the net. He walked over to a white bucket set in the sand and worked the fish out of the net, into the bucket.

After he had done it two or three times more, always coming up empty, he turned to them.

“You seen how I did it?” he asked Willa.

She nodded.

“Maybe you’ll have better luck.” He held out the net.

She took the net and walked out into the shallows. The net was too big for her but the old man stayed on the beach and let her handle it alone and Samuel stood up, came closer.

She struggled with the net. The sea ran on forever in front of her. After a while she stopped and gave the net back and the man told her he guessed he had already chased everybody away.

Willa nodded and walked down the beach.

The man looked at Samuel. White stubble broke through his skin and his eyes were watery. And he looked worried.

“I’ve seen you two before. Here on Sandino.”

“We come when we can.”

Willa went back into the water and started floating on her back again, her arms and legs out. Slowly, the water drifted away and took her along, out toward the empty silver sea.

And sometimes, in his dreams, she kept on going.

## CHAPTER TWO

When Samuel woke up, Scott was sitting across from him, looking out the window. The red haze of the evening made the hospital room welcoming. There were birds out there. Seagulls.

His chest hurt. And his teeth. His head was so clear he knew he was on something wonderful and he found he was smiling though he didn't want to, not now, not with Scott. The room smelled of popcorn and scrubbed, sterile metal. Someone was asleep in a bed beside him, breathing in that heavy way, like something inside was trying to get out, and get-well balloons pulled lazily at their ties.

"Have I been sleeping long?" Samuel asked.

Scott took a minute to answer. "I don't know."

"How long have you been sitting there?"

"Since about one in the afternoon."

"You aren't the face I would have thought I'd wake up to."

"Who were you hoping for?"

"Well, I guess either Jane Fonda or my daughter."

"I love Jane Fonda."

"Me too."

"Did Laura ever look like her? When she was young?" Scott asked.

"No. Not really."

"Sometimes they have the same laugh. The way it's sort of too heavy for such a small person. It's the laugh of a Texan truck driver."

"Laura laughs?"

"When I try hard enough."

“Yeah. I guess I never really did that. Not about very much.”

Scott nodded. He stood up and came beside Samuel. He was tall, Samuel thought, almost as tall as Samuel was, but there was something thin and hard about him, like his muscles were always burning. Scott bent over and picked up an orange juice cup and peeled back the tin foil lid. He thought a minute then put a straw in the juice cup and held it out for Samuel.

When Samuel moved he was surprised at the pain.

He took a sip of the juice. He hadn't realized how thirsty he was.

“The doctors thought you must have been drunk,” Scott said. “I don't think they believed me when I told them you don't drink. I don't know if it's the way you always look lost or the way you drove your car into a sandbank.”

“I don't remember a sandbank.”

“What do you remember?”

“Water. The Gulf.” And the Buick.

“You tried to drive into the water?”

“No. I passed out.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. The heat, maybe. It had been a while since I had any food, too.”

Scott shook his head, “Bullshit, Samuel. That's not why.”

“I don't know why.”

Scott nodded.

“How's Willa?” Samuel asked.

“She's okay.”

“What day is it?”



“Thursday.”

“I was meant to see her today.”

“I know.” Scott sat back down. He frowned. “I got the call this morning. From the hospital. Our number is still on file with this place as your home number and Laura is still listed as your next of kin. She’d love to know that. I didn’t tell her yet. Not yet. I don’t know what to do, Samuel.”

“You can tell her.”

“What about Willa? This might push Laura over the edge. Again. She has a hard time with you, Samuel. You know that. A good part of her is desperate to get Willa away from you. For more than just a few months. And it’s not just her being mean or nasty or controlling, Samuel. She’s terrified. All the time. She lives with it. Every time she looks at Willa she’s worried.”

“About what?”

“Don’t be an idiot, Samuel. She’s worried that Willa is going to turn out something like you.”

“Well, I turned out pretty good.”

Scott shook his head, happy.

The man in the next bed mumbled and moved and Scott put his finger to his lips.

“So what did you tell Laura?” Samuel asked.

“No one was home. I didn’t say anything to any one, not yet. I left a note, said I’d call her later. I also said that you had to reschedule with Willa.”

“Thanks for that.”

“You know she’ll be worried.”

“Willa?”

“Yes, Willa. Even moving back your day together by a single day and she’ll worry.” Scott looked at the get-well balloon on the bedside table, thinking. “She’s always sure that one day you are just going to be gone, that she isn’t going to see you again, or that you’ll do something stupid and she won’t be allowed to see you again. But really that amounts to the same thing, doesn’t it?” He sat back and sighed. “It’s some house hold you left me to look after, Samuel.”

It was full dark now. Outside the birds had gone quiet but Samuel could hear the world going by, hear the traffic, a man laughing down on the street, in front of the hospital, and, far away, the wind coming in from the sea. He wondered why the room smelled like popcorn. Scott pushed his hair out of his eyes and stood up, went to the window. Red light from a silent siren fell over his face. He shook his head, chasing thoughts.

Samuel tried to sit up. The pain stopped him.

“Don’t sit up, Samuel. Just stay down for a while. You broke a few ribs. It’ll hurt like hell but get better pretty quickly.”

“You’ve broken your ribs before?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“My father hit me.”

“I didn’t know.”

“There’s nothing to know. I was fourteen. I ran away the next week and so did he. That’s about the only thing we had in common. That and tennis. We both had a killer backhand. But I was my mother’s son. Always.” He looked over at Samuel. “You don’t get to do that, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Run away.”

“I have no plans to run away.”

“There’s more than one way to do it. You know that.”

“Maybe you got me wrong, Scott.”

“Maybe I do.” He shrugged. “But all the same.”

Samuel’s teeth kept aching and his jaw was sore and tired, like he had been grinding his teeth down for years. He touched his mouth and it stung.

“Your face got knocked up too,” Scott said. “Not too bad though. You look like someone hit you right here.” He touched his upper lip.

Samuel remembered the wind, remembered the bouncing red lights of the Buick doing a hundred and fifty on the empty highway. And he remembered the sea, he always remembered the sea, but he didn’t remember anything else.

“Maybe you need to cut loose,” Scott said. “Go on a bender or something. Do something to break this tension that you take such good care of.”

Samuel thought it sounded like something his mother would have said. He had tried it once, about a year ago, after watching Willa walk out of school while he hid down the block, in his car. There was something too familiar about her, about the way she walked through the crowd like she didn’t know anyone was there, and Samuel had pulled out and driven all the way over to Port Royal, where he didn’t know anyone and he found a bar called the Dunes that offered permanent darkness and tequila screwdrivers for a dollar but he didn’t have a bender in him.

Scott grunted, “Christ Samuel, why do you always look like you just found your father again?” After a minute he shook his head. “I’m out of line.”

“Laura told you?” Samuel said.

He nodded. “We’ve been married a long time,” Scott said. “Look, I should go. I’ll tell the girls you were in a small accident but that you’re fine. And I’ll tell Willa that you’ll call her tomorrow to set up a new outing.”

“Thanks Scott.”

“That means call her tomorrow.”

“I know.”

When Scott left Samuel listened to the man next to him sleep. He sounded like he was good at it, Samuel thought, like he got a lot of practice in. Every so often the room would quietly flood with the smooth red blush of evening and there was something easy and hypnotic to it, like it was pulling him down to sleep, down deep into a heavy underwater darkness where the only thing to do was sleep and Samuel thought about Willa.

### CHAPTER THREE

Luis drove him home in the squad car. There were empty wine boxes in the back seat, stacked neatly, and a small smell of old wine still lingered. The windows were closed and the air conditioning hummed away against the bright, burning day and every time Samuel caught the eye of someone in another car as they passed, they gave him a stoic glare, like they were trying to out-cop a cop with an unreadable face, but it didn't work.

"People really don't like police very much, do they?" Samuel said.

"No." Luis opened his window and put a cigarette in his mouth. "Actually kids do. Some kids. Depending on the neighborhood." He lit his cigarette. Samuel thought the smell was too hot for all the sun outside. Luis laughed softly. "On my way to pick you up, I was behind a car with two boys in the back. They watched me a while, giggling and that, and I knew what was coming, and just before they turned off, they give me the finger. I gave it back to them and suddenly they're outraged. I guess they'll find it funny later."

"You should have been a fireman."

"My mother always says that." He pointed with his thumb to the boxes in the backseat. "Speaking of my mother. I'm moving. I'm going to stay with her for a while."

"Really?"

"I can't take the Hummingbird. Not anymore. After my wife and I split, I guess I needed all that quiet or something. I needed knowing no one was going to be around long enough to get to know me."

"And now."

“And now, well, I just can’t take seeing your dopey face all the time.” He tried to laugh but only bitter air came out. “No. You know what I mean.” He put out his cigarette and started another one right away. “Tell you what, this straight life sucks.” He held up his cigarette. “Been a month now, smoking nothing but Camels. What the hell? I don’t know how you do it, man. Not even a damn six pack to wash you off at the end of a day. A man needs some alcohol to stay happy.”

“Doctor says it’s a depressant.”

“You need a new doctor.”

“The one this morning thought I was driving drunk. Told me all about how many people drunk drivers kill each year, but half the time the drunk walks away fine.”

“The hospital would have checked your blood for alcohol levels. He just had a bone to pick.” Luis looked over at him. “You want to talk about it.”

Samuel shook his head. “The Buick was back. I think the driver was looking in April’s window.”

“So how’d you end up in the hospital?”

“I followed him. I just passed out on the highway. I don’t know why.”

“I mentioned it to Ross,” Luis said. “The Buick I mean. Phone call too. Told him about what you said.”

“What did he say?”

“He just snorted at me like I’m some pain in the ass child running loose in the station. But he’ll follow up.”

Samuel nodded. He thought about the old man at the Palm Court, holding his green fishing cap, smiling while he toasted Samuel with April’s words, smiling like he had gotten used to how funny he found himself.

“How much longer you got at the Hummingbird?” Samuel asked.

“I’ll be in and out until the end of the month,” Luis said. “You should come.”

“What? To live at your mother’s?”

“She’s got room. She loves you, man, you know that. She calls you her little Viking.”

“Little Viking?”

“Don’t ask me why. I think for her the world is made up of Cubans and Vikings. Either way, consider the offer. We’d eat like kings. She does nothing but cook, all the time. And she’s got those cable sports channels so you can get baseball all year round.” Luis grinned at him.

“Christ.”

“Plus, you need to get away from the Hummingbird. Seriously man, you need something to change. You know it, too.”

“I’m not going to live with you and your mother.”

Luis nodded and grew serious. “I know. But think about going somewhere. Okay?”

Samuel nodded. His chest still hurt. The painkillers had worn off during the night and they hadn’t given him more and when Luis took a turn too sharp the swaying of Samuel’s body burned inside of him. Sweat ran down his back, clung to his shirt and he could still taste blood in his mouth. He thought about the red break lights of the Buick, slipping away.

When they pulled into the Hummingbird, Samuel’s car was parked in the shade.

“You owe me for the tow truck,” Luis said.

“Nothing happened to the car?” Samuel was surprised.

“There’s a big dent on your fender. But nothing else that I could see.” Luis nodded toward April’s cabin. A man was sitting in the chair outside, smoking a cigarette, talking to Jenny as Luis rolled down the driveway. He smiled, nodding, while Jenny spoke, trying to keep her around, trying to keep her talking with him. The humidity draped over the Hummingbird and when Samuel got out of the car he felt like he was walking in warm whiskey. The air was too quiet, even with the muffled sounds of Jenny’s voice.

Luis stood next to him a minute. He nodded toward the man. “You think he feels it?”

Samuel thought about that. He saw the hallow darkness under the man’s eyes and nodded.

He looked around for a Buick.

That night Samuel sat outside, alone, drinking ice water, wondering where the world went.

His telephone rang and he got up, went into his cabin. The movement hurt.

He sat down, in the dark, and picked up the telephone.

“Hello?”

“Dad.”

“Willa?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I guess no one else is going to call me dad.”

“No.”

“I was going to call you,” he said.

“Okay.”

“What time is it?” he asked.



“Midnight.”

“What are you doing awake?”

“I couldn’t sleep. I thought your car was outside but it’s not.”

“No. I can’t drive.”

“Was the accident bad?”

“No. Not bad.”

“But you can’t drive.”

“In a day or two,” he said. “I’ll be able to drive in a day or two. Does your mother know you’re awake?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

He heard a car outside, driving slowly on the gravel. Headlights lunged across his kitchen and then disappeared again and he stood up. His head started to throb and sweat fell from his hairline.

“Hey, buddy. I’m going to have to call you back.”

“But it’s after midnight.”

“I’ll call you in the morning.”

He hung up and went outside. A car was parked in front his cabin and Samuel’s eyes burned so all he could see was a gleaming, sweating blur, and he felt like someone had dried out his throat with sandpaper. Silence rang in his ears.

Detective Ross got out of the car and started up the steps. “Holiday.”

“Christ.”

“What?”

“You scared the hell out of me. It’s after midnight.”

“You don’t sleep.” He said it with a familiar laugh, like it was an old joke between the two of them, and sat down on the steps, waiting for Samuel to sit next to him, like April had. “I hear you found me my stressor.”

“I don’t know.” Samuel sat down. “Luis told me about the broken bones, about the different names.”

“And now you think someone was following her?”

“I think they still are.”

“Even though she’s gone.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Maybe there are just too many Buick’s in the world.”

“They make good cars.”

“Yeah,” Samuel said. “Someone was looking into her windows the other night. I don’t know why. Drove off in that same damn Buick.”

“And what’s this about a telephone call?”

“Just that. It was only a call, but she was telling someone to get out of her life.”

“Do you think she was murdered?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. No. I don’t think so, but I think she was being followed, I think she was running from something.”

“In this place, I bet that’s common.” Ross started to crack his knuckles, rubbing both his hands into each other. “Look, maybe she was being followed. It wouldn’t surprise me. A girl like that, pretty, young, maybe she married bad and then went running, maybe she thought this was the only way out, maybe something set her off or pushed her over the edge, but any way you look at it, it doesn’t matter. There’s nothing to do about it now. You know that, right Holiday.”

“And if it was murder?”

Ross turned to him, his eyes dark and gleaming in the night. “If it was murder, I’d be looking at you. Nine times in ten, the last known person to see a victim is our man. Boyfriends too. Were you her boyfriend, Holiday?”

“I was with my daughter.”

“I know,” Ross said. “That’s the first thing I checked.” He laughed quietly.

“There’s a man who goes to the Palm Court, down on Marlin Beach. I think the Buick is his and I think he knows April.”

“How do you get that?”

Samuel told Ross about the old man raising his glass, saying coo coo ca choo like April did.

Ross frowned at him. “That’s pretty weak. From an evidentiary perspective, that’s pretty weak.”

“I guess.”

“Stop thinking about it, Holiday. Stop thinking about her. Nothing can come of it anymore. Nothing at all.”

After Ross left Samuel sat inside, on the couch, the pedestal fan running at a high wobble two feet away from him but he was still sweating. Exhaustion burned at his eyes. Every so often he looked out the open door, looked at April’s cabin, waiting to see someone standing in the dark.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Her cabin was empty. Again. He had been awake when the man checked out of April's cabin. It was early, so early that the man just left the key in the door handle, looked around like he expected to see ghosts walking across the Hummingbird lawn, picked up his suitcase and got into an old pick-up truck with Nevada plates and let it run a while before driving away. An hour later Jenny came out of her office and opened the door and pocketed the key but she didn't go in. She looked like she had been awake all night, waiting for gunshots.

Samuel had been up all night too, waiting, but the Buick never came. His chest still pinched roughly with his breath. He remembered the way his father talked about the air in Florida, the way he talked about the wind that came in off the Gulf so that sometimes, when the wind was right, it felt like you were sleeping out on the water, a thousand miles away from the world, like some kind of freedom had finally found you. Mostly, he remembered the easy, faraway look his father had when he talked about a place Samuel had still never seen. Dust kept falling, silence kept swallowing.

Luis laughed, outside, over on his porch, and started speaking Spanish. Soft voices answered back. The children had wired, bumbling walks, and one of them, the girl, felt Samuel's eyes on them and turned and smiled at him. She laughed at something one of the boys said. Luis smacked him carelessly on the back of the head and mashed his cigarette out.

Samuel leaned against his front door. Soon Luis' younger sister came out of their cabin, wearing a white one piece, and walked over to the pool in that absently self-conscious way of a woman in a bathing suit. She was too young to have three children, Samuel thought. When he had first met her, over two years ago when he

drove Luis into town, to blue lit bar and grill near Marlin Beach and Luis told him to come in, to meet his family, she had smiled while she shook his hand, read him quickly and then drifted away from him like she already knew him. She wanted to keep smiling. He had left quickly. On his way out of the bar he passed the dance floor. She was out there, with her daughter, sweating already.

Luis tipped one of the boys into the swimming pool and turned to see Samuel. He had a green bottle of beer in his hand and he held it up to Samuel and waved him over. The water erupted behind him as the other children jumped in, shouting. Samuel gave Luis a thumbs up and went back inside. He sat down on the sofa and listened to them a minute and then lay down in the darkness.

When he woke a chalky red dusk lit the windows. The voices were gone but the pounding was still there, in his head. He didn't know if it was pain or horses.

He went to the kitchen, his throat sore, like he had been drinking sand, and fixed a glass of ice water. He heard the car on the gravel.

He drank the water and shook his head and the car came to a stop. After a minute the door closed and he heard small steps.

He went outside and saw Willa, standing in the middle of the grounds, looking around at the Hummingbird, her face thoughtful, sizing things up. She hadn't been to the Hummingbird in a long time. A taxi lingered behind her and after a minute it rolled away. Willa saw him and nodded, then kept looking over the Hummingbird. She looked like she was buying ranchland.

“Willa?”

“Hi.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you. You didn’t call this morning, so I came to see you instead.” She walked over to his cabin. She was small enough to scare him.

“You take a taxi out here?”

“Yes.”

“All the way from your house?”

“Well, I walked over to Jefferson. I got one there.”

“Christ.”

“I’m not six anymore.”

“You’re still too young to be doing that.”

She stood close to him. She nodded when she saw his face, his busted lip and then looked at him like she was trying to see his broken ribs.

“You should have called.”

“I did.”

“I must have been asleep.” He felt like he was helping a runaway escape.

“Come inside.”

“This place looks different. The Hummingbird, I mean. But I don’t know why.”

“I guess your mother doesn’t know you’re here, does she?”

“No.”

“I have to call her.”

“Don’t. Not yet.”

He looked at her. She didn’t meet his eyes. She almost never did. Not anymore. “How long have you been gone?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you do anything else before coming here?”

“No. I came straight here.”

“Sit down. Are you thirsty?”

“I guess.”

“I have water. That’s about it.”

“Okay.” She sat down at the kitchen table. It made him nervous. “Let’s wait five minutes, okay?” she said. “Just five minutes before you call mom.”

“I can’t. Five minutes is a lifetime, buddy.”

She nodded and Samuel picked up the phone and dialed her number. Laura answered right away.

“She’s over here,” he said.

“Samuel?”

“Yeah. It’s me. She just showed up now.”

“What?” There was something awful in her voice. Something sharp and he worried it would twist, pulled back to strike, and when he looked up Willa was watching him. “Wait,” Laura said. “Wait. Say that again. Willa is over there? At your place?”

“That’s right. She caught a taxi on Jefferson. Came right here.”

“What the hell, Samuel?”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“She can *not* do that Samuel. She is nine years old. She cannot just go off without telling anyone.”

“I know. I can try to say something.” Willa stood up and went over to his records. She started to look through them. She started to set a few to the side. “She ever do anything like this before?”

“No.” Laura let go a little, uncoiled. He heard a wine bottle open on the other end of the line. “No. Nothing at all. I think she was worried about you. She wanted to go to the hospital when Scott told us what happened. I don’t think she slept at all last night. I kept hearing her walking around the house. It reminded me of having you here. Oh, god, sorry I forgot to ask about your accident. How are you hanging in anyway?”

“It was nothing to worry about.”

“Good.”

“Look, she’s here now, why don’t I take her to eat dinner or something before I bring her back.”

“Are you okay to drive?”

“Sure. Like I said, it was nothing to worry about.”

“Can you have her home by nine?”

He looked at the clock. It was almost eight. He listened to Laura drink her wine, listened to her breathe. It was slow now. A good time to double down, he thought. “That doesn’t give us much time to eat. How about ten? There’s no school to worry about.”

“Okay. Ten o’clock. And Samuel, make sure you let her know that you are not okay with this behavior.” She laughed. “Even if that is not strictly true.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Hey Samuel,” she stopped herself. He could hear her fingernail tapping her wine glass and he worried she was building up to something again.

He waited.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Samuel.” She said it like she didn’t want to say it at all.

“Thanks.”



He hung up the phone and looked at Willa. She gave him a smile that still looked serious and he wondered how she did it.

“Was she mad?” Willa asked.

“Not too bad.”

“She will be.”

“I would imagine.”

“Are you mad?”

“No. Not really. I mean it was a dumb thing to do, but you know that.”

She nodded. She held up a record. Thelonious Monk. “What’s this?”

“That’s jazz piano.”

“Is it good?”

“It’s good.”

“I remember the picture.”

“We used to play it a lot when you were little.”

“Before you left you mean?”

“Yeah.” He thought about the way she said that, said *before you left*. He thought about setting her straight but let it go.

“Is it Christmas music?”

“No.”

She smiled at the record like she just won a bet and nodded.

“It wasn’t such a big deal, you know,” she said.

“What wasn’t a big deal?”

“Walking a few blocks and finding a taxi.”

“I guess not for you.”

She stayed there, sitting on the floor, holding the Thelonious Monk record. Her arms were thin and somehow too long and he thought she was going to be tall.

“Do you ever dream about horses?” she asked.

“All the time.”

She nodded.

“Do you?”

“Not enough. But it’s good when I do.”

He bent over and picked her up, held her tight and she wrapped herself around him like she had done when she was little. She was heavy now. He started to laugh and she pulled back.

“You’re about to drop me, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

He set her down and they both went to the door. He took his keys and followed her outside.

“Where do you want to eat?” he asked.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Likewise.”

“Let’s go to the track.”

“It’s August. There’s nothing much there in August.”

“Let’s go anyway.”

He thought a minute and then nodded.

When they got to the racetrack it was empty. They walked out back to the stables, their footfalls quiet, somehow lonesome sounding in the dirt, so that Samuel thought of the mustangs that got lost out west, when he was young, and knew never to be found. The moon showed the bare stables, the wood warped from too many hot

summers so that the paint had flaked away like an afterthought. Hay and horse shit that had been worn down to dust drifted over the ground and Willa looked the place over, her face bright and thoughtful, her black eyes burning bright, and he thought about his father's horse, thought about A Little Song, A Little Dance, before she tried to run away.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Samuel looked over at the Palm Court again, looked at the empty streets and waited. The Buick wasn't coming. Again.

He got out of the car to stretch, then took off his shoes and went down to the sand. The seagulls made a sweet sound, a high mumbled murmur of sleep. Two of them moved away and he stepped back and thought it would be good to be able to sleep like that, out there on the beach, in the warm sand, smelling the sea all night. He left them to their beach and walked up to his taxi.

A woman was standing there, leaning on his car. She was all midnight shadows and a long black dress. Quietly, from the darkness, she called out, said *woof* *woof* and laughed to herself.

"Woof woof?" Samuel repeated.

"I've had a little too much to drink." She lit her cigarette and looked up at him.

"I remember you," he said. "Jane Fonda."

"Just Jane. Plain Jane."

"If you say so."

"Doucet," she said. "But say the *t* really hard. It makes my father angry."

"I guess that means soft or sweet or something."

"Or something."

Samuel stood by the car, close to her. She smelled of citrus and alcohol and nicotine and she looked out at the black water with the faraway eyes of a really good drinker.

"I can't remember your name," she said.

“Samuel.”

“You look like a Samuel.”

“You look like you need a ride.”

“I do.”

He opened the door for her and stood back. She smiled at the beach before getting in.

He got in and started driving. When she moved he could hear her legs rubbing against each other, hear the fabric of her dress fall on her skin. There was something comforting to the sound. She let down her window and blew the cigarette smoke out.

“Where am I taking you?” he asked.

She was quiet a while. She sat right up against the door. In the mirror he could only see her mouth, lit every now and then by the passing glow of the streetlights.

“Can we just keep driving a while?”

“Sure.”

“I’ve had enough of drinking in bars.”

He nodded and waited for her to go on but she didn’t. He took her out to La Huerta. He thought she might like the way it looked so late at night, all closed up to the world. Hurricane shutters were locked tight against an abandoned night and he watched her mouth in the mirror while she smoked her cigarette.

“You look pretty rough,” she said. “What happened to your face?”

“I was in an accident.”

“Just what you want to hear from a cabbie.”

He smiled. “Sorry.”

“It’s better than a lie. Anything’s better than a lie.”

He nodded.

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” she said.

“Where’s here?”

“Florida,” she said. “My time is almost up. I get to go to go home soon.”

“You’ve been here all summer,” Samuel said. “At least. That’s a long vacation.”

“It’s not a vacation. I work for a company that handles conventions.”

“That’s right. This is home some of the time.”

“It’s not really home.”

“Where is?”

“North Carolina.”

“I went there once. I was told something about some horses. But that was a long time ago.”

“That’s the best time to go anywhere.” She leaned forward. It made him want a drink, a strong one, whatever she had been having all night. “Okay,” she said. “I’m calling it a night. Take me back to the Tropicana Hotel.”

“That’s back at Marlin Beach.”

“I know.” She smiled. “Do you have a call number or something? I need someone to take me to the airport in a couple of weeks.”

“No. I’m an independent.”

“Good. I like an independent man.”

When she laughed, he wondered if she had seen him go red.

## CHAPTER SIX

The radio said a storm was coming. It was out in the Atlantic right now, turning fast, sending rain down into Puerto Rico. The way the news anchor said *tropical storm* made it sound like something for the tourists to see, something for them to smile at while they drank. Samuel switched the radio off. Rain wasn't coming. Not up here.

The Cuban man was out there again, sitting on a bench, looking at his chessboard. He smiled blindly when people walked by him and when he moved a piece, Samuel thought maybe he was playing against himself.

The Palm Court was doing well. When the door opened, Samuel could hear the low buzz of too much talking coming from the bar. He wondered if the man was already inside, sitting in the back, holding his fishing cap, cooling himself with a vodka and lime. It was a good night to drink.

Someone tapped hard on Samuel's taxi. Samuel winced at the sound and looked at the man. He was wearing sunglasses even though the sun was mostly down.

"Really, Holiday?" Ross frowned at him. He took off his sunglasses like it might make Samuel listen better. "What is this? Your third or fourth night out here?"

"I guess."

"You guess." Ross opened the door and sat down next to Samuel.

"How did you know?"

"It's my job to know," Ross said. He sighed, hard, like the air was a cigarette. "And after work I like to have a drink down at the Colonial." He pointed down the block. Samuel knew the place, it was all table service and happy families and he wondered what Ross liked about it.

"So you aren't watching the Palm Court?"

“What? For that Buick of yours? No. I’m not.” Ross waited.

“What?” Samuel asked.

“I’m trying to decide if you look dangerous.”

“And?”

“You’re a hard read.”

“I’ll take up poker.”

“Not the ponies?”

“You follow me out to the track?”

“I didn’t have to,” he said. “So, what’s your plan here, Holiday? You find some poor guy driving a fairly common car and you, what? What, Samuel?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are so worried about this girl?”

“I don’t know. Because nobody else is.”

“So it falls on you?”

“I guess it has to fall on someone.”

“Shit, Samuel.” Ross exhaled and shook his head. He rubbed his face, pushing away the night. “You should have been a cop.”

“I wouldn’t like the hours.”

Ross laughed hard and short and then he went quiet a while. Samuel listened to him breathe. It had the same steady sound as the sea coming in on the beach, like it would go on forever, falling heavily. “You want to know why she did it? Is that it?”

“I guess.”

“You ever think about doing something like that? You ever try anything like that? Because my professional opinion is that you might understand why she did it a bit better than a lot of other people.”



“No.”

“No?”

“No, it’s not something I think about doing.”

Ross looked at him, his face pinched. “If you say so. Tell you what though, even that blind man playing chess with himself can see you got something strong eating away at you.”

“He’s been out there every night this week.”

“I know.”

“Is he really blind?”

“He’s getting there,” Ross said. He got out of the car and bent in to the window again. “Go home Samuel. Go home, alright.”

He looked tired, Samuel thought, like he needed something more than sleep. His jaw kept pulsing, like he was biting down on his own teeth, trying to crush them and Samuel nodded to him and started his engine.

“Okay,” Samuel said. “I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah.”

On the way home he stopped at an all-night drug store for a bottle of aspirin. When he breathed in hard, his ribs still hurt, and in the mornings, when he lay in bed, his whole body hurt. He didn’t know if that was from the accident.

When he pulled in at the Hummingbird, he stopped the car and waited, still expecting to see a Buick sitting in the dark. There was nothing there, nothing that didn’t belong; only the sound of a television and a telephone ringing. When he got out of the car the telephone rang again and he realized it was his.

He walked inside and picked up the receiver.

“Samuel speaking.”

“Samuel.” It was Laura. “Is she there? Is she with you?”

“Willa? No.” He looked around. His place was dark, but there was nobody there. “No,” he said it again. “What do you mean?”

“She’s not here. Willa’s not here.”

“Again?”

“I don’t know. This is new. Jesus Christ. I thought she was in her room all night.”

“She’s not here.”

“She left a note this time,” Laura said. She spoke quickly, like if she got the words out fast enough they would make more sense. “Said she’s gone to see you.”

“What’s the note say?”

“Just that. Just *gone to see Samuel*.”

“Samuel? Not dad or something.”

“Right. And we don’t know any other Samuels.”

He went to the opened door and looked out at the Hummingbird. Someone was smoking a cigarette over by the swimming pool but it was too dark to see who it was. “Maybe she’s on her way here now?”

“She’s been gone an hour. Maybe more. I’ve been calling you all night.”

Samuel sat down. His head hurt. Laura was still talking but he couldn’t hear her anymore. When he took a breath, it was like forcing warm, wet cottonballs into his lungs. Laura was still going. Anger and something else in her voice, something he didn’t know, some kind of pain.

Samuel said, hush, quietly, and then hung up.

When it was quiet again Samuel rubbed his face. He was soaked through with sweat. The air popped quietly around him and, faraway, he heard a bird cry.

He picked up the telephone again and dialed Laura.

“It’s me again. I’m going out to look for her.”

“Okay. Good. Thank you. Wait. Leave a note on your door. In case she shows up there.”

Samuel hung up. His head was too light, like he had been drinking all night and then gone to chase horses, had run too fast so that the drink had gone right into his blood in that wonderful, welcoming way. Laura used to do that, when they were younger, not long after they married and she was afraid that she had missed out on some life she had heard about and she wanted to make every bottle of wine last a little longer.

His clothes were heavy with sweat and he went into the bathroom and washed his face and neck with soap and cold water and then changed his clothes, put on a fresh cotton work shirt and wrote a note for Willa, told her to go inside and call her mother and he would be back soon. He got a thumbtack from the kitchen and put the note up on the front door and then went back inside his cabin and turned all his lights on even though he didn’t think she was going to show up. He stood there a minute, up on the porch, and listened to the blood beat in his ears. He liked the sound. Not as much as he liked the sound of the birds who cried out at night, but he like it.

Out at the swimming pool, the man stood up, a long, thin silhouette of somebody smoking by himself. It wasn’t Luis.

The cherry of the cigarette swelled and Samuel could smell marijuana and gardenia flowers. He looked again to make sure it wasn’t Luis and then went to his car and drove away, looking up in his mirror at Luis’ cabin. It was dark. It had been dark every night for some time now.

He got to Century quickly. The floodlights were on, even out on the raceway, and there were trailers in the parking lot, parked over close to the stables, sitting empty and open. The air smelled of warm horses and saw dust and when he parked and got out of the car and stood out in the night, he heard voices, coaxing, and somebody laughing. When he went to the backstretch a mare was standing in a ring, alone, a palomino who wasn't big enough to race, wearing a fly mask. There were people in the stables, walking down the rows, talking, laughing, leading horses. They were happy to be back at work.

Willa was leaning on a metal fence, frowning at the palomino. Samuel got the feeling the horse was looking back at Willa through the mesh over her eyes. He wondered how she could breathe wearing that mask.

He walked over to Willa.

"I've been looking for you," she said. There was something in her voice that confused him and he lost track of what he had meant to say.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded and turned away, looked down the small streets of stables. Samuel tried to remember when he had seen it so bright.

Another trailer pulled into the parking lot, a big one, with six horses in the back.

"What's going on?" Willa asked.

"They're getting ready to open again."

"In the morning?"

"No. Over the next week or so."

"So they close down?"

"For a little while."

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Samuel said. “Maybe there aren’t enough people to keep it all going.”

“Where were you?”

“I was out,” he said.

“I know. I went to the Hummingbird first.”

“And then you came here.”

“And then I came here.”

He nodded. The palomino took a step forward, toward them, and then stopped. It huffed, heavily, and behind them another horse nickered back. The palomino moved her head, swung it in a jerky way like she was tied up and trying to get free.

“Can she see anything?” Willa asked. “Through that mask on her face?”

“I think so.”

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

They heard the scattered rattle of the six horses being led off the trailer, one by one so that they moved on out back like a caravan of smooth and perfect muscle. Willa didn’t turn away from the palomino.

“You should have seen it before,” Willa said. “When I first got here. They were everywhere.”

“Who?”

“The horses,” she said. “It’s slowing down now.”

He nodded. “I’ve only ever seen horses brought over in the morning.”

She turned and started to walk to the stables. Three men were going door to door, hanging hay. They looked tired, Samuel thought. One of them looked at Samuel

and absently rubbed a horse who put her head out, waiting, and after a minute he nodded. The three men kept going.

“Why do you like it out here so much?” Willa asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Your father used to like it, didn’t he?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Mom told me he did.”

“Then she knows more than I do.”

“She says you’re a lot like him.”

“I guess I never thought that,” he said.

“Are you?” she asked. “Are you like him?”

He wondered what she was old enough to know. At nine years old all he had known was that nothing made sense. That was the year his father first brought home A Little Song, A Little Dance, before they knew she just needed to run, always run.

“No. I’m not like him. Not really.”

“I saw his photograph. Mom has one in an album. You don’t look like him. You aren’t dark enough.” She stopped and looked around. The parking lot had emptied some so that only the six-stall trailer and Samuel’s taxi were out there. “I like it out here,” Willa said. “It’s hard somehow, but I like it out here.”

“We need to call your mother,” Samuel said. “We need to call your mother and take you home.”

“No. Not yet.”

He followed her into one of the stables. There was an odd darkness to the row of stalls, like burnt wood that still held a small glow of fire. He could hear the horses, inside their stalls, moving, breathing, almost hear their hearts beating thought he knew

that wasn't right, and Willa sat down on a cracked wooden bench and he sat next to her. Down the row a bay put her head out to look at them and after a minute it lost interest and slipped back into the darkness.

"Maybe he just liked all the horses," she said.

"Who?"

"Your father."

"Yeah. I think that might be right."

"How old was he when he died?"

"Forty-six."

"You're almost forty six."

"I have a few years yet."

"Why do you think he did it?" She asked. She didn't look at him, she looked right ahead at an empty stall, the half door hanging loosely off only the bottom hinge.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know. I guess something was just eating him."

"Was it always?"

"I guess I think so."

"Mom told Scott. About a year ago, she told him."

"And she told you."

"No. But she's loud sometimes."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What for?"

"For coming out here like this. After I said I wouldn't do it again. I'm sorry."

“Okay.”

“I wanted to see you. I was calling all day. Yesterday too.”

“I was out.”

“You are always out.”

“I know.”

“Did she tell you we’re going to North Carolina for the rest of the summer?

Did mom tell you?”

“No.”

“We are. And I wanted to see you before we went.” She moved her feet, dragged a path through the fine dusting of hay and dried manure and horse hair and soft red earth brought back from the track in the horses hooves.

“Why North Carolina?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. They heard men shout and looked out toward the row but all they saw was night. Willa shook her head. “A girl in my class, her parents separated. She sees her father all the time. Sometimes every weekend even.”

“Well. I guess sometimes things aren’t so simple.”

“You got told to stay away for a while, didn’t you?”

“I guess.”

“You didn’t have to listen.”

“Yeah.”

She punched him in the shoulder and made a low noise, a sudden choking, and when he looked at her, he expected to see her crying but there was something else in her clear black eyes, and he thought she had gone far away.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Scott called him, early, when sky still wavered between dark and dawn, unsure of itself, a low and hazy ocean blue. Samuel had been awake, sitting outside, waiting for the birds, sure they would call out soon.

Scott laughed to himself when Samuel answered.

“You’re awake, then?” Scott asked.

“Hey there. Yeah, I’m awake.” Samuel wondered at the laughter still in Scott’s voice.

“Good to hear it,” Scott said. He sounded like he had been awake for a while, bathing in coffee. “Look. Willa told you about North Carolina.”

“She did.”

“The girls were up all night. Negotiating.”

“Negotiating?”

“That’s right,” Scott said. “They’re only coming for the week. Okay? We leave later today.”

“Okay.”

“We thought maybe it would be a good idea if you could take Willa out for breakfast. Just for an hour or two.”

“*We* thought?”

“Your daughter thought. Like I said, negotiating. It’s like a metaphysical hostage crisis in this house right now, Samuel.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means you have a child who wants to see you,” Scott said. “How soon can you be here?”

“I’m leaving now.”

“Good. I’ll tell Laura and Willa.”

“Laura is okay with this?”

“Oh, god, no. Not on your life. But they’ve worked something out.”

“Well, I’ll see you soon.”

Scott hung up and Samuel listened to the dead air. He saw Luis, outside, come out from his cabin and put a large cardboard box in the back of his cruiser. He stopped to light a cigarette, coughing while the flame took, and then went back for another box and Samuel left, went out to his car and waved to Luis as he drove onto the highway and turned toward Willa’s.

The streets were quiet that morning, and when he got to Willa’s he pulled up at the curb and waited but no one came out of the house and after a minute Samuel went up to knock. He couldn’t remember the last time he had done that. They were always waiting for him. Sweat ran into his eyes and he wished he had taken some aspirin but it wasn’t his ribs hurting him. Laura opened the door and looked at him like he wasn’t there.

“That was fast,” she said.

“There wasn’t any traffic.”

Laura nodded and tried to smile. She had lost weight, Samuel thought, so that her body was somehow too sharp. She tried to find something to say. She had lines at her eyes now, like someone who smiled a lot, who laughed a lot. Sweat ran down her neck and caught and darkened at her t-shirt. A long time ago he would have kissed that away. After a minute she gave up on something in her head, and shook her head like he owed her an explanation.

“North Carolina, huh?” he said.

“Yeah. But only for a week. She wants you to take her out next weekend, on Sunday.”

“Sounds good.”

“She really likes the damn race track.”

“It’s just the horses. A lot of girls like horses.”

“Right,” she said. She used the same clipped tone that Scott spoke in when he had been drinking. She shook her head the way she always did when she wanted to move on. She had done that a lot with Samuel, at the end. “Can you be back by half past nine this morning? We have to head out to the airport.”

“Sure. You need a taxi?”

“No, Samuel.”

He heard Willa call out from in the house, her words lost in the dark rooms and then she was there again, biting down a good smile.

“Half past nine, right Samuel.”

“Okay.”

He walked down the driveway beside her. Walking next to her, looking down at her, she seemed too small to be nine years old, too thin, like a colt still so new it didn’t know what the hell to do with its legs. They got in the car.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” she said.

“You want to get some pie?”

“How about pancakes?”

“Okay. Pancakes. I know a good place.”

“Do you remember the Red Wagon?” she asked. “We used to go there all the time.”

They had been there maybe four times, when he had first moved out and she was trying to put things together in that young way where nothing fit.

“You remember that place?”

“Of course,” she said. “They had horses up on the walls, those big ones with all the fur around the feet.”

“Clydesdales?”

“That’s right. And they had good food.”

“Yeah, they did.”

“I went there with mom once. Maybe two years ago. But she started crying and so we left and never went back.”

“Why did she start crying?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll try not to cry.”

She laughed, “You don’t look like you even know how to cry.” She had a small sunburn across her nose and it was peeling already. He wondered when she had been out in the sun, like he would know where she went.

“You got that right. Holidays are too tough to cry.”

They drove down Jefferson for a few minutes and just before the highway he pulled over at the Red Wagon. When they walked in he followed Willa. The café smelled of fried eggs and coffee and hairspray, and they sat side by side at the counter, their backs to the sunlight beating in through the front window. Willa poked him in the arm and pointed up at the wall, over the opening to the kitchen, at the old Budweiser beer poster, the team of heavy horses pulling a red wagon through the

snow, fir trees all around. He thought it looked like something his father would have drawn.

“I’d like that in my bedroom,” she said.

“It’s for beer.”

“I’d like it all the same.”

“I’m not sure what your mother would have to say about that.”

“I know.”

She asked for pancakes and bacon and he nodded to the waitress and held up two fingers and asked for coffee and orange juice as well.

“Your little girl drinking coffee too?” the waitress asked.

“No. Just juice for her.”

“Then put your two fingers down and tell me what each of you will have. This isn’t some night club.”

He looked up at her hair, fried and frightened by all her hairspray, and he nodded. They had blueberry pie under a glass display stand and he remembered the summer after his father had died his mother moved them down south and they took a long time driving down and every afternoon they stopped somewhere on the side of the road and she got him blueberry pie because it had been a good year for blueberries and everyone had too many and while he ate his mother sat back and watched him. Sometimes, not long after Willa was born, he had found Laura with the same look on her face and he never knew what it meant.

Willa ate slowly, looking around the Red Wagon as she moved her pancake through syrup, looking up at him with black and tired eyes and, sometimes, a messy smile. They were quiet and Samuel kept chasing thoughts for something to talk about

but he always came back to horses and that Budweiser poster and so he kept quiet and waited for Willa.

“How are the horses?” she asked.

“What horses?”

“Out at the track. The ones we saw getting brought in.”

“I haven’t been back yet.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s good out there.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I don’t think mom sees it.”

“I guess not.”

“Will you take me back out there?”

“Yes.”

“Today?”

“No. When you get back from North Carolina.”

“As soon as I get back?”

“As soon as you get back. First thing.”

She nodded at his plate. He hadn’t eaten much and she took a piece of bacon from his plate and ate it.

“Oh, moms having a party,” Willa said.

“Oh yeah?”

“I don’t know why. Not a birthday or anything. Her birthday is in March.”

“I know.”

“Yeah, well, do you want to come to the party? I asked her and she said you could come.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“It’s just a party.”

“If you say so.”

“Mom even said it would probably be a good idea. Those were her words. A good idea.”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“I know.”

“Does she think I drink too much?” he asked. “It sounds like an intervention.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s when someone drinks too much wine or beer and all their friends get together and, well, basically, hold a party and try to get him to stop.”

“No.” She shook her head, taking him seriously. “Mom wouldn’t do that. She likes to drink wine. And there won’t be any of your friends there. But I won’t really know anyone either.”

“Will there be any pie?”

“I don’t know. I can ask.”

“Maybe I’ll just bring some.”

“So, you’ll come.”

“Yeah. I’ll come,” he said. “But I’m still worried about why your mother thought it would be a good idea.”

“I think she just doesn’t want me to run off any more.” She looked over at him and winked like an old pro who had planned the whole thing.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Samuel watched the Palm Court every night that week. There were a lot of Buicks in town but none of them stopped off for a drink, not at Marlin Beach, not at the Palm Court.

Once, he woke up, the sun sinking into a caramel sea beside him, his mouth dry like he had been drinking vodka and dust all week long, and the old Cuban man was standing next to his taxi. His chessboard was packed up and folded under his arm. Samuel wondered if the man was going to ask him to play.

The man shuffled closer. “Eres un taxi?” he asked.

“Yes. Si.”

The man reached out with a soft touch for the door, got in and smiled and Samuel wanted to touch his face, to tell him it was okay though he didn’t really know what was okay, but he just drove him over to Salem, to a café that was so bright it dimmed the dusky.

After midnight Samuel was back, sitting across from the Palm Court, when he saw the old man walking back to his bench and he sat down to wait for something that wasn’t going to come. The man had the same distant smile his father had, even back before A Little Song, A Little Dance came along, that came when he was warm from his second cold scotch, and Samuel thought that even then his father was seeing something else, that even then, deep inside he was hearing horses run and he wanted to go with them.

Samuel turned off the music and thought about Willa until he fell asleep.

The next night he didn’t stay long. There were too many people out all of a sudden. Their faces were red and shining with summer and liquor, and there was too



much noise, too much laughter, and the bars burned brighter and the doors slammed harder as the listless bodies roamed from bar to bar, from drink to drink, from kiss to kiss and he couldn't breathe any more.

When he got home the door to Luis' cabin was open. Jenny was inside, mopping the floor.

Samuel walked over to her. Luis' place was empty.

"So he's really gone?" Samuel said.

"I know. I didn't see it coming." Jenny stopped mopping and came outside with Samuel. She crossed her arms and looked over at the swimmer. There was a green wine bottle on the patio table. It was empty. Jenny frowned. "When he told me he was moving in with his mother, I thought he was having me on."

"Yeah."

"Hell, is that lady swimming drunk?"

"I don't know."

"Has he really moved in with his mother or has he just found somewhere else to live?" Jenny asked.

"I think he's really moved in."

"Maybe I should have cooked for him," she said. "Maybe he might have stayed."

"His mother's a really good cook. Really good."

"I used to be good. When I lived in Mississippi I cooked all the time for my ex."

The woman in the pool stopped swimming. She held onto the side of the pool and stayed there a while, her head turned to them and then she got out and sat down at the table, the water showing smooth and silky and white on her skin. She lit a

cigarette and took a sip of wine, straight from the bottle. She was lean. Lean and tall and blonde and for half a minute Samuel thought April was back.

“Suddenly everybody wants your girl’s room,” Jenny said. She pointed her chin toward the woman, sitting alone.

“She’s in April’s room?”

“She is for the night. But it’s her boyfriend that wanted it. He’s here the month, maybe more. This girl though, well, she’ll be gone by morning.”

“How do you know?”

“He went out for more wine,” Jenny said. “He’ll be done with her soon. He had that look, you know what I mean? At first I thought he might be a junkie, but then I saw him with that girl there. I guess he is a kind of a junkie.” She looked up at Samuel. “I’m glad you’re still here,” she said. “Not as good as having a cop car in the parking lot, but you’re a little bit of safety all the same.”

Samuel looked in at Luis’ rooms. They were clean and bright, even in the night time.

Over by the pool the wine bottle fell from the table. The glass broke and the woman jumped back, shouted out *motherfucker* and threw her cigarette into the swimming pool before walking away, going into April’s cabin and slamming the door.

Jenny sighed. “Wait till you see the boyfriend.”

That night when Samuel went outside, hoping to see the birds, the man was out there, sitting next to April’s door, smoking, holding it in a little too long, and in the dark gleam of night Samuel could see him, see the tight bare skin that coiled across his naked chest, see his limp pale hair and twisted good looks.

The man saw Samuel and smiled and when the birds called out, shrieked against the night, the man spat and Samuel remembered when as a boy he had seen a horned owl splitting apart a young crow that made the mistake of waking during the night.

## CHAPTER NINE

The day of the party Willa called him at the Hummingbird.

“You answered,” she said.

“Yeah,” he smiled. She sounded so serious.

“You don’t answer too much.”

“I guess I’m not home too much.”

“Mom said you should be here about five.”

“I can do that.”

“Okay. Good.”

Samuel listened to her a minute longer, waited for her to say something.

Outside, he heard the desolate hum of an afternoon that had become too warm so that a void rang in his ears. He heard the scratching sound as Willa brushed her cheek against the receiver on her end and, after a minute, she said, “Okay, good,” again and hung up.

He wanted to call her back but he had nothing to talk about.

A car started up outside, the engine snapping, and drove away so quickly that Samuel could smell the scorched tires, almost taste it on his tongue and soon it was quiet again.

He dressed nicely; wore his good blue shirt and shaved so close his skin shone raw and later, when he got to Marlin Beach and waited across from the Palm Court, he thought he looked like one of the professional tourists, going from town to town, from conference to conference, always smiling and clean and pressed and looking for somewhere to have another drink, somewhere quiet, somewhere dark, where no one could see them too well.

That afternoon the air changed.

It took him a while to notice. First it was the seagulls. The sweat on Samuel's neck, on his back, dried up and he turned on the radio and tuned the dial, tried to find the news. All he got was happy rock and roll and violin music that reminded him of sitting in the Napoleon café, with Willa.

And then he saw an old man walk up to the Palm Court, take off his green fishing hat and smile brightly at nobody at all as he opened the door and disappeared inside.

Samuel blinked. He wiped away sweat that wasn't there anymore and got out of his taxi, walked quickly over to the Palm Court and went inside, saw the old man sitting alone at the bar, staring up at the television, while a news anchor tried to be worried about something. He held his hat tightly, twisted it. His white hair looked like it had been combed once, a long time ago, and then matted down into weather-worn disarray. The bartender set a lowball glass down in front of him and the old man picked it up, raised it, and said something softly that made him smile. He took a long pull at the drink and Samuel went over, sat down next to him and asked the bartender for two more of what the man was having.

The old man looked at him, "You drinking two at a time?"

"One's for you."

"Well, that's pretty nice of you."

"I think I owe you for last time."

"What?"

"I was in here a few weeks ago. I fell asleep and you bought me a drink."

"Oh. I remember. No. I didn't buy that drink for you. Maybe your friend did."

Samuel remembered the man, the magician who looked like he might always be lost. It had only been two weeks ago. It felt longer.

The bartender put the drinks down and Samuel slid one over to the old man and then took a sip. Scotch. It tasted expensive. There wasn't any burn at all and he took another sip.

"God damn that's good," Samuel said.

"It should be. It's Balvenie."

"I don't know it."

"There's nothing better. Nothing at all. Not even a woman's touch."

"Is it bourbon?"

"Heavens no, son. It's single malt."

"I'm Samuel."

"Rod." The man held out his hand. It was soft. It looked like it belonged to a younger man and Samuel looked down at Rod, sitting on the barstool next to him, smiling vaguely in the way of someone who had already taken a few good drinks under the sun. Pale skin flaked across his nose, a new sun burn atop an older one, and his eyes had that watery look of someone who sat on a boat all day, wind and sun and sea-glare wearing away at him day after day.

"I thought you were a bourbon man," Samuel said. "You told me to try bourbon."

"Did I? Well, I'm a bourbon man when I want to sleep. Right now, I don't want to sleep. It's still daylight."

"You sure got a sunburn on you," Samuel said.

"I know. I'm still warming up. My skin needs to harden."

"You fishing?"

“As much as I can.”

“What do you do when you aren’t fishing?” Samuel asked.

The man smiled and pointed to his glass. He winked, happy, too damn cheerful, turned back to the television. The anchor was still pinching her face for the camera. The volume was too low to hear. “Now what do you think she’s so upset about?” he asked.

“Sports. I’d say her team lost.”

“I hope she didn’t lose too much money.” He held up his glass to Samuel.

“Well, friend, coo coo ca choo.” He took a sip of his scotch.

Samuel frowned and left his drink alone. His heart beat against his broken ribs, tried to break them again. He looked to the back of the bar, at the pay phone and thought about calling the police station, get hold of Luis or Ross and tell them to come down, quick, but when he turned back at Rod, he thought the old man wasn’t going anywhere. He would be there until someone scrapped him off.

Rod looked at him, tried to take Samuel’s measure with blue eyes.

“It’s something my daughter used to say,” Rod said. “When she was a kid. Oh, hell, even when she was all grown up. But I think she just did it too try to make me happy.”

“That right?” Samuel said. He sipped his drink. Rod smiled weakly up at the television. Behind the worried girl a small screen showed a baseball player strike out.

“Where’s she at now?”

“My daughter? I don’t know. I don’t exactly keep tabs on her.”

“Oh no?”

“She grew up quick. Even as a teenager, she was always off trying to be a grown woman. Now, well, there wouldn’t be any point. I know she’s down here, though, somewhere.”

“Down here?”

“Florida,” Rod said. “Somewhere in Florida. Her last husband brought her down here about half a year ago.”

“You said last husband. How many were there?”

“You mean how many did I know about?” He tried to laugh but a quiet cough came out. “She married the first time when she was only seventeen. So that got annulled. I don’t know if it counts when they’re that young. Gayle turned up not much more than a year ago. Three months later, they got married and when he got itchy feet, and that man was born with itchy feet, well, they came down here. But there were times, in between those two husbands I mean, when she’d be gone for weeks on end, even months. She’d turn up out of the blue, saying ‘Oh dads’, she thought that was funny, calling me dads, like there were more of me. Anyway, ‘Oh dads, I’ve had the most wonderful time down in New Orleans’ but I always knew she was just right over in Maude’s Point, at someone’s beach house for a month of expensive drinking.”

“New Orleans.” Samuel spoke blankly, trying to catch up with what the man was saying.

“New Orleans. It was almost always New Orleans. She loves the idea of the city, but I don’t think she’s made it there yet. I don’t know why. I think it conjures up some bohemian freedom her blood is too blue for. She had a few other tales too, trysts with tycoons in Hollywood but, really, she was never too far away, friends would see her here and there, drinking and dancing and being chased by handsome men who couldn’t have her. But all the same, I always thought she might have got married a



time or two then. She liked getting married. She'd seen too many magazines with that Elizabeth Taylor." He took a long sip of his drink and set the glass down and thought a while. "Or maybe it was me."

"How's that?"

"I don't know. It's like she was trying to break something and when she got older, I always got the feeling it was me. It was the way she looked at me sometimes. Like she was already done being beaten though I never raised a hand. Maybe it wasn't me. I don't know. But nothing I did seemed to be right enough. Not for her." He took a sip of his drink and frowned. "Let life be short, else shame will be too long. You know who said that?"

"No."

"The duke of Bourbon." He started laughing, off somewhere else, all by himself. "She was a cute kid though. Loved to hear Simon and Garfunkel. That's why we all say coo coo ca choo now. The whole family does. It's a line from their song, from Mrs. Robinson."

Samuel thought a minute. The smooth scotch was cold against his thoughts. Down at the end of the bar two men were watching him, their faces down, like they weren't really looking, but didn't want to miss seeing what he might do. He had seen men do that same thing before a fight broke out.

Samuel took another drink. His thoughts were floating into each other and falling away, lost, landing in mixed up pieces and he thought about April, thought about when she came to his room, late at night, her face too young, too excited to go tumbling off the cliff she jumped.

And then she pulled the trigger.

Hot blood flew free from her head.

Rod clicked his drink against Samuel's glass and smiled. He took a long, last sip and set the empty glass down and pulled the one Samuel had bought him close. His left hand still squeezed the green fishing cap.

"So you're down in Florida looking for her?" Samuel said. He pushed his drink away. It was too strong. "Or did you already find her?"

"What? No. I wouldn't be able to find her if I wanted to. She'd just go on somewhere else. But I thought it might be nice to be closer to her anyway. She had sent me a post card, I guess it must have been when she first got down, from right here on Marlin Beach. I think she was just passing through but I thought it would be a good place for me. And the deep-sea fishing, well, I never found better. Heat is a bit much though. Does it get better?"

"The heat?"

"Yeah."

"It gets better. Another few weeks and it will get better. Where's home for you anyway?"

"We're a Massachusetts family. We go way back."

"Massachusetts."

"You bet."

"Long way from home."

"Am I?" Rod looked at the television again. Race horses were onscreen, being ponied around, getting ready for the start of the fall's quarter horse season. The sun beat down on them, made them shine even in the shade. "Yeah, well, maybe she'll look me up."

"You daughter?"

“That’s right. Everyone knows where I am. I’m easy to find.” He pushed away from the bar and stood up. Both his drinks were done already. A frozen daiquiri sign lit up his face. “Hey, I’m going down the block to get some dinner. They have these crab cakes down the block that remind me of home, actually they remind me of my girl. She loved those when she was a kid. If you’re around later, I owe you a drink.”

Samuel nodded as Rod left. When he smiled at the bartender, Samuel saw, in a passing flash, the feigned excitement April was so fond of. At the end of the bar the two men watched him, blank and disappointed, like they had paid for a fight that wasn’t going to be screened and Samuel left the Palm Court.

It was dark out and Samuel saw Rod walking down the street, alone, his hat back on his head. He stopped and got into a long white Mercedes that was nicer than any Buick and Samuel realized he was three hours late for Laura’s party.

## CHAPTER TEN

Laura let him in. When she smiled, it was empty. Samuel stood at the door a minute, looking down at her. He felt too big around her, like if he touched her she would just fold in and when she craned up, stood on her toes to give him a cold kiss on the cheek he just stood there. He wondered where her freckles had gone. She used to have freckles. But that was a long time ago. She smiled, bright and sudden and for somebody else and he followed her into the house and thought her eyes still had that lucid clarity that made him think of the clear blue skies of a northern winter.

He didn't know any one, not any more. Two women smiled at him, the vague smiles of unpleasant recognition, but Samuel didn't know who they were. He wanted to run and Laura pressed a drink in his hand.

"Are you still a Scotch and water man? Heavy on the water?" she said.

"Apparently." He took a sip. There wasn't much water in the drink. And it sure as hell wasn't Balvenie.

"Thanks for coming. Willa will be thrilled."

"Where is she?"

"I'm not sure. Around. She had better be." She walked through the living room, through the people, and he followed.

"You know a lot of people," he said.

"Yes. We do."

They went out back onto the patio. They sank into the warm air. There was only a small handful of people outside, talking quietly, laughing quickly and when Laura stopped, stood close to him in the warm darkness, Samuel smelled that same perfume she always wore, since before he knew her, when he met her all those years

ago while he was in Kansas City for a while. There was lemon in it. He could always smell the lemon and a whole lot else. It made him want to touch her.

She saw his face and took a step back, drank her wine.

“You should have brought a date,” she said. “I don’t think you know anyone.”

“I won’t stay too long.”

“Maybe you should.” She looked at her watch. “It’s almost nine o’clock now.

You told Willa you would be here for five.”

“Something came up.”

“I hope it was important.”

“Where do you think she is?” he asked.

“I asked her not to go into her bedroom. To try to be a good hostess and all, but if she’s not out here, she’s probably in her room drawing or something.”

“I’ll let you alone then,” he said. “I’ll go and see if she’s in her room.”

“Sounds good. And Samuel, thanks for coming. Make sure you find me before taking off, okay? We need to talk.”

“Ok.” And then he laughed. “You make it sound serious, like I’m in trouble.”

“No. No trouble. But we do need to talk Samuel.”

“I guess.”

Willa wasn’t in her bedroom. He sat down on her bed for a minute and looked around. He had been there only once since moving out, a while ago, when she was still young enough that she had only her mother’s tastes. There had been a lot of aqua and sea blue back then, like Laura was afraid of drying out. It was still there now, but fading out. There was a stack of brass bangles beside her bed, and there was a lot of gold and red in the room so that it reminded Samuel of some old fortuneteller who

trailed a circus across an empty country. He got up and went to her desk. She had been drawing horses.

“You’re really late.”

He looked up from her drawings. She was at the door, frowning at him. She looked tired, like the grey under her eyes had been there for years.

“I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “I’m not allowed in my room tonight.”

“Where are you going to sleep?”

“No. I mean as long as we have people here.”

“I know,” he said. “Okay. I’ll follow you.”

She took him back out onto the patio. People smiled at her and drank quickly. A handsome, healthy man called out to her, said *there’s the lucky girl* but she didn’t seem to hear him and, when Samuel looked up at him, his face fell, embarrassed, and he blinked away his thoughts and turned back to the party. Willa sat down and waited for Samuel. He sat next to her, at the wrought iron table he and Laura had bought when they first moved down to Florida. He took a sip of the scotch and winced at its strength.

Willa she was staring at him, hard, her face flat, her eyes black and gleaming. Her jaw was set hard.

“I’m sorry I was so late,” he said.

She nodded. She looked old, he thought, old and immovable. It made him wonder who came along first.

Salsa music came from the house, followed by a feminine cheer. When he took a nervous sip of his drink he thought about Rod and his Balvenie, thought about telling Willa he had just met a man who didn’t have a daughter anymore and that

Samuel had been too slow, too tied up in something he didn't understand, to tell the man.

He heard Willa moan, a small rail-thin sound of dying and even in the dark he saw her face was flushed and she was holding back tears. He reached out but only touched her shoulder, stiffly.

"You okay buddy?"

She shook her head. Her eyes dried up and she let her hair fall across her face.

"Did mom tell you about North Carolina?" she asked.

"What? No. Did something happen on the trip?"

"She says we're moving. She says we're moving to North Carolina. She was going to tell you."

"Oh."

"She didn't tell you."

"No."

"Tell her no. Okay? Tell her she can't do it."

He looked into the house, into the bright crowds of talking faces. He wondered where they found so many things to talk about. And then the heat fell down on to Samuel, weighed down on his shirt, swept smoothly into his throat and coiled around his chest, like there was a hundred feet of solid ocean above him and it tried to snap his ribs again, break them so they stabbed into his lungs and he felt all that and the air popped. His head swam and he heard Willa say something.

"Say that again?" he asked.

"I said tell her she can't do it. She has to listen to you, right?"

“No. She doesn’t. Not really.” He brushed sweat away from his forehead but it was back right away. He looked over at Willa, at her small frowning face, a million miles away, and the beating of his blood echoed in his ears.

“Can we go away from here?” she asked.

“What?”

“Can we go out for a while? Get away from this?” she asked. “Let’s go out to the racetrack. See some horses. This is all just too loud. Please.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think we can.”

“Let’s just go.”

In the house, behind all the glass, he saw Laura, smiling, moving gently to the music, laughing with handsome women he didn’t know, holding her wine glass carefully and she looked out at him. She smiled, once, quickly, at him, and then her face changed, closed itself and he remembered when he had lived with her, when he lived with them, and late one night she found him, sitting alone at the kitchen table, in the dark, sweating, lost in some snarling thought that wouldn’t let him go and Willa was there, at the doorway, taking it in like she understood it all at three years old. Laura picked Willa up and left the house, quickly and quietly, and they were gone for three days and soon he was gone for years.

Samuel looked at Willa. Her eyes were dry now and her face was rigid and for a minute he thought she was sizing him up. She turned away, not from him but away all the same. Something danced deep in the shadows of her eyes.

“I can’t,” he said. “Not right now. We’ll go out there soon, okay. Watch them train. I promise. But not right now. I have to go. I’ll call you soon.”

He left quickly, without stopping, and went to find the wind.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

He drove all night, stayed on the Gulf front, with the swollen ivory moon low in the sky. Near dawn he drove through a closed and quiet Marlin Beach and saw the young magician, dressed in a white suit, standing on a corner, happy, like a surprised toddler who couldn't believe his good luck. He held a large dark bottle of champagne under his arm, and picked away at the golden foil with his free hand. When he took a delicate sip he had to hold the bottle with two hands. The man smiled blindly at Samuel said something to himself, faint vapors of pink scratching away at the sky behind him, and Samuel kept going, drove back to the Hummingbird, his thoughts lost in a sea of burning sweat. Birds that weren't there screamed in his head.

Laura was there. She looked out of place, up on his porch, sitting in his chair. She stood when she saw him pull up and park. She had changed into jeans but she still looked like she had gotten lost looking for a party he couldn't afford. She always looked like that.

Samuel walked over and sat down on the steps, near her. Laura sat down beside him.

"I told you to come find me," she said. "I told you we had to talk."

Samuel nodded. He remembered the way April sat out front, drinking all night, waiting for the birds, scared as hell.

His head hurt. And he was tired. Too tired.

Laura waited.

"You left too quickly," she said.

"Where's Willa?" he asked.

"With friends."

“At a sleep-over?”

“No. With friends of mine. She doesn’t really do sleep-overs.”

“Okay,” he said. He thought about her, about Willa, thought about the way she looked at him so that sometimes he wasn’t sure if he was really there at all. “Why doesn’t she do sleep-overs?” he asked.

“You know what she’s like. Friendly with everyone, friends with no one. Sound familiar?”

He thought about that. “You don’t mean me, do you?”

“I do.”

“But I’m not like that.”

She laughed. Pretty shadows played across her face. Sometimes she still seemed so young, he thought, like when they first left Kansas City together and she was just past nineteen but when they stopped in a motel for a night the manager called the police, sure they had run off together while she was still too young for the world.

“You don’t think you’re like that?” she asked.

“Not at all. Other way around.”

She shook her head like she didn’t believe him but he saw she was thinking it over.

“You ever miss Kansas City?” he asked.

“God no.”

“How about Tisdale?”

“No. Maybe if we had known each other I might have liked it more.”

“Why didn’t we know each other?”

“Because I was three years younger. Because you were always off with your father, chasing horses that were already dead.”

She stopped. She winced and tried to hide those thoughts that had turned sour.

“But Kansas City was good,” she said.

“I thought you didn’t like it there?”

“I didn’t,” she said. “I hated it. But we caught up with each other there and I loved you. So there was something good about Kansas City. There was nothing good about Tisdale.”

He thought about Tisdale, about the summer after his father had died. He had seen her, seen A Little Song, A Little Dance, when he had gone out early one morning to go fishing, he had seen her running hard, beating the wind-blown prairie down to dust, red clouds billowing behind her, all alone, headed south, going so fast, so hard, Samuel thought she might break and when he got home he told his mother and by the end of summer they were gone.

“So, what’s in North Carolina?” he asked.

“Work.”

“You or Scott?”

“Both of us. His is lined up already. Some big golf club really wants him. The money is too good.”

“And Willa?”

“We’re going to have to work something out,” she said. “Seriously. I don’t know what’s going on anymore. I don’t know if I ever did. But this new shit, this running off that she’s started doing. She can’t do that. She can’t run off again. She’s on a damn tight leash right now, but we need to figure something out.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t go,” he said. “She asked me to tell you not to go.”

Laura nodded.

“You’re going anyway,” he said.

“Yeah. We’re going anyway,” she said. “We’re going. And here’s the thing, it might be good for Willa, it might be good to get away from everything, maybe it might even be good for her to get away from *you* for a while, it might snap her out of whatever’s going on.”

“I don’t know,” Samuel said. “I’m not sure she’s going through the kind of thing you can snap out of.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head and tried to find something to say but his thought just burnt away. “I don’t know.”

“What’s she going through, Samuel?”

“I don’t know.”

She didn’t say anything to that. He could feel her anger in the air. The wind slammed to a stop and Samuel knew Laura was fighting back hard words.

She shook her head. “I swear to god, Samuel.”

He waited.

And then she laughed. “Christ,” she said. “We’re a pair, aren’t we?”

“I guess.”

“You know why I get so worked up, right?”

“I know,” he said.

“Even when you’re smiling, even when you’re with Willa, I can see something grinding down on you, Samuel. It worries me.”

“It’s not contagious.”

“No. I guess not,” she said. “But is it hereditary?”

“You don’t need to worry about me. Not like that.”

“You didn’t used to be like this, you know,” Laura said.

“I know. I was a barrel of monkeys.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but something changed. I don’t know when, but something changed in you, something caught up with you.”

“I guess.”

Over at April’s someone coughed, hard and hacking and the man came out, lighting a cigarette and looking right at them like he had been waiting on them. Samuel thought the man looked like a cigarette, burning away quickly and loving it. The air was electric, like the man had plugged himself into a socket and there was a hard current coming from his body and falling dead in the air.

“Oh, he looks fun,” Laura said.

The man looked at them a minute longer, smoking deeply and then pulled on a thin t-shirt with a dark stain on it that Samuel guessed must be wine or blood or both.

He coughed again and walked away, over to the parking lot and got into a sleek Buick Riviera and drove away.

“Holy shit,” Samuel said.

“What?”

“I’ve seen that car everywhere.”

“Wonder who he stole it from?”

“What?” His thoughts tripped.

She was frowning out at the Hummingbird.

“If Willa’s going to start spending summers with you, you might need to find a nicer place.”

“Summers?”

“Yeah, Samuel. Not a whole summer, but maybe a week or two. I think we should try it out. Or something like it. I’m not sure what I really think about it, you know that. If it does more bad than good, if it turns out you are fucking contagious or whatever you want to call it, well, it will stop, everything will stop, but right now, we have to try something Samuel. That’s why I came all the way out here in the middle of the night. With us going away, well, hell, how long do you think before Willa’s hitch hiking down to Florida or something stupid. She won’t last. And I don’t know, but maybe neither will you.”

The faded sawdust glow of sunrise struck her face, made her eyes lucid, almost hollow, and her skin too thin. She still looked angry.

“Did you tell Willa?”

“Yeah.”

“What did she say?”

Laura shrugged, tried to shake some thought away; “She just looked at me and nodded.”

“Two weeks,” he said. “That’s a hell of an about-face.”

“Yeah, well, something’s gotta give, Samuel.”

“I guess.”

It was quiet that morning, with only the steady hush of a small and constant wind that ran across Samuel’s skin, dried his sweat before it fell, and it felt good, raw, like it had brought some of the Gulf along with it. Laura sat still, her body tense so that he saw those rigid muscles at her jaw, at her neck and he wanted to palm the back of her head, feel her hair and her warmth, like he did to Willa but he just sat there, holding his own hands.

Laura rubbed her eyes, delicately, like she did everything.

“I’m scared, Samuel.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

He took Willa out to Century, after four, when there was the nostalgic smell of burnt wood in the air rather than the damp and sour salt from shallow southern seas. They ran the horses around four or five, when it had cooled, just enough so they wouldn't get heatstroke, and after, when most of them were done, when the grooms were washing them down, the track started to empty out, to quiet down so that only the soft mumbles of the horses and the stable hands could be heard.

He drove quickly and left the music off and when he looked over at Willa she was touching the small photograph of his father's horse that hung from the mirror. When she turned it over and saw herself she frowned and went back to the horse.

"What was her name again?" she asked. She had asked before, many times.

"A Little Song, A Little Dance."

"That's a good name."

"I think so too."

She sat back and later, when they were almost at the track, she was asleep. Her face flinched, a subtle run of the skin, and he wondered what she was dreaming about. Something that wouldn't let her rest, he thought, something that just kept on going. He put a hand on her knee and when he looked back she was watching him, her head back, her face hard in a way he had seen before, long ago.

She pointed out the window.

"What way is she heading?" she asked.

He looked out again and saw the bird, the arcing wingspan, the flash of black in the sky.

"North, I guess."



“What kind of bird is it?”

“I think it’s a vulture,” he said.

“What’s it doing?”

“Probably looking for road kill.”

She leaned over to get a better look. “I didn’t think a vulture would be so pretty,” she said.

“From this far away, I guess they are.”

“I think she’s following us.”

He laughed softly.

“North, right?” she said.

“I think so.”

“Maybe we should be following her.”

“Why’s that?”

“Get out of here before the storm comes. They talked about it on the news this morning.”

“It is a big one?”

“No. Not really.”

“Then let it come. It will feel good. We need a good rain.”

“That’s right. You like these storms.”

“Sometimes.”

And he remembered when she had stayed with him at the Hummingbird, when she was so small that she looked lost at sea while she lay in his bed, sleeping through the rain while he sat up, moved from the couch to the chair in his room so he could see her and when the wind picked up so that it starting knocking hard against his cabin, hard enough that heavy palm fronds fell from the trees and were picked up

again, thrown hard against the cars outside, against Luis' cabin so that his windows broke and she woke up and looked at him like she had been waiting for the storm all along

He turned into Century. The grandstand was empty but over at the clubhouse a few parked cars waited near the doors, while inside people talked and drank and tried to stay cool. When they walked out back there were people everywhere. Horses bristled and he took Willa's hand.

"I can't remember the last time I saw so many people out here," he said.

"Why's that?"

"I guess I come at all the wrong hours."

"What do you mean?"

"I come at the end of the night, at the end of my night, when I'm done driving for the day. Not too many people here around two or three in the morning."

"Can you bring me here then?"

"I kid your age should be sleeping at that time."

"You know I'm up anyway."

"Yeah." He nodded.

She absently squeezed his hand and then let go, walked over to an open pen and stepped up on the rail to see better. A buckskin gelding with black socks trotted nervously along the fence, over at the other side of the ring. He stopped when he saw Willa, did a few half turns and then waited. After a minute a kid not much older than Willa walked over, holding a halter.

"He's just a boy," she said.

"Looks like."

"Does he work here?"

“I guess.”

She nodded and thought about it. Wind danced in the dust out in the ring and the boy squinted and stopped to stare at the horse. For a second the air was cool and Samuel could smell the warmth of the horse, even from so far away, like when he was a boy and dreamt about the mustangs running down south and when he woke up he still smelled them, like he had been out in the desert sleeping with them.

“Do you think there are many horses in North Carolina?” Willa asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “There must be.”

“Are you going to come up to visit?”

“Of course.”

“Of course?” she said it like she had heard it a thousand times before and knew what kind of line it was.

“I will.”

She nodded. The boy moved toward the horse, walked in from the side and slipped the halter on smoothly so that the gelding twisted his head but it was too late. “Did he do that right?” Willa asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“It didn’t look right. The horse didn’t look like he thought it was right.” She watched the boy lead the horse away, over to the stables. “We should go look for them. When you come up to visit me, we should go look for horses. Find them. They must be up there somewhere.”

“I can ask around.”

“That would be good.”

Willa frowned at her thoughts. “We’ll be pretty far away.”

“It’s not that far. It’s an easy drive.”

“Do you think we’re a lot alike? You and me?”

“I guess. In some ways.”

“But not all ways.”

“No. Not all ways.”

“Mom thinks I’m a lot like you. She doesn’t always say it, but sometimes by the way she looks at me, I know I remind her of you.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure it’s me you remind her of.” He looked at Willa and wondered if Laura even knew what she was seeing. In some way, under her skin and under her thoughts, she knew, but he hoped not too much.

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head, gave her a small smile. “Maybe you’re starting to look like Scott.”

“I don’t look a thing like Scott. Mom thinks he looks like Paul Newman.”

“He does.”

“Scott says he looks better.”

“What’s your mom say to that?”

“She says that’s impossible.”

“She’s probably right.”

Another horse was brought out into the pen. Claude trotted beside the mare, both of them sweating, the mare cooling down, Claude warming up and then she huffed quietly, some odd equine laughter, and then she took off and ran for her life. The lead snaked from Claude’s hand and trailed the mare as she ran. She circled the ring, let go of that pent up burning inside of her, sweat glinting across her back, and when she tore past Samuel and Willa, her eyes a wild and almost blind black and

gold, Samuel wondered if she thought she was still out west, running toward the mountains, hunting the sky.

Claude stood watching, his mouth open as he caught his breath, his forehead pinched, and he started laughing, a full laugh that turned to wheezing. The mare kept going and Samuel thought she wasn't going to stop for anybody.

Beside him, Willa tensed, leaned into the rail like she wanted to fall into the ring and go after the horse, run with her, and then she laughed quietly, in a familiar way.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Samuel worked until the bars started to close. Outside the Lighthouse the red neon sign burst, the thin glass popping in the quiet night, the electrical current too much for it, and there was an old, acrid scent in the air that made the drinkers hold each other tighter than usual as they came out of the bars and looked up and down the street, eagerly, like they expected to see an old friend. Samuel called it a night and drove back to the Hummingbird.

He was still awake when he heard the car doors slam, heard flat, fried voices in the night, the words spat out in heat. They walked across the Hummingbird, thin shadows moving fast. They stopped and he was sure they were looking at him, hidden behind his darkened window. When they got to April's cabin and turned on the light, he saw the woman, another thin blonde, hard-boned and hungry, and then they were gone, the door shut, and soon the room was dark again.

There was a sweet smell in the air, something young, that made him think of the Florida he had been told about by his father, made him think of all those seaside mornings when his father had woken before daybreak and gone out on the road.

The Buick was over there, in the parking lot. His thoughts burned in that dull and feverish way.

He heard a grunt, small and feminine, and then a thin nervous laugh that disappeared, the silence like a slap across the night. It was a hard kind of quiet.

Outside, a door shut quietly and Samuel went over to his front door, stood there and heard a match flare up and then die quickly, heard the trapped sound of splashing in a glass bottle.

He was out there again, smoking a cigarette, the thin vapor running away quickly. Samuel thought about this new girl, sitting in the cabin, in April's bed, the room locked into darkness. The man stood still for a minute, his face hidden in shadows. When he stepped forward, toward Samuel, the moon caught him and showed that vacant, handsome face. He was naked, his body thin and hard, like it had been eating itself for some time now, and when he took a long pull on his cigarette he started to cough, a long ragged cough that turned into a laugh. He smiled at Samuel, like he had found Samuel spying through a window as though he had been putting on a show the whole time.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Willa called him a little before sun up to ask when Labor Day was.

“Labor Day?” he asked. “Why are you asking me about Labor Day?”

“Because I heard mom on the phone last night. We’re moving after Labor Day.”

“To North Carolina.”

“To North Carolina.”

“Oh.” He wondered how they could get going so quickly.

“Is it soon?” she asked.

“Yeah. It’s in a few weeks. It’s at the start of September.”

“School starts in September.”

“That’s right.”

“So I’ll miss a little school.”

“I guess.”

“That’s good.”

“You don’t like school?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You can’t open the windows.”

“Fair enough,” he said. He could hear her moving, hear that restless fidget of childhood. She dropped something. “Pretty early to call,” he said.

“I thought you didn’t sleep much.”

“I don’t.”

“Then it’s okay, right.”



“Yeah. It’s okay. Of course it’s okay. Only why aren’t you sleeping?”

“I guess I don’t sleep much, too.”

“What were you up to?”

“Drawing. Waiting until I thought it would be late enough to call you.”

“Is your mother up?”

“No.”

“Is Scott back yet?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he awake?”

“I don’t know.”

“Go wake someone up,” Samuel said. “Tell them I’m coming over.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. Let’s go get some breakfast.”

When he left the Hummingbird he drove by the Buick. Dew had settled over the car, a fine damp lace, and he wondered how such a grimy man could drive such a clean car and he wanted to get as far away from it as possible.

Out on the highway, Samuel drove quickly, happily, alone out on the highway.

Willa was waiting outside, sitting on the step like she had been there all night. He half expected her to be smoking a cigarette. She grinned when she saw him and ran to get in the car. She smelled of rose water again, rose water and baby shampoo.

“Let’s go,” she said.

“You tell your mom?”

“Yeah.”

Samuel honked his horn, twice, the sound incredibly loud on the empty street.

The front door opened and Scott came out, grinned weakly, like he had been up for days drinking gin in the sun and he sat down on the step, where Willa had been waiting.

Willa looked at Samuel. “You didn’t believe me?” she asked.

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know. I guess I wanted to settle your mom’s nerves. Something like that. It’s just that she always acts like she thinks I’m going to run away with you.”

“Why would she think that?”

“I can’t imagine.”

Willa squinted up at Samuel, looked at him hard, and started laughing.

They drove a while, quietly, letting the world wake up around them. He had the feeling she had been up all night, something inside of her racing hard.

“You want to go out to Easter Parade?” he asked.

“To the amusement park?”

“That’s right.”

She shook her head, “No. I’d rather go over to the track.”

“Again?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

They stayed along the coast a while, heading north. Beside them the Gulf seemed to jump; small hard waves smacked each other and burst into whitecaps and far away the granite sea was still shrouded by the lingering night.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not yet,” she said. “Will there be horse out at the track today?”

“Yes.”

“Will they be racing?”

“Not. Not yet. Not for a while. Just training, getting ready for the season.”

“When’s that?”

“I think it’s in a few weeks. A little more.”

“So, after I’m gone.”

“That’s right.”

“But they’ll be running.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” she said.

At Century they walked in behind three men in bright shirts, all of them smoking, pulling hard on their cigarettes as if they expected something more than nicotine. The three of them talked quickly. They pointed a lot and looked worried and when they walked down to the stalls and stopped at the horses, giving each of them a brief once over, pushing the horses heads roughly to the side to see into the stall, to see what the horse was working with, Samuel wondered how much they were getting ready to put on the line.

Willa watched two horses walk side by side, a thin leather lead connecting them, their steps hard on the packed dirt floor, their dark eyes warm and wary.

On the course several horses were cooling down, trotting, their reins held tight by lose riders. Voices called out, too sudden for the morning, and further back horses ran, fast, the damp red earth kicked up behind them. A rider eased to a stop and jumped down and handed the wet bay off to Claude. She pushed against him and he pushed back, bent his head down onto her and smiled. He rubbed her neck with thick

hands and they walked away from the course together, bumping each other slightly as they walked. Behind Claude a pale mare called out, worried, and kicked up like she were trying to step on snakes and Claude moved closer to his bay.

Samuel nodded toward Claude and they followed him down through the backstretch. Men drank coffee and ate cinnamon buns, quietly, like it was still too early to talk too much, like it might stop the day from coming and when they looked at Samuel with the distant, almost blind look of waking, he knew that they slept long and well and were waiting to get back to it, once the horses were done and away from the heat.

He noticed that Willa bumped him as they walked, like Claude and his horse, and he wondered where that came from. She smiled up at him and winked.

“They have wild horses in North Carolina,” he said. “I remembered that last night.”

“Wild ones? You mean like the mustangs out west from when you were a kid?”

“They still have them out west.”

“Where?”

“Mostly Nevada.”

“We should go out there sometime?”

“To Nevada?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s start with North Carolina.”

“Okay.”

They followed Claude down a row of stalls. Horses nickered at them as they passed. The overhead lamp was dim, the yellow light old and smoked-looking so that

the horses were wrapped up in shadow. Bridles and halters were strung up on nails along the walls and the hay nets knocked gently against the wooden doorframes as the horses nuzzled into them, pulled out the feed.

Claude washed the horse down, hosed her softly, mumbling more to himself than the horse as he went, as he soaped her and rinsed her again, and then he held out the drying towels to Willa and she walked over and helped him. After a minute Claude sat down on a bench that was too low and he nodded as Willa rubbed down the bay. After, they put a thin blanket on her and walked her back into the stalls, set her in next to a grey, sharply muscled gelding who made Samuel wonder if maybe horses were predators after all.

Willa reached out and touched the bay. "Does this one race?"

Claude shook his head. "Mostly, they all race if they're here," he said. "But not this one. Not for while."

"Why not?"

"Did you see how she's walking funny?"

"No."

"It's hard to see it. But she is. She hurt herself. It will take a while before she gets sent out again."

"So what happens to her now?"

"She'll keep him company." He pointed to the gelding. "They're old friends. They go everywhere together."

Willa nodded and kept rubbing the bay's neck. She leaned in close, the oily smell of horsehide thick in the air, in her hands, on her skin. The horse bristled, softly, and Willa's cheeks turned red.

In the next stall the gelding hit back at the wall, his hooves hard on the wood and he snorted. The sound echoed through the stables. Willa stepped back, away from the stalls and bumped into Claude. He put his hand on her shoulder, his wide palms calming, and looked at the gelding. Both the horses started to nicker, their breath came on fast and their eyes flared and Claude stepped toward them, gently. He held out his hands, palms out, but the horses backed away, ears twitching, something under their skin running hard. Claude looked outside, at the bright sky over the fenced in rings, and he nodded.

“What are they doing?” Willa asked.

“It’s just the rain,” Claude said.

“It’s not raining.”

“Not here. Not yet.”

“Is it going to?”

“Oh yeah. A summer this dry, when it does finally rain, it’s always big. A big rain always gets these guys worked up.”

“Can you do anything about it?”

“I’m going to sit with them a while.”

Claude sat down across from the two horses, his back against the wall.

They walked out of the stable, stepped over a man who was sleeping on the ground, his long legs stretched out like he was ready for a coffin. Hay and dust and dirt billowed easily around him, on him, and when Samuel looked down the man was watching him. The horses coming in from the track quivered and pulled away so that the men had that hard, steady tension of a fake and forced calm. Samuel took Willa’s hand and pulled her in close to him and when they got in the car, he heard her laugh, softly, to herself.

He took her back to Marlin Beach, bought hot dogs with mustard from the food shack for breakfast and sat down in the sand to eat, close to the water where the sand wasn't blowing so hard, and they squinted out at the solid silver sea. Wind popped on the water, whipped it playfully, and when Samuel looked at Willa she blinked, startled, and he wondered where she had been. A small handful of people were out, scattered across the beach. Willa sang to herself while she ate, so quietly Samuel wasn't sure if she knew it, and her dark hair flickered around her face like a horse's tail chasing away the flies. He thought that soon her hair would be darker than his, maybe even black and he put his arm around her shoulders and wondered why the sky was so empty, why all the birds had gone away. He was thirsty. He was always thirsty out here, he thought, even more than when he was young and he lived on the edge of the desert.

Willa kept on singing to herself.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A telephone rang, quietly, the sound buried under blackness. Near him, someone moved, carefully, and there was the sleeping smell of jasmine. When Samuel pushed himself awake, he was alone in his bedroom. The jasmine was gone. All he could smell now was cigarettes and sweat. He waited for the telephone again but it didn't ring. He rubbed a mosquito away from his ear.

When Samuel went outside the man was out there again, smoking a cigarette in the wicker chair beside his open door, looking over at Samuel like he had been waiting all night. He grinned and took a long swallow from a small bottle of vodka. Fast music came from the radio inside, something rough that sounded half static and the man stood up, flicked a cigarette hard over into the swimming pool and then lit another one, sucking at it deeply, the flame from the lighter flaring softly in the darkness as it caught.

Samuel looked back at him and waited. He wanted to blink and have the man gone. And he wondered if that girl was inside, in bed, or if she had gone away already. The man took another drink. When he moved there was a whiplash hardness to his muscles, and Samuel felt soft, like an over the hill buffalo too slow to avoid the solid taste of steel.

He walked over to Samuel and held out the pint of vodka. The glass glinted against the moon and Samuel saw there was only an inch left in the bottle. Samuel shook his head and the man shrugged. When he coughed the sound was a hollow rattle and he took another drink and frowned.

"Is it always this quiet?" the man asked. His voice was softer than Samuel had expected, held an easy edge of laughter.



Samuel shook his head. "No. Sometimes there's birds."

"At night?"

"Yes."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know. Calling out."

The man spat tightly and then took a drink. He looked at Samuel a while. "I've been seeing you around quite a bit, haven't I?"

"Looks like."

"Not just here."

"If you say so."

When he opened his mouth to laugh, no sound came out. His body shook slightly. Cigarette smoke drifted from his nose and then shot out quickly and hung between them, somehow too thick to fade away with the wind.

"Not much, is it?" he said.

"What?" Samuel asked.

"This place. This place here, this Hummingbird."

"I guess."

"You guess." He shook his head at Samuel. "You been here a long time?"

"Sure."

"You were about to say *I guess*, weren't you?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah." He grinned. "Yeah, you were." He held out the bottle again, half shook it for Samuel. His movements were all too sharp, like there was only broken glass under his skin. "Go on."

"I'm all right."

“Shit.” He took another sip. “What I need is some lemons or limes with this. It’s all kick right now. It needs to be cut. You A.A. or something?”

“No.”

“You got the look.”

“If you say so.”

“You don’t got any limes, do you?”

“No,” Samuel said. It almost felt good to lie to the man.

“No? Okay, okay. I’ll get by. Almost done the damn thing anyway.”

A woman came to the door, rail-thin and shook out her hair while she watched them. Samuel looked at her, nodded, but she didn’t seem to notice. Her t-shirt was old and thin, a familiar pink print on it across her chest told Samuel to stop in at The Sunken Ship down in Tampa. He knew the bar. It was all clean cut college kids, pitchers of cheap beer and onion rings, scrubbed faces and fresh haircuts and he wondered how long ago she had been one of those kids.

“Baby.” Her voice was worried. “Baby, we’re all out of cigarettes.”

“Then go buy some.”

“You got any there with you?”

“No.” He said it slowly and looked at Samuel with suddenly bright eyes.

“Can you drive me?”

“Not in the middle of the night, I can’t.”

She stood there a minute longer and then went back into the cabin.

The man took a last swallow of the vodka and wound up, threw the bottle out back into the trees. Samuel heard it hit.

“Not the same without the limes, man,” he said. “You wouldn’t think it, but it’s good. My wife put me on to that one.”

“Your wife?”

“Yeah. Pretty little blonde thing.” He smiled again, wide and gleaming, teasing out a joke all his own. “You seen her around, haven’t you?”

“That her over there?” Samuel nodded toward the darkened cabin.

“Nope.” He winked.

Samuel wiped his palms against his shirt, and when the man coughed again, sudden and sharp, Samuel noticed that, very far away, the frogs were starting to drone. And he could smell the vodka gone sour on the man’s breath. He took a step backward.

“She was here. My wife. Hanging around this joint, staying here a while. Hiding out. Hiding out and making friends wasn’t she?”

“Okay.”

“*Okay*,” he said. He shook his head and took a package of cigarettes out of his hip pocket and lit one. When he pulled a long draw down into his lungs and held it there, he just stared a while, smiling like a man pretending to find something funny. “But she’s gone now, isn’t she? Long gone so long.”

“If you say so,” Samuel said.

“Yeah. Yeah. If I say so.”

He spat at the ground, sudden and sharp, and wiped at mouth with his arm and looked at Samuel like he knew he had lied about something.

Bright lights waved across the Hummingbird and Samuel looked over at the parking lot, saw the pick-up truck roll in close and sit, waiting. The man squinted at the truck. Something under his skin bristled.

The truck went dark and Luis stepped out. He waited a minute, let the leftover glow from the bright headlights die down into the trees and walked over. He wore an

old t-shirt, covered with spills of paint, and cradled a six-pack of Budweiser, the cans beaded with condensation and he drank from an open can. When he got to the two of them he stood close and looked blankly at Samuel's neighbor.

"How's it going?" Luis asked.

The man smiled and stepped back, gave Luis more room like it was a gift he might take away again. "All fine here, officer."

Luis nodded. He took a drink of beer and kept looking at the man. "Okay."

"Well, I guess no one likes a third wheel. I better go see to my lady, anyhoo."

"Okay," Luis said.

He winked at Samuel again and walked away, taking his time, sucking on his cigarette. When he got to his door he sat down in the wicker chair, in the dark, and every now and then Samuel could see the red burn of the cigarette in the night and, when he moved, the lethargic sway of alligator shadows.

Luis took a beer from the six-pack and pressed one into Samuel. "Oh man."

"How'd he know you were a cop?" Samuel asked.

"He's seen enough of us to not need a uniform." Luis frowned. "He'll sit there all night," he said. "Let's go out back."

"Sure."

"I made sure the beer is almost ice."

"Thanks."

"I guess it won't last." They walked out behind Samuel's cabin and kept going, away from the man sitting outside April's cabin. Luis shook his head and stopped walking. He looked back toward the Hummingbird, toward the darkened cabins. "He's at your girl's cabin, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he's at April's."

“Man.” Luis shook his head, took a long swallow of beer and emptied the can.  
“It’s good to be gone,” he said.

“How’s your mother’s place?”

“It’s good. I forgot how mad she gets. All the time I mean. Sometimes I don’t know why she’s yelling at me. But it’s good. It’s better than this, you know. Don’t have to worry about if someone’s going to walk into my place and take my gun to use on themselves. I don’t know if it’s this place, if it invites you to dig a nice old rut for yourself, or if it’s just the damn people that keep on coming.”

“That man in April’s place,” Samuel said. “He’s driving a Buick Riviera.”

“That the car you’ve seen everywhere?”

“Yeah, I think it is.”

“And?”

“And, I don’t know.”

“You still think something’s off.”

“I guess so. I guess I just don’t see it.”

“Don’t see it?”

“Don’t understand it? Don’t understand April. I don’t know. Something doesn’t seem right to me. I can’t get my head around it.”

“That’s good, Samuel. It’s not right. You shouldn’t understand it. It should seem off to you. The minute you do understand it, well, I say that’s when you’re in trouble.”

They walked over to Luis’ old cabin and sat down in plastic tubs chairs out back. It was all clean now, swept and scrubbed by Jenny, the glass ashtray glinting, waiting for someone new. Luis took a fresh beer and opened it, took a drink and frowned.

“It’s warming up already,” he said. “You’re right you know, it is better when it’s half frozen.”

Samuel nodded and took a sip of his beer. Luis was right, it had warmed already, and he set it down on the ground.

“What have you gone off to think about?” Luis asked.

“I’m not really thinking. Maybe I’m wondering.”

“Wondering what?”

“That man, the way he was talking, said he was looking for his wife.” Samuel shrugged and let his words hang in the air.

“You think he knew her?”

“I think he knew her.”

“Maybe he did, but it doesn’t matter, not anymore. Just stay away from him. Trust me, the whole damn world should stay away from people like him. They never do though. I don’t know why. I see guys like that everywhere, and not just on the job. He’s a human wormhole with a sweet, sweet smile and a few free drinks.”

Luis waved away the mosquitos and Samuel thought about all the nights Luis had spent walking around out back behind the Hummingbird, trying to chase away the thoughts that had followed him home from work. When Luis first moved in, years ago, Samuel would wake at night and hear those soft aimless steps that, in the quiet of the night, sounded like they were right outside Samuel’s window, close, the same way he could hear A Little Song, A Little Dance all night long, walking the fence line, half a mile away though Samuel was sure she was just below his bedroom window, waiting for his father.

They sat there, silently, and Luis drank the third beer like he didn’t want it.

“The offer is still there you know,” he said. “For you to come and stay at my mother’s house. Even just for a few days while you get something else sorted. Jenny’s not going to last much longer here and then you’ll have nothing but people like April and her handsome friend. My brother sold me his pick-up truck and you know I’m happy to haul your stuff for a six-pack. A cold one, though.”

“You okay, man?”

“Yeah,” Samuel said. “Yeah, I just miss Willa.”

Luis nodded. “That’s good.”

“That’s good?”

“Of course,” Luis said. He stood up and walked over to the side of his old cabin and glanced toward the swimming pool, toward April’s cabin.

“He still there?” Samuel asked.

“I think so. It’s too dark to see but I think so.” Luis squinted and shook his head. “You know he looks like her? Like April I mean. Not like they look the same physically or anything, but I saw her, you know, after she came and got my weapon, I saw her walking over to her room, she looked back at me for a second before she went in. I didn’t know what was going on. I was just having sweet thoughts. I might have even waved to her. I had no idea what she had in her hands, what she had planned. But looking at her and now looking at him, they look the same, something looks the same. I don’t know what it is. Jesus man, I can’t tell you how good it is to be somewhere I don’t have to worry about people like that anymore.”

The rain picked up. The sound rang out as it hit the cabins and the trees, grew to a steady beating and sent the nightlife running, and Samuel could smell the sea, like it had come in close and was right there at his feet.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was too wet to work. The wind whipped broken sheets of rain across the roads and when he went out to la Huerta to try the hotels, the Gulf was a rumpled mess of whitecaps that rose and broke against the pier. The sea was very high and Samuel got the impression that the whole empty boulevard was ready to go under. He waited a while at the Rathbone Inn, the red suited doorman watching him from inside the marble lobby, behind the glass walls, his dark face finding it all funny.

Every so often he looked over at Samuel and raised his eyebrows. Soon Samuel's windows steamed over and even with the wipers going he couldn't see anything but cracked pearl water hitting his windscreen. Once, he heard shouting and he opened his window to see two children in front of the hotel, excited and stomping around.

An ambulance passed him, and he swerved, held the wheel too tight and then pulled over. Sweat beaded his forehead and when he tried to breathe it came out tight and raspy, like his lungs didn't want to let anything go. He thought about that blue road sign another twenty minutes away, telling the world to come and stay a while at the Hummingbird Suites, and he turned away, drove back to Marlin Beach and pulled up at a telephone booth at the tip of the strip and jumped out of the car into the rain.

He had to press his back on the phone booth door to stop the wind from blowing the door open and when he dialed he thought it was good to be so wet again.

Willie answered.

"Hey buddy," he said.

"Dad."

"What are you up to?" he asked.



“I was waiting for you to call back.”

“Call back?”

“I’ve been calling you all morning.”

“I need to get an answering machine.”

“It’s raining pretty hard.”

“I know. I’m out at the beach right now. I saw birds looking for shelter.”

“Did they find it?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you think the horses are doing? Out at the track.”

“They’ll be fine. It’s just a storm.”

“Will there be people there? To look after them?”

“Yes.”

“Can we go out there?”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

Across the street, over the water, the rain was falling on ruptured lead. He remembered when he was young, young enough to chase animals all night, and he used to dream about quiet waves that were too big for the earth. Sometimes he woke up in the darkness, sure the world was already gone and then he heard his father, sitting in the corner of his bedroom, drawing horses in the dark.

Outside the sky kept rolling, thick and muddy, an eerie void that had chased away the birds.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. I’ll head over now. Have you cleared it with your mother?”

“I will.”

“Okay. I’ll head over now.”

“Good.”

When he pulled up Willa and Laura were waiting in the open doorway, out of the rain and Willa ran out when she saw Samuel. She got in the car, bringing the rain with her and Samuel looked back at the house but Laura was already gone. Willa looked at him, excited.

They drove slowly and the rain came in sudden and shocking waves. Giant palm fronds that had fallen from the trees dragged themselves down the roads with the wind like lost alligators. Even with all the rain Willa opened her window a crack and told Samuel she needed to breathe.

“No music?” Willa asked. “No Christmas songs?”

“No Christmas songs. I’m getting tired of all the Christmas songs. I’m getting tired of all the music I hear.”

“You ever try opera?”

“Opera?”

“Singing.”

“I know what opera is. You like it?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you hear it?”

“Scott listens to opera.”

“And you like it?”

“I told you yes.”

“Okay.”

“You know, mom says we can spend summers together,” she said. “A few weeks at least.”

He nodded. "That's a solid block of time."

"I think she wants you to move out of the Hummingbird."

"Yeah. Yeah, she does," he said. He stopped at a red light that could barely been seen through the rain and they waited, alone, for the empty world to pass by.

"You think she'd go for a few weeks even if I was up there?"

"Up where?"

"North Carolina."

"You'd move?"

He nodded.

"I thought you loved Florida. Mom told me you've been dreaming about Florida since before she knew you, since you were a kid."

"I guess that's true. I don't know. Maybe I just loved the stories my father told me."

"You ever hear stories about North Carolina?"

"No. I went there once. That was a long time ago."

"Was it nice?"

"I don't remember."

"Are you really going to move?"

"Of course."

"Sometimes I don't think she wants us to be so near."

Samuel shrugged.

She smiled at him and laughed quietly to herself.

At Century they pulled in close to the backstretch and waited for a lull in the rain but it never came. Up ahead the track was empty. Rainwater pooled in the

raceway and ran into streams in the dirt, and out there in the open they could see the rain dash about madly. They listened for the horses but only heard the storm fall.

They got out and ran through the rain to the shelter of the barns. The air was heavy with the smell of wet horses and the beating sound of the rain. Willa laughed, a small wolf's laugh that was too deep for such a thin girl and her eyes were bright and black and lovely and when she looked at Samuel he felt like he had gotten something right.

They listened to the muted sound of the horses shuffle and nicker. Samuel followed Willa and they stopped and looked at a boy sitting on a bale of hay reading a comic book. He smiled at the two of them, said hello in soft Spanish and went back to reading. His boots were out in front of him, kicked out like he was tired from a weeklong ride, and they were covered with red mud from the track. Behind him the stable was almost full of worried horses. A few of them had their heads out of the stalls and looked at him and Willa as they huffed, their eyes wide.

Claude walked out of an empty stall holding a Navajo blanket and a bottle of beer and when he saw them he stopped and smiled softly, like he had just woken up from a long night and wasn't sure where he was. He was covered with rain and mud and shone in that greasy way so they knew he had been sweating for a while, worried for a while. He took a sip of beer and shook his head and when the wind fell hard against the stables so that the wood shook like thunder gone solid they heard the horses dance. Claude gave the blanket to Willa and went back into the stall for another one and then nodded for them to follow.

"Are they scared of the rain?" Willa asked.

"They like rain," Claude said. "They like rain plenty. But not like this."

Far away, lightning splintered through the charcoal clouds. The wind pulled at them and forced its way through the stables and Claude took them down to the bay mare they had seen the other day. When the thunder came they all stood still, something inside of them expecting to be hit.

The pale gelding was still there, mulling them over, his breath loud and damp in the air. His body coiled under the soft-looking hide, and he turned quickly, like the wind was twisting him around too.

Willa walked up close to the bay and held out her hand but the bay just bobbed her head, her feet dancing, ready for anything.

Claude set down his beer bottle and opened the stall's bottom door, still holding the blanket, and the bay froze and then rushed out, bolted past them, silently, going fast, going hard so that her hooves beat the earth and the shaking ran up through Samuel's body and then the bay was outside, in the rain. When she turned, her hind legs kept going, slid out and kicked up the mud so that she fell on herself hard enough to drown out the storm and Samuel heard her break.

Willa still held the Navajo blanket, pressed it tight against her body and her face was flat. A small, hard-thinking frown started to show in her eyes and Samuel brought her close to him, quickly, held her tight and turned her head away from the bay.

The horse tried to stand and he held onto Willa.

"You better go," Claude said. "You two better go right now. You hear?"

"Right," Samuel said.

Samuel picked Willa up and followed Claude's pointing arm.

"Wait," she said. "Wait. Will she be okay?"

“She’ll be fine,” Claude said. “She’ll be fine.” He gave her a smile and walked toward the bay, and Samuel kept going, hurried through the rain past the stables and along the row back to the car. Willa was small in his arms and felt like a bird’s wing that was tied down tight.

They drove to The Red Wagon. She looked out the window at the storm but didn’t say anything, just rubbed her face hard every now and then and he hoped she was tired. When they got there Samuel ordered them both key lime pie and iced tea and Willa looked at him, her thoughts very far away, and he winked at her but didn’t get anything back.

“Was he lying?” she asked. “When he said she’d be fine. Was he lying?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

With the rain gone the air became sweet. There were too many people out, smiling, talking loud, their voices strangling the air so that Samuel became claustrophobic and, come sundown, when the sky ran with purple powdered clouds, he tried to find somewhere clean, somewhere quiet.

Even out on Cinnamon Key, where the rains had brought out the gardenias and the white angel's trumpets bloomed, there was a constant mumble of excited faraway voices that always needed one more cocktail, one more song, one more laugh and, finally, on the way back to the mainland, Samuel stopped out on the causeway, in the dark and sat a while over the water.

He listened to the water run, heard it fall into itself in the dark, and the smell was different now, raw and deep and fertile, like the salted sea had been skinned by all that rain.

It was late when he got to Willa's, well after midnight. When the moon came over it was pale yellow, bruised in a way that made Samuel think of the bones he found when he had passed through Nevada as a boy, not long after his father had died, when his mother took them from town to town, state to state, going fast so that he didn't have time to stop and think, so that he didn't have time to chase the horses running through his own mind. They had stopped for two nights in a motel, surrounded by a sunburnt desert that didn't end, and when Samuel woke up very early in the morning and saw that the sun was stuck behind the mountains so far away, he had gone out walking, looking for it, like he might be able to help. It was cold out and the air was dry and good in his lungs and he walked out into the scrubland and stopped when he found the horse's bones.

They were old, the flesh stripped away long ago, but the bones weren't white yet. The long jaw was yellowed and broken and the teeth had been rotted out so that even now they looked bruised and sore. He looked at the bones a while, thinking, and when he felt the land tremble, heard the distant drumming and steady sigh of morning, he looked up and saw them running, black shadows crossing in front of the sun, breaking through the burnt amber desert, the slow sky waking up behind them while the horses kicked up gold dust.

Over at Willa's house he saw something move, in the dark, behind blackened windows and sat up. He wanted to go over there, to knock on the door and sit in her room all night and wait for her to smile, wait to see anything but those softly burning thoughts he had seen in her black eyes the last time, when they had come back from the track.

Outside, the wind rustled the tall coconut palms and crickets quietly laughed.

The windows moved again, shadows falling into darkness, black on black and then the light flashed out at him, twice.

He switched on his engine and flashed his headlights back at her, twice also, the smooth white glare cutting through Florida's velvet night, and he smiled. When the front door opened and Willa came out and waved to him, in her pajamas, her face too serious, he got out of the car. She ran down from the house toward him, still holding something inside of her.

And he remembered seeing her run like that before, like her legs were a little too long and she still didn't know what to do with them. She had been with him for the night, out at the Hummingbird, fighting sleep so that when Samuel woke up on the sofa he heard her, in his bedroom, moving around, talking quietly to herself and when he went in to see her she told him she was waiting for the birds to come back, waiting



for them to call out to her and that she wanted to see them, wanted to find them. He took her out and they drove north along the highway, and when she saw something flying, they followed it north all the way to Lily Bay Beach. It was nearly dawn when they got there and a burnt-sugar light ran slowly into the sky and lit the crumpled, rocking sea. Willa got out of the car and saw a blue heron standing at the water's edge, almost as tall as she was, looking out to sea like it was thinking.

She watched it a while, standing still until the bird seemed to sigh and lift its wings and fly away and then she was off, down the beach, kicking up sand, running hard, running for her life.

The End

**The Existentialist Roots of Noir: On the Literary  
influences of Shoot the Wild Birds**

## INTRODUCTION

In this exegesis I aim to explore several themes or concerns that are foundational to existentialist thinking in order to demonstrate that the fundamental tenets of existentialism are inextricably linked to noir fiction. *Shoot the Wild Birds* is an attempt at a noir novel that does away with most of the usual conventions of the genre – crime, villains, victims, socio-political critique – with the goal of focusing instead on the existentialist concerns that I argue are truer cornerstones of noir fiction. Noir has been seen or defined through a variety of lenses over the years, from scholars like Andrew Pepper viewing noir as ‘a socio-political critique that yields nothing’ (*American*, 58) to academic and crime writer Meg Abbot who points to what might be called moral order to distinguish noir (in this case specifically from hard-boiled): ‘In noir, everyone is fallen, and right and wrong are not clearly defined and maybe not even attainable.’ (lithub.com, 2018). However, as Pepper goes on to note in his essay, any strict categorization of noir is rife with difficulties.

Essentially a philosophy of existence, existentialism is perhaps best summed up by Jean-Paul Sartre’s assertion that ‘Existence precedes essence’, which is to say that the world and human identity have no predetermined meaning; therefore one is or becomes what one does. It is a way of thinking that focuses on human freedom, choice, and being and the problems inherent in these issues. In this view, life itself is

essentially a quest to create a self or an identity (Stokes, 18); a quest to work through the problems of anxiety and alienation, of finding or creating meaning and purpose in a world void of predetermined meaning. While perhaps most famous as the philosophy of Sartre and his fellow mid-twentieth century thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger (though the last two refused the label) and others, the roots of existentialism are most often traced back to Soren Kierkegaard (Guignon 11; Reynolds 4). Jon Stewart writes in *A Companion to Kierkegaard* (2015): ‘He [Kierkegaard] was in many cases co-opted by existential thinkers... Major figures such as Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, and Jean-Paul Sartre were deeply inspired by different aspects of his thought... Kierkegaard’s critical rejection of abstract thinking and his analyses of freedom, despair, and anxiety all fit well with the existential program’ (3).

The link between noir and existentialism is widely recognised, but when discussed in noir scholarship, the existentialist dimension is too often summed up as nothing more than a mood (Horsley, *Noir* 48). Throughout this exegesis I argue that existentialism is much more than that. Existentialist principles are found in noir’s themes, characters and story. As Stephen Faison writes of noir: ‘The isolation of the individual and the lack of transcendent values are personified by the noir protagonist, who is typically a cynical, morally ambiguous loner without conventional standards of ethics.’ (12). Here we find the existentialist estrangement, or alienation; the lack of concrete, predetermined meaning and purpose; the absurdity in life and the fractured or perhaps even lost sense of identity that so often combine to provide the despair and anxiety of the noir protagonist.

In this exegesis, I examine several of the existentialist themes that I find make noir a distinct literary form, related to but distinct from its usual cousin, hard-boiled fiction and indeed, crime fiction in general. Existentialism addresses many themes, or has several major principles: individuality, authenticity, freedom, absurdity to name a few. However, as my aim in these pages is to explore the existentialism of noir, rather than existentialist philosophy itself, I have winnowed down to focus on four main existentialist principles. First, I examine how the concept of alienation (or estrangement) is articulated in noir, with a special focus on the physical landscape and environment. The second and third principles, being anxiety and despair, I tie together to look at how they are used in shaping and defining the noir character. Finally, I discuss noir fictions as quests for meaning and purpose, rather than as quests for hidden truths or justice.

Throughout this discussion of my own creative work, I will emphasise how the use of existentialist themes aligns the novel with noir fiction. As I discuss, *Shoot the Wild Birds* does not feature any crime or any criminal, yet it was influenced by a life-long love of what might be called more atypical noir. This is the noir by well-known noir writers, well-known *crime* writers – Jim Thompson, David Goodis, John D. MacDonald and more – that begins to drop the focus on the usual tropes of noir or crime fiction in favour of what become existentialist character studies. In my own work, I attempt to do the same, to leave aside the customary characteristics of crime and noir and instead try to draw out the existentialist themes, the fractured identity and sense of self, or loss of self that afflicts my protagonist, Samuel. Furthermore, I attempt to use the landscape (that is to say the natural world: the air, the heat, the sea, the light, rather than, as is more typical of noir, any socio-political landscape or environment) to emphasise and colour Samuel's alienated states. Finally, and perhaps

most importantly to me, I attempt to have Samuel's journey, his story, be a quest for what I see as existential relief.

Just as his influence can be found in later noir fiction, Raymond Chandler's work had a profound influence on my own novel. However, it was less his oft-discussed style or hard-boiled characters or attitude that influenced me, but rather his treatment of structure, and his growing emphasis on existentialist concerns. This is most apparent in *The Long Goodbye* (1953), a novel in which crime and investigation are so loosely structured that the result highlights the place of Marlowe's existentialist leanings and needs. Here I point to the lack of a single, focal investigation in the novel, as the narrative focus shifts from Marlowe's 'friend' Terry Lennox, to the finding and then baby-sitting of the alcoholic writer Roger Wade, before the story finds its way back to Lennox and his family. It is not the plot or investigations that give the novel the continuous narrative through-lines, but rather Marlowe and his way of relating, as well as his existentialist flavoured interiority.

I also look to *The Little Sister* (1949) and Dorothy Hughes' *The Expendable Man* (1963) for their treatment of alienation. Four other novels I discuss in detail are all quite notable for the fact that while they are all ostensibly noir or crime fictions by crime writers, they well and truly do away with crime and criminal dealings or characters. *The Alcoholics* (Thompson, 1953), *Of Tender Sin*, (Goodis, 1952), and *A Flash of Green* (MacDonald, 1962) are discussed in the second chapter and are strong examples showcasing the place of anxiety and despair (and displacing crime or criminal) as foundational to noir fiction. Finally, Donald E. Westlake's novel *Memory* (written c1960, published posthumously in 2011), a crime-free noir quest for identity, was influential in shaping *Shoot the Wild Birds*' slow, loose structure as a novel that highlights the importance of the existential quest.

It is important to note that I do not mean to suggest that these novels are purposely existentialist novels, or that the authors were directly influenced by and/or responding to the thoughts and works of Kierkegaard and other existentialist thinkers. (In fact, to some extent, the influence ran the other way, as both Sartre and Camus admired and even acknowledged a debt to the noir fiction that came before their own work (Brevda 323)). Rather my aim is to explore how noir fiction takes such full advantage of the very same existential themes to the point that this thematic importance sees noir depart from hard-boiled fiction and even, at times, crime fiction.

## A QUESTION OF HARD-BOILED AND NOIR

As related to literature and fiction *noir* did not come into common usage in English until the 1980s, most often to refer to the writings of hard-boiled authors of the inter-war period; authors like Cornell Woolrich, Hammett, Cain, Thompson and so forth.

“Noir” as a term that pertained to these American crime narratives surfaced in France in 1945-6. First with the French publication of several novels by the likes of James Cain and Raymond Chandler under the ‘Série noir’ imprint of Parisian publisher Gallimard and soon thereafter by French film critics, in reference to Hollywood films of the era such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura*, *The Big Sleep* to name a few. While these movies were heavily influenced by German Expressionism and Italian neorealism, they largely drew their source material from hard-boiled novels and their authors.

Many critical discussions of noir fiction begin with the difficulties in defining the genre (Breu, Rolls) and in the differences between noir and hard-boiled. Scholars such as Lee Horsley, J.T. Irwin, and Stephen Faison question whether hard-boiled is

the American fiction genre and noir is instead a style of film, while others such as Andrew Pepper suggest that there are two distinct categories of this era of American crime fiction (Roman Noir PAGE). Further there is disagreement as to which came first, with William Marling, Alain Silver and others arguing that noir stemmed from the hard-boiled pages of the pulp magazines of the twenties while others argue that, in those same pages, what they consider noir emerged before hard-boiled (Breu, *Masculinities* 25). As I go on to discuss, conflict is rife.

By and large, there is more agreement on the genesis and defining factors of hard-boiled fiction than there are for noir fiction. Hard-boiled fiction came of age in 1920s America, most notably in pulp magazines such as *Black Mask* where editor Jack Shaw ran a stable of writers that included Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Though first credit goes to John Carroll Daly, it was Hammett who refined the hard-boiled story beginning with his eighty some short stories, many featuring the morally shady Continental Op, and then his five novels, beginning in 1927 with the serialization of *Red Harvest*. The thirties also saw the emergence of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain's novels of transgression starting with *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934). By the forties a proliferation of writers such as Ross MacDonald, Jim Thompson, David Goodis, John D. MacDonald had all joined the fold.

Generally, hard-boiled stories feature terse, solitary heroes, usually a detective of some kind, with a very individual sense of honour. These outsider protagonists inhabit corrupt, chaotic worlds and are often pulled at random into their absurd worlds and quests. Action and violence play a big part in the prototypical hard-boiled stories. They feature bleak, realistic depictions of crime and city-life and though violent carnage generally ensues, by the end of the story the detective has restored a sense of



order. Hard-boiled novels present “a vision of life that is cynical, if not pessimistic; the attitude is ironic, dispassionate, neutral... the syntax, diction, and grammar are those of the characters – the imagery is stark, rarely lyrical” (Mecholsky 22).

In contrast, noir fiction is less associated with any style of language or writing and instead often associated with a shift in the inner psychological workings of the characters. Many scholars point to the shift in protagonist – from detective hero to transgressor – as the turning point where hard-boiled becomes noir. Heather Worthington suggests noir emerged with “texts in which the focus is on the criminal and his/her actions and motives rather than the detection of the crime” (4).

Noir is sometimes codified by a sensibility or feeling, rather than character or narrative form and plot. The characteristics that contribute to this noir sensibility are variously identified as dread, fear, angst and anxiety, alienation, loneliness, breakdown and despair, events set into motion by the intrusion of what might be called the absurd into everyday life, the futility in the failed quest to restore order and/or find a sense of reason or meaning. Of course, many of these are also considered to be prominent features of hard-boiled.

Editor, publisher, and sometime critic Otto Penzler suggests hard-boiled detective fiction and noir fiction are two fully separate and distinct forms. In his introduction to *The Best American Noir of the Century* he offers a useful but somewhat prohibitive understanding of noir:

Noir works, whether films, novels or short stories, are existential, pessimistic tales about people, including (or especially) protagonists who are seriously flawed and morally questionable. The tone is generally bleak and nihilistic, with characters whose greed, lust, jealousy and alienation lead them into a

downward spiral as their plans and schemes inevitably go awry... the machinations of their relentless lust will cause them to lie, steal, cheat and even kill as they become more and more entangled in a web from which they cannot possibly extricate themselves. And, while engaged in this hopeless quest, they will be double-crossed, betrayed and ultimately ruined... it will end badly, because the characters are inherently corrupt. (Penzler, x)

Martin Priestman argues that the cornerstone of noir fiction is a protagonist who intentionally breaks the law for their own purposes. He notes the shifting focus to ‘more psychological depictions of crime as a hidden guilt knowing away at a respectable middle class society’” such as James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity* (1936), which ‘explores the physiological motives and consequences of a crime of passion hatched after a chance meeting’ (40). Adding to the discussion, Lee Horsley suggests that noir almost spawned or evolved from the hard-boiled, using similar vernacular styles and characteristics to produce a more disturbing, often transgressor-based, type of fiction, noting the ‘the label “hard-boiled” is often used synonymously with “noir”’. Although this is to some extent misleading, there is substantial overlap, and much of the best noir crime fiction is unquestionably hard-boiled’ (*Noir* 23). I find these varied interpretations of noir (and its distinction from hard-boiled) and by and large all valid. In examining genres, conflicts can and do co-exist; a book can be more than one genre, and a genre can encompass more than one set of rules. However, I argue these interpretations and discussions of noir miss what I see as the lifeblood of noir. They miss the fundamental and foundational importance of the way in which noir emphasizes and deals with existentialist principles.

## DISTINGUISHING NOIR

In a 1944 letter Chandler expressed his discomfort with the hard-boiled genre, stating the detective story had been so thoroughly written and examined and that ‘The real challenge for a writer was to *avoid* writing a mystery story while appearing to do so.’ (*Speaking* 48). Thus, Chandler was subtly but very deliberately bringing hard-boiled noir back to the modernist novel or the sentimental novel (Cassuto, *Sentimental*): ‘My theory was that readers just thought that they cared about nothing but the action; that really although they didn’t know it, they cared very little about the action. The thing they really cared about, and that I care about, was the creation of emotion’ (MacShane, *Chandler* 51).

Chandler’s disregard for the then-common plot driven detective novel was a result of two issues. First, Chandler himself admitted he had trouble with creating new plots and so he patched together various short stories to create full-length novels (*Chandler Speaking* 13). The second issue was that Chandler simply cared less about plot than he did about other aspects of writing. The decision to focus less on plot was met with much criticism, yet the seeming randomness, or confrontation with the absurd can be ‘considered as a metaphor for his view that the world is a confusing, contradictory place in which loose ends are never tied up’ (Panek 409). But the decision was conscious, with Chandler claiming that *The Big Sleep* was ‘a detective yarn that happens to be more interested in people than plot’ (MacShane 76). In his effort to better develop his hero Chandler began to subtly shift the paradigms of the hard-boiled novel to one which ‘had less to do with callous relationships with people and more to do with attitude. And it was decidedly more psychological than physical. Indeed, Chandler’s heroes rarely engage in violence and in fact receive a lot more

than they give when it comes to physical abuse' (Panek 408). As Chandler developed, he strayed further from the hard-boiled detective novel, particularly with his last three novels, *The Little Sister*, *The Long Goodbye* and *Playback* (1958). 'All are a little sadder and darker, and *The Long Goodbye* in particular is less concerned with actual detection and more deliberately literary than Chandler's earlier work.' (Panek 412). In fact, toward the end Marlowe is barely a working detective and has more in common with one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's alienated heroes than previous hard-boiled detectives. As noted by Anthony Boucher, the plot in *The Long Goodbye* 'deals relatively little with the professional criminal classes' and rather than focusing on solving any crime, Marlowe is now 'less a detective than a disturbed man of 42 on a quest for some evidence of truth and humanity' (*New York Times*, 1954). This quest for humanity, I argue, is essentially an existential quest for meaning. In these existential quests Chandler forgoes crime fiction's usual path to the restoration of justice, and instead Marlowe seeks to understand the world around him and his relation to the world.

Clearly, noir can and does coexist with other genres. However, what sets noir apart is more than just a mood or tone, more than just a shift in protagonist or moral character (i.e., hero to transgressor) or moral compass, is the prioritizing of existentialist concerns in character and story. As I see it noir deals emphatically with the very same principles that existentialism contends with, while hard-boiled fiction does not. And, as I argue in this exegesis, it is Chandler who best represents and perhaps leads this departure from hard-boiled fiction to noir.

## A QUESTION OF EXISTENTIALISM

As with noir, precise meanings and which writers and/or thinkers belong to existentialism is laden with discussion, interpretation and disagreement. While Jonathan Webber sees existentialism very specifically as the philosophy of Sartre and de Beauvoir which expresses the ‘theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values’ (3), he does so at the expense of many other existentialist principles and thinkers, from Kierkegaard to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Camus. I find this too restrictive, especially as it applies to art and creative processes as expression or exploration of such ideas. Similarly, categorizing Kierkegaard or Camus as an existentialist or not an existentialist is too restrictive for my purposes: just as John D MacDonald wrote novels in more than one genre, surely a thinker may examine concepts that apply to more than one school of thought, and have their ideas still be valid in the respective schools. Instead, I find more value in the arguments of Porfirio and more recently Brevda and Faison, which suggest that while Camus, for example, may not have been a purely and solely existentialist thinker, many of his ideas still apply to or fall within existentialist thought (Faison 15; Porfirio 80). Hence my use of and approach to existentialist thinkers and principles is deliberately broad. I draw not only upon Sartre but also on Camus and particularly Kierkegaard, to view existentialism as a way of thinking that starts with an ‘individual’s psycho-logical and moral disorientation’ that accentuates the possibility of choice in ‘a world without transcendent values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning except that which the individual creates’ (Faison, 11). Its principles include facets of responsibility, freedom and authenticity, meaninglessness, anxiety, despair and alienation. Unsurprisingly, I make liberal and wide-ranging use of existentialist tenets in large part because this exegesis is not an examination of existentialism itself but rather an exploration of my own and other

noir fictions in an attempt to analyse the literary techniques and devices authors use to elucidate the existential themes that I argue are characteristic of noir.

Literature, or fiction, has long been seen as a key method for conveying existentialist ideas in no small part due to the fact that several of the primary existentialist works have been works of fiction, perhaps most notably the novels of Camus and Sartre. Likewise, the forebears of existentialism Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche both used more fictional devices such as narratives, stories, jokes, songs and fictitious characters to express their ideas. However, existentialist themes and thinkers, stemming from Kierkegaard and reaching its zenith in Sartre are, as Jeff Malpas notes ‘sometimes so broadly construed as to allow even Shakespeare to be included, along with a host of other dramatists, novelists and poets... Indeed, one might wonder whether there is any modern literary figure of note who has not at some point been characterized in this way’ (*As literature*, 293). Malpas makes a good point, and the link he points out is due to the fact that most all novelists are concerned on some level with exploring the human condition, with existence itself, as is existentialism. And so, Malpas offers the very valuable distinction between ‘existential’ and ‘existentialist/existentialism’, arguing that ‘existential’ writers are concerned with how to live or how to be, while ‘existentialist’ writers are concerned with how to live in a meaningless world. His distinction and criteria are *meaninglessness*.

Again, to narrow in further still on existentialist writers, or what might be considered existentialist fiction, Malpas points to Dostoevsky, often considered an early existentialist or proto-existentialist. Malpas notes Dostoevsky is a writer concerned with ‘the situation of the solitary individual, the “outsider” who can no longer find any sure refuge in God or religion... whose very existence is rendered

uncertain and ambiguous... (preoccupied by) the disunity and fragmentation of the self' (ibid, 297). Yet, arguing against scholars such as the eminent Walter Kauffman and Steven Earnshaw, Malpas suggests Dostoevsky is *not* an existentialist writer because his thematic scope is too broad. This 'zooming in' that Malpas offers is useful when applied to noir fictions, and in fact helps to set noir apart from the usual tropes and criminal worlds and instead grounds noir in the existentialist world. Accordingly, following Malpas' logic, existentialist fiction must be rooted in a meaningless world, yet not have too broad a scope, but a scope which, I argue and add, contains at its core various other existentialist principles.

While often referred to as hard-boiled rather than noir, Chandler's work, which I contend is one of the major bridges from hard-boiled to noir, depicts a world inundated with chaos and meaninglessness. However, the question arises as to whether, like Dostoevsky, Chandler's canvas of themes was also too broad. While indeed there are other topics to be found in the Marlowe novels, I argue that the lion's share of thematic concerns in Chandler and in noir in general by and large consist of other existentialist themes, be they alienation, despair, individual identity or others.

Noted scholar and philosopher David E. Cooper views existentialist thought through a closer lens with what he terms

'a sort of existentialist "manifesto": Human beings are prone to experience estrangement from the world in which they live... A sense of estrangement is rooted in the fact that, while human beings are embodied occupants of the world, their powers of reflection, self-interpretation, evaluation and choice distinguish them from all other occupants of the world... it emerges that each

human being is possessed of a radical freedom and responsibility, not only to choose and to act but to interpret and evaluate the world.' (*Movement*, 30)

Cooper notes that his brief portrayal of existentialism does not include many of the key words so often associated with existentialist thought such as anxiety, absurdity, authenticity and more and he suggests this is because such words so well-suited to *art*, which, I argue, is precisely why they so readily apply to fiction.

Some scholars suggest that existentialist principles such as alienation or authenticity are now redundant or have been repudiated (Jameson, *Postmodernisms* 12). While I agree that many existentialist concerns may well be, in some circles, out of fashion, they are by no means out of date. Characters in despair, alienating world, quests for meaning and identity are all concerns that manifest in fiction and noir, old and new, and of course, they are concerns which have greatly influenced my own work. However, as Cooper (*Movement*) suggests, it is not enough to simply touch upon these principles, but one must (as I aim to do here with regard to noir) locate them in a general perspective appropriate to existentialism. That is to say one's relationship to the world results in alienation, one's relationship to one's self results in despair, so that the starting point is essentially one's anxiety to be overcome with an understanding of and acceptance of the responsibility of freedom in a meaningless world, and one's foremost concern is the pursuit and/or creation of honest and individual selfhood. That said, I should note my use of the term *authentic* or *authenticity* in this exegesis is fairly interchangeable with 'true self' or 'genuine self', in the Kierkegaardian sense, with the emphasis on the self that characters pursue or create. As with much of this exegesis I take a somewhat Kierkegaardian approach to



both existentialism in general and an authentic selfhood in particular, one that focuses on the process of “becoming a self” rather than “being a self” (Michaelman 50).

## EXEGESIS STRUCTURE

In the first chapter of this exegesis, I discuss explore the concept of alienation. Sometimes referred to as estrangement, I take an existentialist view to this tenet of noir fiction, and argue that the noir world is inextricably steeped in alienated and alienating relationships. I discuss alienation as a mode of relating, or a product of ill-formed relationships, rather than simply a mark of otherness. I look mainly to Chandler’s *The Little Sister* and Hughes’s *The Expendable Man* to examine the various modes of alienation as by-products of relationships. The relationships I look to are 1) the individual to the self, 2) the individual to society and 3) the individual to the physical landscape. I place special importance on this last mode of alienation and discuss how in my own writing I have attempted to use landscape not only as providing a fractured relationship but also as an expression of a character’s alienated state.

In Chapter 2 I explore the Kierkegaardian understanding of despair in MacDonald’s *A Flash of Green* and Goodis’ *Of Tender Sin*, both noir fictions with no crime, hero or villain. In fact, these novels focus so closely on the anxiety and despair in character that narrative conflict and tension stems, repeatedly, from existentialist concerns rather than criminal concerns. Similarly, I discuss the existentialist concept of anxiety, again drawing primarily upon Kierkegaard and how these character traits are fundamental to noir by pointing to Jim Thompson’s *The Alcoholics* and to several instances of Chandler’s Marlowe. I also discuss how these how these two

existentialist emotions are fundamental to the noir character and how I attempted to use this existentialist understanding of anxiety and despair in shaping my own characters in *Shoot the Wild Birds*.

In Chapter 3 I explore noir fiction as quest fiction, specifically as the existential quest for identity and meaning. I discuss noir fiction as quests that return to their medieval roots in that they are quests for *internal* objects, rather than *external* or physical/societal objects, albeit with an existentialist slant. Specifically, I discuss Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* as a quest novel that really begins to shift the emphasis away from tangible, hard-boiled quests and objects, toward more internal, personal quests. I argue that here Marlowe's quest is one for existential meaning, which, existentially-speaking, is the pinnacle of 'achievement of the human spirit and is found in the individual's confrontation with the challenges of the world and one's own being' (Längle 2). Further, I look to Westlake's *Memory* as a novel that explicitly illustrates Sartre's belief that the first principle of existentialism is to create one's self, that one begins as 'nothing. He will not be anything later, and then he will be what he makes of himself' (Sartre, *Humanism* 22). It is this aspect of noir, the interior existentialist quest, which I see as perhaps the defining aspect to noir fiction, that most influenced *Shoot the Wild Birds* and so I discuss how I attempted to portray this particular quest type in my own work.

In sum I intend to show not that, as Faison argues, noir fiction is a form of American existentialism but that existentialism is both essential to noir and that existentialism sets noir apart from hard-boiled fiction. While Faison may well be correct, what I aim to demonstrate is that existentialist principles are the defining trait of noir fiction, and more than just a mood or outlook. It was this existentialist slant that drew me to noir and influenced my writing, not villains as protagonists or

unhappy endings or moral ambiguities, and therefore I also demonstrate how the existentialism of noir manifests itself in *Shoot the Wild Birds*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### LANDSCAPES OF NOIR AND THE WORLD OF ALIENATION

Night or day it's all one in those damn 24-hour joints,' Billy said one slow evening a few days before he was killed. 'That's the hell of it, man; they're air-conditioned, open all night, *soft music playin*, an you don't know what day it is after a while, or if it's winter or summer. Time dies in a place like that, you feel pulled loose from it, like dreaming, dig, you don't even know if you're hungry. Like comin out of a movie, dig, and it's bright sunlight out and you're blinkin away and people are walking around on business and you wonder what the hell world you fell into. (207)

The paragraph above, taken from Don Carpenter's 1964 novel *Hard Rain Falling*, vividly illustrates noir fiction's alignment with an existentialist view of the world. The character's sense of dislocation, not knowing day from night, summer from winter, and finally upon exiting what turns out to be a pool hall, not knowing what world he has fallen into, captures the alienated and alienating relationship the protagonist has with his world. Here Carpenter directly illustrates the noir trope of the protagonist's severe estrangement from an orderly world, instead finding the hero 'pulled loose'

from both time and space. This serves to enhance the character's sense of self-estrangement, characterized by being so removed from himself that he has lost track of basic human functions such as knowing whether or not he is hungry. Billy is an alienated outsider inside the pool hall and even more so out in the world.

Alienation and its various modes are prevailing themes in noir fiction. The noir protagonist exists in a world that is 'across the tracks' and 'away from the banging of the town' (Hughes 3), literally or metaphorically and often both. He exists in a world of existentialist isolation and alienation; alienation from both himself and the world around. Even when steeped in an environment, as the Marlowe novels can be saturated with California, this same environment often serves to highlight the protagonist as an outsider, as alienated in an existentially absurd world characterized by chaos and chance.

In discussing the existentialist slant to noir Horsley writes that noir heroes are 'Obsessed, alienated, vulnerable... they act out narratives that raise the question of whether they are making their own choices or following a course dictated by fate. The forces affecting the protagonist can be perceived as a manifestation of the world's randomness and absurdity' (*Noir* 11). Horsley continues, placing the cause of the affect primarily upon society at large: 'The protagonist feels his course to be shaped by society's injustices, failures, prejudices or pressures... The forces controlling the lives of the characters are conceived in terms of the dominant conceptions of social-political determinants' (ibid). Steven Sanders adds to the discussion in a way that speaks to my own creative process and attempts, in pointing to the noir protagonist's sense of self-relation as one of the major sources of estrangement: 'a nightmarish sense of loneliness and alienation; a purposelessness fostered in part by feelings of estrangement from one's own past even as one seems driven to a compulsive

confrontation with that past' (*Meaning* 92). The burden of the past, and the fractured relationship that the protagonist has with it, serves to add to the sense of isolation he feels. The past reaches out to throw the present into an alienating chaos so that the heroes are 'trapped in circumstances that they did not wholly create and from which they cannot break free' (ibid 93).

This past that reaches forth to disrupt life is often anchored in place or setting. In discussing David Goodis, Horsley notes that Goodis, 'uses the freezing city streets of his home town as a setting that contributes to the immobilization of his protagonists, whose narratives tell of their failed attempts to escape from the past by withdrawing from society' (*Noir* 168). This aspect of using a locale in creating the sense of alienation is of particular interest to my own writing. In *Shoot the Wild Birds* I aimed to place an extra and careful emphasis on place, on the humid Florida setting that swallows Samuel. I hoped to accentuate something akin to how Camus sees the feeling of the absurd by focusing on the 'divorce between man and his life, *the actor and his setting*' (*Myth* 13, italics mine). This focus on environment (as in setting or static landscape), and a protagonist's relationship to it, is a central concern to my creative work. In creating character, I am often quite concerned with how the landscape shapes the character, sometimes going so far as to attempt to foreground the environment so that 'people give the landscape scale; the landscape is not a background to them' (Paul Bowles, *Letters* 440). In discussing his novel, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), Bowles offered, 'What I wanted was to tell the story of what the desert can do to us. That was all. The desert was the protagonist' (*Conversations* 54). While in my own creative work I did not intend to go so far as to have the landscape as protagonist, I did attempt to emphasize the landscape to aid in demonstrating Samuel's perpetual alienation. My intention was to use the static,

physical landscape *as an expression of alienation*, to exhibit or represent alienating relationships within the protagonist.

Just as it is a key theme of existentialism, the concept of alienation in its various forms is ever-present in noir fiction. Gavin Rae suggests that '*alienation* is typically associated with feelings of isolation, hopelessness, powerlessness, loss, anxiety, frustration, despair, and/or loneliness' (2), all terms which can easily be applied to many noir protagonists' lives and their relationship to the world. Terms may differ, but the concept of the alien, of being alien or alienated, estranged, foreign, isolated or on the outside, particularly in the existentialists' sense of being unable or unwilling 'to conform to society's received values... the sense of 'not belonging', of being 'outside' normal society' (Earnshaw 6), is the fundamental mode-of-being in the noir world.

Of course, there are multiple modes or forms of alienation. At its simplest, the term alienation refers to 'feelings of estrangement or of detachment from the self and from others' (Josephson 12), but it has more specific meanings as well, such as in social psychology where alienation 'refers to a person's psychological withdrawal from society' (Tally 3) or in the writings of Karl Marx which, 'emphasize the social relations of capitalist production as sources of alienation... separating men from the products of their labour (TenHouten 15). However, in existentialist literature and, I argue, noir fiction, there are three key modes of alienation. The first is the individual's alienation from their self, or self-estrangement, in which man finds it hard to be himself, or has become something that is not quite his true or authentic self (by and large through succumbing to the numbing effects of Kierkegaard's 'herd' or similar). Second is the individual's alienation from his fellow man or the immediate society (i.e., neighbors, lovers, etc.) in which he lives, where misunderstandings between

more intimate relations occur and prompt injustices and/or estrangements. The third mode of alienation and perhaps the most common form alienation in literature is the alienation of an individual from society at large or the cultural community, which concerns the ‘lives of men and women who are at odds with their society and its culture, who cannot accept either the ideas by which the average man in that society lives or the parochial loyalties he demands’ (Winthrop 9). Continuing beyond these three modes for a moment, there is also the alienation of the individual to the natural world or the physical world/space around them, which while less common in noir and in academic discussions on noir, still serves to enhance the effect of any or all of the previous, more typical, modes of alienation.

In this chapter I will discuss the existentialist theme and various modes of alienation within the noir world. I will discuss the modes of alienation not only in the context of human and socio-cultural relationships, but also, I will examine the role of the so-called background, or noir’s physical landscape in establishing, enhancing and at times representing noir’s alienated characters. In my view, the natural world, or the static environment, holds an important position in establishing and illustrating the over-whelming sense of alienation paramount to the noir world and its characters. I will also discuss how this particular facet of noir has influenced my own writing, and how I use landscape in my attempt to portray alienation and the alienated. In view of the potential ambiguities between the singular other and the plural other/society, I will consider alienation within the following relationships: 1) the individual to his self, 2) the individual to society (lumping the singular ‘other’ into society at large, and 3) the self to the landscape or physical environment. Here I don’t mean to suggest that the relationship between an individual and the physical, textural landscape is a part of any tradition of existentialist alienation, but rather I aim to discuss how some noir authors



have used the natural world or physical environment to enhance self and/or societal alienation. Similarly, I will discuss how I attempted to use the textural landscape in my own creative work to imbue the novel and the characters with the atmosphere and affects of alienation.

## RELATIONS OF RELATIONLESSNESS

Alienation is not merely disassociation or strangeness; it is not simply the mark of being foreign or other-than. As alluded to above, alienation is best seen as a product of relationships, as a mode or way of relating. In her insightful study *Alienation* (2014), Rahel Jaeggi proposes that ‘Alienation is a relation of relationlessness’ (1). I agree with Jaeggi that alienation and alienated states do not indicate a *lack* of relation at all, but rather alienation is, at its very essence, an existing relationship, albeit a troubled and defective or fractured relationship. As Jaeggi writes ‘Being alienated from something means having become distanced from something in which one is in fact involved or to which one is in fact related— or in any case ought to be’ (25). Or to put it in more existentialist terms, alienation can be seen as the *quality* of an inauthentic relationship, to oneself, or to any form of other. Jaeggi continues:

An alienated relation is a deficient relation one has to oneself, to the world, and to others. Indifference, instrumentalization, reification, absurdity, artificiality, isolation, meaninglessness, impotence— all these ways of characterizing the relations in question are forms of this deficiency. A distinctive feature of the concept of alienation is that it refers not only to powerlessness and a lack of freedom but also to a

characteristic impoverishment of the relation to self and world. (6)

I see these alienated relations – to a self, to others and to a world – as the core of noir fiction. The loss of sense of self, referred to in my chapter on despair and anxiety, does not indicate an *absence* of a relation to a self but rather a deformed and therefore alienated relationship to one's self. Similarly, noir fiction, existentialist fiction and much of my own writing, is rife with these deficient relationships between individuals (in *Shoot the Wild Birds*, Sam with his daughter or, really, anyone. The same often is found in the interpersonal relationships portrayed in the works of Chandler and others, as I will discuss) which then produce the alienated states of the individuals. The very words Jaeggi uses above to characterize the deficient relationships that constitute alienation – indifference, absurdity, isolation, meaninglessness – are the hallmarks of the relationships of the noir protagonists.

Alienation then is not simply the product of the failure to form a relationship with another human or to a society or location, not the *absence* of a relationship, but instead it is the result of a malformed relationship, or it *is* the malformed relationship itself.

Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* is exemplary in this regard. The very fact that Marlowe is attempting to create a friendship or relationship with Lennox greatly strengthens the novel's atmosphere of alienation, greatly emphasizes Marlowe's estrangement from others, not at all because of any absence of a relationship between the two of them. Indeed Marlowe and Lennox do have a relationship, a friendship of sorts, but it is not an honest or authentic relationship. It is, at its core, a very disfigured relationship, hence it is also an alienating relationship. Their friendship, to use Jaeggi's words 'denotes relationlessness of a particular kind: a detachment or

separation from something that in fact belongs together, the loss of a connection between two things that nevertheless stand in relation to one another' (25). Marlowe's alienation does not stem from any absence of relation(s), rather 'alienation describes not the absence but the *quality* of a relation' (ibid, italics mine).

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Self-estrangement and estrangement from the Other, or society, are inextricably linked. For this reason is it beneficial to discuss these two modes of alienation, and how they function within noir, in tandem.

Kierkegaard conceptualizes anxiety as 'an alien power that 'takes hold of the individual' and keeps her momentarily captive' (Tsakiri 10). Through the internal malaise of Kierkegaardian anxiety, a person 'becomes conscious of itself as a strange creature: a stranger in nature, a stranger to other human beings, and a stranger to itself by being both similar to and different from all other creatures in the world' (Rosfort 462). Thus, many individuals can be seen to be alienated, or when suffering from anxiety an individual can be seen to be in a state of self-alienation. Likewise, Kierkegaard is concerned with the possibility and process of 'losing' one-self in the herd or crowd, of conforming to society's expectations at the expense of the individual self, and further with the solitude and isolation an individual experiences in the midst of seeming social prosperity, again, the result of which is alienation (Khawaja, Kierkegaard, Pavlikova).

Similarly, Sartre discusses the concept of alienation, and examines various modes of alienation as an inextricable part of the human condition:

By alienation, we mean a certain type of relations that man has with himself, with others, and with the world, where he posits the ontological priority of the Other. The Other is not some specific person but a category or, if you will, a dimension, an element. There is no object or privileged subject that has to be considered as Other, but anything can be Other and the Other can be anything. (Sartre, *Notebooks* 404)

The crux of the point here, the actual cause of this alienated state is, as Sartre puts it, ‘the ontological priority of the Other’. The favouring of the inauthentic self over the authentic self, the living for Others and/or at the will of Others at the expense of one’s true individual self causes a fracture in one’s true or genuine mode-of-being.

Furthering his point Sartre uses a somewhat over-the-top example of what might be misunderstanding or misperception to demonstrate the dangers of and irrationalities possible in this alienated state. Sartre notes: ‘He interprets each object in the universe not as it is but as being profoundly other than it is (*the tree and the pebble are also bears*)’ (ibid)). In noir fiction the dangers of these alienated states often come to more violent (and substantially more over-the-top) conclusions.

Jim Thompson’s psychotic transgressors are terrific examples of the creative potential that can be mined from alienated states left to linger in their bad relations. In *Pop. 1280* (1964), the protagonist, sheriff Nick Corey, plays the part of the simple-minded, ever-helpful small town idiot, a veneer he uses to manipulate, murder and to cause and get away with mayhem. The reader never learns what Corey’s authentic self might once have been. Evil or benevolent, Corey’s genuine self is overwhelmed with multiples layers of artifice and falsity. In fact, early on in the novel Corey himself nearly states that he doesn’t know who or what he is: ‘And if I wasn’t sheriff,

I wouldn't have nothing or be nothing... It was a kind of hard fact to face – that I was just a nothing doing nothing' (11). Without his position of sheriff to society, he fears he would be nothing, or without society, he is nothing, which aligns precisely with Sartre's concept of being-for-others.

Another facet to his alienated state is Corey's perceived stupidity. The theme of an intelligent man acting the simpleton for the sake of making others comfortable runs through a few of Thompson's novels and Corey in *Pop. 1280* is a quintessential case. Even in his confessional first person voice, in 'talking to' the reader, Corey uses a very dumbed down language, the same language he uses with the townspeople to convince them he is as harmless as he is dumb. However, this dynamic between intelligence and stupidity serves to elucidate and even exacerbate two distinct modes of alienation. First, Corey's true self, however corrupt, is highly intelligent. This is shown most clearly in the careful string of personal manipulations, crimes and set-ups. However, in always playing the fool, Corey must continually act counter to his true self, hence deepening his own self-estrangement in this regard. Second, the dynamic of the relationship between himself and others, the alienation between Corey and society is further enhanced (in but one way among many here) by the fact that Corey is – or perceives himself to be – better than and smarter than, or separate from and above, society. Due to his maligned self-conception Corey almost desires an alienated relationship with society.

Corey's alienation – both from his self and from society – increases with each action Corey takes. As these actions become more manipulative and more violent, and notably he places the responsibility at the feet of others, Corey comes to believe he is the Messiah, returned to earth to dispense justice. In Sartrean terms Corey is assuredly interpreting his Self as profoundly Other than it is, so that finally Corey, 'makes the

Other a way of existing... in the very heart of every upsurge of being he sees a way of not being itself, of escaping itself' (Sartre, *Notebooks*, 404). As is common in noir fiction, self-estrangement for Corey leads to a harrowing demise.

While according to Michelman, existentialist alienation is typically self-estrangement or being 'divorced from one's true nature as a human being. In general terms, this means lacking a clear sense of oneself' (42), in fiction – existentialist literature and noir fiction alike – other forms of alienation often occur. However, they do in fact often serve to highlight the nexus of alienation, self-estrangement. As mentioned earlier, these other modes of alienation take shape in the relationships of an individual; estrangement or alienation from the self, from others, and from the world at large.

Despite any similarities or influences, an important distinction lies between the thoughts of Hegel and Marx and those of existentialism. In Hegel as with Marx, alienation in any form is overcome when an individual accepts his place within, and ideally joins, a 'kind of community – the Hegelian state, or the classless society' (Cooper, *Existentialism* 33). In both noir and existentialism, this acceptance of, or ability to join, any greater community is not a valid, or perhaps straightforward, option.

In noir these greater communities tend to consist of two distinct worlds, with the noir hero so often stuck in the middle, belonging to neither. These two worlds by and large are firstly, the legal world of common and greater society, (in Chandler's world for example, represented by the police force and the law-abiding) and secondly the darker underworld of the criminals, (or in *The Little Sister* specifically, the Hollywood motion picture business) the snitches and corrupt bellhops and the like who Marlowe so often interrogates, those who exist in the world outside the law.

Marlowe, ever the outsider and ever alienated, can belong to neither world. For Marlowe, the noir protagonist, and the existentialist alike, joining any ‘society’ is neither an option nor a remedy to any mode of alienation. In noir and in existentialism a true or authentic existence ‘requires a person to disengage himself from the ways of the “Public”, the “herd” or the “they”’; the remedy for self-estrangement is inherently liable to bring him into conflict with his fellows’ (Cooper, *Existentialism* 33). To remedy self-estrangement the existentialist must become at ease and/or at peace with his world, while not losing themselves by conforming to this same world. This existentialist problem is central to much noir fiction, and also, to my own writing. Of course, unlike existentialist philosophy, noir fiction is less interested in providing the actual remedy, but rather in teasing out the torture.

In *Shoot the Wild Birds* I tried to have it both ways. I aimed to have a semblance of resolution, of a coming to peace with the Other, while at the same time implying that any remedy to the protagonist’s alienation, to his alienated relationships, was temporary. My protagonist, Samuel, is by nature fairly solitary, at times living in self-imposed emotional isolation. While solitude and social isolation are not necessarily synonymous with alienation, creatively speaking, these affects are useful for metaphorically alluding to alienated states and relationships. As such, this isolation is not the reason for his alienated state. Rather, the cause is the tension within the relationships he has with himself and various others. To paraphrase Kierkegaard and Jaeggi, Samuel’s relationships exist in a state of misrelation. It is this misrelation (and not isolation or solitude) which creates the alienation within Samuel.

Samuel has no real desire to engage with any society, to join any ‘crowd’ or ‘herd’, yet at the same time his relationship with his world around him is far from harmonious. Obviously, there is none of the violence often found in noir to exhibit the

tension or fractured relationship Samuel has with society, or to depict the tension in attempting to become at ease with the surrounding world. Rather I aimed to depict this lack of harmony with the world around primarily in showcasing Samuel's conflicting desires. Samuel's desire for solitude, for all his solitary highway driving and being alone in his cabin watching people while almost never wanting to join people, is, for Samuel, meant to be a genuine state of being.

However, while Samuel may, genuinely, desire solitude, he does not want 100% solitude, 100% of the time. Similar to Marlowe and Lennox, this authentic desire for solitude is juxtaposed with his desire for a relationship with April and more importantly Willa. The tension, I hoped, would arise from Samuel's conflict with always wanting to be alone while at the same time wanting to forge a true, authentic, relationship with his daughter and not quite knowing how to do so. Samuel's conflicting desires regarding others and relationships in general results in a deficient relationship with both his self and with others, the qualities of which - 'Indifference, instrumentalization, reification, absurdity, artificiality, isolation, meaninglessness, impotence' (Jaeggi 6) – helps to elucidate his perpetually alienated states.

The closest Samuel comes to existing in harmony with his fractured relationship(s) is toward the end, in a very brief conversation with his neighbor Luis:

“You okay, man?”

“Yeah,” Samuel said. “Yeah, I just miss Willa.”

Luis nodded. “That’s good.”

“That’s good?”

“Of course,” Luis said. He stood up and walked over to the side of his old cabin and glanced toward the swimming pool, toward April’s cabin. (258)



While the possibility of an existentialist remedy to at least some of the alienation in Samuel's mode of being is implied above, and similarly at the end of the novel, with Samuel recollecting watching Willa run on the beach when she was younger, and the peace Samuel felt in watching her run away from him, there is no true resolution.

Willa got out of the car and saw a blue heron standing at the water's edge, almost as tall as she was, looking out to sea like it was thinking.

She watched it a while, standing still until the bird seemed to sigh and lift its wings and fly away and then she was off, down the beach, kicking up sand, running hard, running for her life. (268)

In this last line of the novel, while there is a moment of harmony, of authentic relationships between Samuel and his self, others (via Willa) and even nature, the imagery here is of Samuel alone on the beach, with Willa running away from him. So yet again, Samuel is alone, isolated, and while I don't view isolation as synonymous with or properly symbolizing alienation, I do find that the depiction of isolation is a viable method for hinting at the possibilities of alienation. Hence my attempt to have it both ways: to provide Samuel with an existentialist remedy to issues inherent in existing within or in proximity to a crowd, while maintaining the noir fatalism in implying that things will never truly get any better.

In most noir the 'crowds' or 'herds' are more venomous than they are in my own work. This tends to benefit the showcasing of existentialists themes, particularly alienation, and the possible dangers inherent in them. However, the crowds, the Other,

are not always the so-called villain. Again, Chandler is a useful case here.

In the Chandler novels, Marlowe will never become at ease with the world around him, as exhibited by his sense of estrangement and isolation throughout the novels. Marlowe's attitude toward the well-heeled, his 'gift for ridicule and an unerring eye for the foibles of the social and intellectual aristocracy' (Smith, 3) are well documented. Similarly, throughout the novels Marlowe's relationships with the police and various law enforcement officials are fairly antagonistic, even though their objectives are fundamentally the same. These relationships are, as Jaeggi suggests, distorted or 'relationlessness' and afflicted by 'a detachment or separation from something that in fact belongs together, the loss of a connection between two things that nevertheless stand in relation to one another' (25). Marlowe's frequent needling of police officers, his withholding of information, the sarcastic and sardonic and sometimes condescending attitude he has toward the law characterizes the distorted relationship that produces alienated states, from what might ostensibly be his closest allies. Likewise, the law often treats Marlowe just as badly, sometimes treating him as a criminal (for example jailing him in the early part of *The Long Goodbye*) and other times simply as a nuisance. Marlowe's relationship with the police in *The Little Sister* is one of his better ones and still it is characterized with an antipathy that sets them at odds. Roughly midway through the book Marlowe is questioned by the police officers French and Beifus:

"Ask the questions," I said. "If you don't like the answers, you can book me. If you book me, I get to make a phone call."

"Correct," French said, "if we book you. But we don't have to. We can ride the circuit with you. It might take days."

"And canned cornbeef hash to eat," Beifus put in cheerfully.

"Strictly speaking, it wouldn't be legal," French said. "But we do it all the time." (169)

There is no group, no communal society, to which Marlowe might attach, but rather ugly or unappealing 'herds' which Marlowe strives to avoid. In these acts and moments Marlowe exemplifies 'Kierkegaard's conviction that the only way to "become an Individual" is by withdrawal from, or opposition to, the "public"' (Cooper, *Existentialism* 34).

However, as an existentialist protagonist, and within the world of noir fiction, I find Marlowe to be something of an outlier. There is no question that Marlowe's mode of relating to society, to the Other, is that of estrangement. This precept is peppered throughout the novels in various ways, from the above-mentioned relations and lack thereof with different aspects to the societies around him, to his chess games against himself, or the oddity of his attempted friendship with Terry Lenox in *The Long Goodbye*. Similarly, there are numerous moments like the following excerpt from *The Little Sister*:

The office was empty again. No leggy brunettes, no little girls with slanted glasses, no neat dark men with gangster's eyes.

I sat down at the desk and watched the light fade. The going home sounds had died away... I put my papers away in a drawer... got out a duster and wiped off the glass and the telephone. It was dark and sleek in the fading light. It wouldn't ring tonight. Nobody would call me again. Not now, not this time. Perhaps not ever. (178)

The quote begins with an empty space, his office, and though it is often empty, Marlowe's awareness of the fact drives home the fact of his isolation from society, from the Other. This serves to partially illustrate the uneasy tension that makes up his relationship with society, it drives home the *quality* of the relationship he has with society (alienation). It continues, of course, with the absence of people and then the absence of light, or of day, but even more so with the sounds of society going off to their homes, suggesting that the world or society has gone home, but not Marlowe, he remains, alone, his one possible connection to society being the telephone, but it won't ring. All of this serves to quickly set the scene of Marlowe's physical isolation and estrangement, but also, his perceived estrangement from society on a deeper, more emotional level. The extract contrasts well with how Chandler opens the novel. It begins with a similar description of his office:

The pebbled glass door panel is lettered in flaked black paint: "Philip Marlowe... Investigations." It is a reasonably shabby door at the end of a reasonably shabby corridor.... The door is locked, but next to it is another door with the same legend which is not locked. Come on in – there's nobody in here but me and a big bluebottle fly. But not if you're from Manhattan, Kansas. (3)

This opening also sets the scene for Marlowe's isolation and estrangement. Yet again he is alone in an empty office down the end of an empty corridor. However, this passage, while providing room for some of Chandler's tongue in cheek lyricism, is really an invitation to society. Marlowe is alone and seems to be asking for more

company than a bluebottle fly can provide.

Both of the quotations and the other instances I pointed to above all point quite swiftly and clearly to Marlowe's alienation from the Other, from society. As the acme of the noir protagonist, he is alienated from 'the complex social institutions that presumably serve but are more likely to manipulate him; from the community in which he lives' (Josephson 11), an echo of Kierkegaard's sentiments. Richard Schacht views existentialist alienation quite specifically, comprising 'remoteness from other people... and a lack of oneness with the world generally' (231), characterizations which are vividly a part of Marlowe's relationship with the human or cultural world or with society. Both of the scenes from *The Little Sister* quoted above aid in establishing this isolation and estrangement as Marlowe's fundamental mode of being in the world around him. Here Chandler uses the depiction of isolation as a *tool* with which to enhance the sensation of alienation and alienated relationships in a manner similar to how I attempt to illustrate Samuel's stunted relations in *Shoot the Wild Birds*.

In their study of alienation, *Man Alone* (1962), Eric and Mary Josephson suggest that: 'Alienated man is everyman and no man, drifting in a world that has little meaning for him and over which he exercises no power, a stranger to himself and to others' (11). This not only greatly personifies Marlowe but also the noir protagonist in all his existentialist glory. Ever the outsider, Marlowe is apart from and at odds with his society, his culture; similarly he does not follow along with or accept the ideas that define this society. Marlowe is not ruled by or emotionally tied to any desire to conform to a 'crowd', a weakness often mentioned in existentialist writing, such as Kierkegaard's many warnings similar to that found in *The Present Age*: 'the public is... the most dangerous of powers... the public is also a gruesome

abstraction... more individuals, owing to their bloodless indolence, will aspire to be nothing at all – in order to become the public’ (3).

Rather than succumbing to any of the above-mentioned forms of societal conformity or belonging, Marlowe remains an outsider, alienated from his society, from the surrounding herd. Marlowe is, as Colin Wilson suggests of the outsider character type, ‘a man who cannot live in the comfortable, insulated world of the bourgeois, accepting what he sees and touches as reality... what he sees is essentially chaos’ and further Marlowe lives his life with ‘a distressing sense that the *truth must be told at all costs*, otherwise there can be no hope for an ultimate restoration of order’ (15).

As I propose throughout this chapter, the alienation of self to society is one of the defining existentialist traits of noir fiction. The noir protagonist never *belongs*. However, where Marlowe is, as I mentioned, an outlier, is in his relation to his self. Just as self-estrangement is a vital concern to existentialist thought, so too is it a central component to the noir protagonist’s character. The protagonists found in the works of Jim Thompson, Patricia Highsmith, David Goodis especially, and others all typically endure various degrees of self-estrangement. These noir protagonists are disconnected from their true or authentic selves, often so much so that any identification of a ‘true’ self is lost. They are far from free, far from responsible and in command of their own choices, suffering the symptoms and often-extreme fates of self-estrangement.

In Warren TenHouten’s *Alienation and Affect* (2016), TenHouten lays out several of the by-products of self-estrangement, arguing they include:

- (iv) Losing touch with one’s authentic self or feeling that one is inhabiting

a false self; no longer knowing what constitutes one's genuine self; (v) losing access to memories of affect-laden biographical episodes, and more generally, to the events, experiences, and processes that the self has lived and aspires to sustain into the future; and (vi) sensing a need to conform to sociostructural, sociorelational, or role requirements that cause or motivate the self to suppress or abandon the goals, agendas, and desires that give purpose and meaning to life. (91)

While TenHouten's list above is neither rigidly binding nor complete (and I have left aside a few other conditions or traits), it does provide a solid through-line to the self-estrangement commonly suffered by noir protagonists. The battle between the selves, of 'no longer knowing what constitutes one's genuine self' is evident in noir, as found in Thompson's *Pop 1280* and the Goodis work discussed in length in my chapter on anxiety and despair. Highsmith's Tom Ripley takes this to a very extreme level in essentially replacing his own person with that of Dickie Greenleaf, and furthermore is wholly characterized by his 'need to conform... to suppress or abandon the goals, agendas, and desires that give purpose and meaning to life' (ibid) in any way that is not mandated or dictated by an Other, by sociostructures.

While self-estrangement is quite often a central component to the noir protagonist, where Marlowe differs, is in his relatively *unalienated* relationship with his authentic self. Without doubt there is some inner struggle (and as discussed in chapter two a resultant despair), yet Marlowe is dogged in his *attempts* to be a true self. His behaviors are aligned with Kierkegaard's propositions of not conforming to an Other's expectations, nor does he favor the 'ontological priority of the Other' (Sartre, NB, 404). Marlowe does little to nothing to ingratiate himself in any society,

even with would-be employers, or as noted above, law enforcement officers also in search of hidden truths. He does not deny his past or his reality, or as TenHouten notes, any ‘access to memories of affect-laden biographical episodes... to the events, experiences, and processes that the self has lived’ (ibid).

However, Marlowe does have moments of introspection and what can be seen as a very existential self-doubt. This becomes more pronounced in the later novels and it comes across quite strongly in chapter thirteen of *The Little Sister*.

The chapter’s structure is quite unique. Throughout the entire chapter the plot comes to a standstill, the action of the novel does not advance. It is all rumination and reverie. The frustrations of the day, of the events so far, have gotten to Marlowe and so he drives around Los Angeles, aimless, waxing poetic about the city. While there is a brief paragraph in the middle of the chapter that sums up the events so far, the rest of the chapter is essentially an existentialist toned monologue about the city and society that vividly illustrates Marlowe’s alienated relationship to it. But in the midst of his pushing away of society, of expressing a disdain for society (‘They have to get the car out and go somewhere. Sucker-bait for the racketeers that have taken over the restaurants’ (80) and ‘California, the department-store state. The most of everything and the best of nothing’ (ibid)), and elevating the sense of his societal alienation, Marlowe begins to doubt himself. He looks inward and wonders if and how he has gone wrong inside. When his bitterness comes to a height, as it does several times in the chapter, pulls himself in; ‘Here we go again. You’re not human tonight, Marlowe.’ (80-82). This phrase is rhythmically repeated several times in a few pages as his contempt comes to a crescendo. It is a phrase that both separates Marlowe from society (he is not human, like the rest), and seemingly places the blame for it squarely on his own shoulders. His loss of sense of self is marked after the brief outline of the



events of the case; ‘Is that my business? Well, what is my business? Do I know? Did I ever know? Let’s not go into that. You’re not human tonight, Marlowe’ (81). But this momentary self-doubt, this brief questioning of his self-identity and his occupation which makes up such a large part of his identity does not go on to illustrate any lasting fracture in Marlowe’s relation to his self, nor does it serve up any lingering quality of self-estrangement. Instead, these moments of self-reflection serve to illustrate and enhance Marlowe’s individuality, his at oneness with a true self. As Marlowe thinks through this fleeting identity crisis, he concludes, in more basic terms, that the issue at hand is one not of self-estrangement but that his ‘identity crisis’ is due to social estrangement from ‘the cold half-lit world where always the wrong thing happens and never the right’ (81). Not to say Marlowe finds that the only way to live authentically is to withdraw from society – indeed over the course the novels he does the opposite – but his relationship with society is more fractured than his relationship to his self. There is more tension (i.e., alienation) in his relationship to society.

So while Marlowe does not suffer from the same self-estrangement found in many a noir protagonist, like any true existentialist, Marlowe is *concerned* with the thought or possibility of his own self-estrangement. He is afraid, as Marlowe says ‘of being nothing’ (*Farewell* 251), though he never succumbs to a nothingness or to full self-estrangement.

## LANDSCAPES AS EXPRESSION OF ALIENATION

Chapter thirteen also makes ample use of the environment, of Los Angeles and California as a whole, to extend the thematic concerns of Marlowe’s alienation from

an Other; in this case both society and, of particular interest for my own writing, the environment it is built upon. However, some scholars see the vivid descriptions of landscape in Chandler – and others – as nothing more than the author flexing their lyrical muscle:

Aware of the danger that the novel might slip into a sterile hunt for criminals, Chandler shows more clearly than ever before that he can be a lyrical painter sensitive to local color... the author feels a need to sprinkle in some sort of intermezzos, among the passages that describe so well the great mixer of lives, machines and ambitions that is Los Angeles. The lyrical-descriptive interpolations prove beyond doubt Chandler's intention to make his literary discourse fresher. (Mihaies 137)

Critics have made similar comments about Dorothy Hughes (Gold) and more recently James Lee Burke (Ferguson). However, I find there is much more than a simple poetic aside in the way Chandler and many other noir writers use landscape and similarly, in my own creative work I have attempted to use landscape to further thematic and character concerns. In my view, the three most obvious/common ways landscape is used to enhance theme and character, especially in regard to developing issues of alienation, are 1) using the landscape to mirror the hero's inner psyche, 2) to further displace the hero so to increase the sense of alienation and 3) using landscape to represent the socio-cultural Other. Of course, these uses are by no means mutually exclusive.

Despite the above comment, Mihaies conversely suggests that in *The Lady in the Lake* (1943) 'nature is an ally but also a trap for the guests who are trying to solve

their psychological or legal problems. In a subtle kind of way, the landscape dictates the rhythm and intensity of the narrative' (135). The point made here, of nature being an ally in the dealing with one's own psychological issues, or better still in revealing or reflecting one's own inner psyche, is precisely what I have attempted to do in my own work.

Marlowe and California are inextricably linked. Even when the landscape assumes its autonomous identity, the two exists in a mutually descriptive relationship. A California native, Marlowe's relationship to the land is often tied to and used to express his own alienated relationships (by and large from others or nature/god/world), and to emphasize his estrangement in his ongoing dealings with the Other. In *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, Jeff Malpas offers terms that readily apply to Marlowe and California:

The unity of my life, and of myself as a person, is the unity, always incomplete, of an ongoing and interconnected set of activities and projects as worked out in relation to an encompassing environment or locale—it is also a unity that is recognized as such by the one whose life it is... one's self-identity is indeed tied to one's active, embodied involvement in the world. (185)

However, it should be noted that Malpas – and those commonly associated with existentialism like Sartre and Heidegger – generally considers the 'environment or locale' or the world to which an individual relates to be more than simply physical land. Instead, they place a great emphasis on the social or cultural Other, on the history and human connotations of landscape, and less so simply on a textural

landscape or a landscape made up of nature's physicality, independent from man. As Malpas notes when discussing the idea of place 'the place at issue here also has a dynamic character of its own— it is not merely the static appearance of a viewed locale or landscape' (*Topology* 221). Rather than discussing the physical environment in terms of what socio-cultural entity it is representing, what is important for my purposes here is the way the static or physical landscape is *used* to evoke the alienated relationships and psyches belonging to the characters. In short, while I agree with Malpas and the above reading of environment as a dynamic character, I am *simultaneously* interested in the creative potentials available in static landscapes.

In my own fiction I attempt to use static landscapes not to reflect or represent any culture or history, but as a world *away* from mankind. In fact at times I do my utmost to eradicate any socio-cultural byproducts of landscape. Rather my intention is, by and large, to reflect my protagonist's inner psyche and his own alienated state of being. My hope is that by creating a fairly autonomous landscape, a landscape without much in the way of human connotation, it will help in distinguishing the societal 'herd' as separate and exclusively human and therefore aid in developing the fractured relationship my protagonist has with society, but not with the world at large. Just as the landscape has a disturbed relationship with society and therefore they coexist in a perpetual state of alienation, so too does my protagonist Samuel.

One way in which I have tried to depict this alienating relationship between Samuel and society as reflecting that of the natural landscape and society is through frequent juxtapositions, especially at key moments. The below quote takes place not long after April's death and Samuel is still processing the death.

Samuel could smell a very quiet sea come in on a slow, steady breeze.

That night after work, Samuel drove south, the orange sun bursting into the Gulf of Mexico beside him, and he pulled in at the Mirage Motel. The small row of rooms was nestled up against the beach, palm and pine trees lined up out front, protecting it from the highway.

He stayed the night at the motel and listened to the small waves hit the beach and to the college kids out in the parking lot, drinking beer, telling stories, their voices bursting with something Samuel never had.

Here it is the quiet sea, the wind, the natural environment living in a properly attuned relationship with itself which I hope imply the possibilities of genuine and unalienated states of being for Samuel. Further it is the natural world that provides the undisturbed relationship for Samuel, so soon after his relationship with society is again fractured and disturbed following the death of April. The motel is on the sea, protected in part from the human world by the trees that block the highway, and yet even here, with the natural landscape as both Samuel's ally and as a mirror to his psyche, he is still estranged from the ever-present human world of the college kids outside his room. While Samuel finds a relief and a psychic mirror in nature, there is still the tension of a dissonant relationship with a society.

In discussing *Noir Anxiety* (2003) Kelly and Trigo suggest a similar concept for *interior* spaces:

The mind of its hero is often represented in film noir as a room with symbolic architectural features. These features in turn mirror the emotional or affective disposition of the subject of noir... Ranging from locked doors to thick walls, the architectural features of noir rooms often

make references to the besieged mind of noir subjects. Similarly, the furnishings of these rooms are signs of the subject's state of mind: mirrors for the self-absorbed, beds for the tired, or empty chests of drawers for the drained subjects of noir. (249)

While they exclude exterior spaces (and instead tie exterior geographic locations into the hero's search for a moral center), I suggest that the reading Kelly and Trigo offer for noir's interior spaces applies at least equally to exterior landscapes. Further still, in my view, I find the natural landscape to be even more useful than interiors when depicting a hero's inner psyche. This is particularly the case when using natural elements such as weather, the physical geographies of skies or seas or vegetation. As interiors are always manmade there is the constant implication and influence of the human other with which to contend. Similarly, highways, cars, houses, offices and so forth always suggest the world as a human world, constantly affected by the sociocultural other. This is, as I mention earlier in the chapter, the world of which Sartre and other existentialists generally speak. Conversely, in using the natural world, in having an autonomous landscape, this influence can be largely avoided so as to draw even more focus upon the hero, and how the landscape might reflect and affect their inner being.

This is a technique that I find other noir writers, particularly Dorothy Hughes as I shall discuss later, employ to great effect. However, the physical landscape obviously is used for more than just mirroring a protagonist's inner psyche. Similarly, space and landscapes are often employed as an absurdist Other from which the noir hero perpetually exists in a state of estrangement. In this regard I find Chandler often straddles the line in crafting a landscape so as to represent society and a human Other,

and as portraying it as a static other which at times represents Marlowe's inner psyche only.

*The Little Sister's* oft-discussed chapter thirteen begins: 'I drove east on Sunset but I didn't go home' (79) and goes on to provide a detailed route, listing place names at a speedy clip. La Brea, Highland, Cahuenga Pass, Ventura Boulevard, Sherman Oaks, Studio City, Encino; these are all doled out in the second sentence tying in the enormity of the city, the sense of an endless void of sprawling landscape, into Marlowe's own anonymity. Of course, Marlowe chose not to go home, which can readily be seen as one place where he does in fact belong. Instead, he chose to drive away from his home, to stay out, driving and momentarily stopping for a bite or a drink, in a landscape from which he becomes more and more removed. Not to say he ever belonged in the first place.

Throughout the chapter there is a so far unprecedented (in this novel) level of attention paid to the environment and landscape (and to its society) and Marlowe's attitude toward it and relationship with it. Here, seemingly simple details about the land, about the world of highways and headlights, invariably reveals and enhances Marlowe's alienation from the Other; from society and even the unnatural, over-processed, land. This relationship to place is, as Henrik Gustafsson suggests of noir more generally 'emblematic of the Existentialist ethos...the alienated, isolated individual navigating through an indifferent, nauseating universe.' (60)

In his chapter on noir, 'A Wet Emptiness', Henrik Gustafsson argues that Marlowe is prone to the reveries throughout the six novels, when the narrative has come to a halt:

Repeatedly, we find him peering into space, listening to the silence,

feeling time pass, measuring the emptiness. But it is an atmospheric, resounding emptiness, filled with sensory details. In these passages, something happens with space, it assumes an autonomous quality that has nothing to do with character psychology or plot twists. (56)

I would disagree here with what I take to be Gustafsson's major point. While surely the space or landscape has little to do with the plot in these moments, and I especially agree that these passages reveal the landscape to have 'an autonomous quality', I argue these moments do, in fact, reveal a great deal as to Marlowe's psychology. In the first place, these are Marlowe's first-person sights and thoughts. With each thought from such a character, a reader is privy to some level of the characters' thinking and make up, no matter how small. When Marlowe says "I smelled Los Angeles before I got to it. It smelled stale and old like a living room that had been closed too long' (81), this points to Marlowe's discontent with the city with which he so often identifies with. The landscape, the city, has become mundane and domestically interior, trapped and insulated, as something Other than it perhaps should be. Secondly, and more importantly, these moments reveal Marlowe's relationship to the space or environment. In taking on that autonomous quality the environment becomes an Other through which we can examine the relationship it has with Marlowe, or vice versa. This relationship is revealed as melancholy, often nostalgic and often alienated. Marlowe is seldom a part of the landscape, though often he does appreciate it.

As noted, Marlowe seems to notice the land has become somewhat alienated from itself as well: 'On the right the great fat solid Pacific trudging into shore like a scrubwoman going home. No moon, no fuss, hardly a sound of the surf. No smell.



None of the harsh wild smell of the sea. A California ocean' (80). The quote suggests that the natural land, the ocean and the moon, and smell of the air, have all lost their natural, authentic state. This further heightens the somewhat symbiotic relationship between Marlowe and Los Angeles, between the individual and place, so that the crisis of identity Marlowe sees in Los Angeles propels his own momentary crisis of the self. However, as Slankard notes, Marlowe 'regains control of the self by severing his symbolic association with Los Angeles and its hordes of inhabitants' (4). Of course, in severing this relationship with Los Angeles, Marlowe is initiating his alienated relationship with the city as well as its people.

While Marlowe and California are symbiotically entangled, Chandler's frequent illustration of the autonomous landscape, as a distinct (and often absurd) Other, is, in my view, close to the attempts Paul Bowles made in endeavoring to even out the balance between background and foreground, between landscape and character. By doing so, Chandler both brings closer the relationship of the individual to an absurd, meaningless world, and highlights the individual's alienation, often from the self but most notably from the Other.

Though he might momentarily 'lose himself', Marlowe will never truly be lost in California.

Being lost and not knowing where one is, is in corporal terms, the essence of alienation and estrangement. I see this as one reason why noir makes frequent use of aimless and homeless drifter, individuals who are always on the move, isolated and alone. This results in an estrangement from the landscape, a disturbed or undeveloped relationship between the individual and the land. Here the idea of an autonomous landscape applies particularly well, especially in cases where the landscape is less background, and co-exists in a more equal relationship with character. Of course, the

degrees vary.

Similarly, sometimes an unknown landscape and all its connotations can follow a character home.

Across the tracks there was a different world. The long and lonely country was the color of sand. The horizon hills were haze-black; the clumps of mesquite stood in dark pools of their own shadowing. But the pools and the rim of dark horizon were discerned only by conscious seeing, else the world was all sand, brown and tan and copper and ale beige. Even the sky at this moment was sand, reflection of the fading bronze of the sun.

It was good to be out on the road, away from the banging of the town on the other side of the tracks. (Hughes 3)

So opens Dorothy Hughes' 1963 novel, *The Expendable Man*. The story of a black man who picks up a young white hitchhiker and for whose murder he is subsequently blamed, the clear racial divide and subsequent alienation is similar to that elsewhere discussed in the works of Chester Himes and Charles Willeford's *Pick-up*, but it is not the issue I aim to explore. Rather, my focus here is on textural landscape as an expression of alienation.

The very first sentence sets the protagonist, Hugh Densmore, up as an outsider, a part from and alienated in this different world. However, Hughes goes further than simply characterizing Densmore. The attention and detail of this opening are not paid to any character, but to the landscape and environment, so that in essence it is the foregrounded environment into which the 'foreign' hero comes. This shift in

the typical foreground/background – hero/environment relationship, is similar to what I tried to achieve in my own work.

What stands out for me in Hughes' novel is not only the ominous and autonomous landscape, but the weight, and in my view thematic importance, the land is given, particularly in key moments.

The first twenty-five pages of the novel take place in a 'nowhere', in small highway towns between Los Angeles, where Densmore works and lives, and Phoenix, Arizona, where he is going to visit his family. The towns and the desert highways in-between are vividly described, with an abundance of references to an intolerable heat, principally in the towns, and soon thereafter, dark desert shadows.

When speaking of the alienating and alienated world, Jaeggi writes:

An alienated world presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless, as rigidified or impoverished, as a world that is not one's own, which is to say, a world in which one is not "at home" and over which one can have no influence. The alienated subject becomes a stranger to itself; it no longer experiences itself as an "actively effective subject" but a "passive object" at the mercy of unknown forces. (3)

This applies particularly well to *The Expendable Man*. In this no man's land between homes, Densmore is in a world over which he seems to have no influence and as he travels on to Phoenix, he quickly becomes a "passive object" at the mercy of unknown forces' (ibid).

It is in two small towns, Indio and Blythe, where Densmore picks up and tries to get rid of – twice – the young hitchhiker, Iris. The 'different world' described in the

Hughes quote above is Indio, where Densmore first meets Iris, a town that is virtually smothered in sun and heat. Here Hughes uses this searing desert landscape and unbearable temperatures to help convey the disconnect between Densmore and the world. Hughes does this repeatedly, soon adding further thematic impact onto the quote above: ‘an invisible cloud of heat which lay heavily, suffocatingly, upon the town’ (ibid) and almost immediately thereafter, when ordering food ‘It was too hot for anything else’ (4). In fact, the land is described more intensely, in more detail than any human save a paragraph on Iris. The primary relationship at the start of the novel is the one between Densmore and the landscape; the heat and the sun.

However, landscape and the heat both over-whelm and alienate Densmore from the world around. Leaving Indio is a relief, fleeting though it may be. What is notable here, however, is the that relief Densmore feels is not in getting away from the vague threat of teenagers, not in getting away from any cultural or human Other, but rather in getting away from the heat and stagnation of the town and back onto the highway; ‘In spite of the heat in Indio, it wasn’t too hot on the desert here at sundown... Most evenings were still cool, the nights chill, on the desert in May. It should be the same in Phoenix – hot days, cool nights, perfect weather’ (4). While Densmore’s relationship with the surrounding people is assuredly one of disconnect – he is apart and alienated from them as a stranger and social outsider, he is black in a seemingly white society – any relationship with a human Other is barely mentioned (It is worth noting that race and Densmore’s skin colour are not mentioned for the first third of the novel). The attention is instead focused upon the landscape, and his reactions to it, to represent and sometimes manifest the sense of alienation that is part and parcel to Densmore’s state of being.

Similar depictions of landscape are emphasized in the novel but are used for more than solely representing the ‘often chaotic world’ or ‘The alienation experienced in attempting to navigate seemingly unrepresentable spaces’ (Tally 8), and, in fact, often not at all. For example, not long after Densmore leaves Indio, Hughes writes; ‘He switched on his lights. The sky was still pale, the pale lavender of twilight, but the sand world had darkened... the lights would identify the presence of his car to one approaching’ (6). The image evoked here is that of the peaceful evening sky, notably solitary and full of the calming colours of pale lavender, facing the possibility of encroachment from oncoming cars. The space, the physical landscape of the empty desert, is in no way ‘unrepresentable’ or chaotic or causing any state of alienation in Densmore or between itself and Densmore. In fact, here, alone in the desert, is when he seems most at ease with himself and the world around. Though Densmore is alone – isolated or physically *away* from any human world one might say – there is no disharmony in the relationship between him and the static landscape. The relationships here – Densmore to his self, the landscape to itself and the two to each other – are those of ease, attuned-ness, and proper attachment (Jaeggi). For both Densmore and the land, their authentic state of being is one of isolation, however this is constantly encroached upon. Hence, rather than a landscape embodying socio-cultural norms *or* influencing a character’s psyche, I see the depictions of landscape as *representing* the isolated psyche of Densmore, representing, that is, his status as a solitary individual, whose natural – authentic – state of being is one of isolation, often forced to confront a human other from which he and therefore the landscape, are perpetually alienated.

As the novel progresses, and the effects of Densmore’s various modes of alienation intensify in tandem with his trouble, the attention paid to the static

landscape lessens. Gone are the careful depictions of a soothing sky and quiet, people-less, deserts that permeate the early part of the novel:

This was as the desert should be... with land unrolled to the farthest distant horizon hills, with saguro standing sentinel in their strange chessboard pattern, towering supinely above the fans of ocotillo and the brushy mesquite. Because there had been some winter rain, the desert was in bloom. The saguaro wore creamy crowns on their tall heads, the ocotillo spikes were tipped with vermillion, and the brush bloomed yellow as forsythia. (23)

Notably, “as the desert should be” is people-less and other-less, and so too for Densmore himself. As the novel goes on the desert fades away, Phoenix takes over and it is a very peopled Phoenix, a city that exists in a tense relationship with the land it was built upon. When described Phoenix is increasingly tawdry, built-up, and most importantly, populated. Furthermore, the physical descriptions of the surrounds, of the textural world, lessen to a great degree and when they do occur, they are by and large less than pleasant:

The street slept, the village slept. There was no sound, not even the murmur of a car passing on Scottsdale Road. And then as he stood there, the door of the elegant restaurant beyond was opened and a gash of sound cleaved the night. (95)

This moment starts with a very brief nod to a possibly peaceful world; one that is emptied of people, yet this state is quickly ripped apart by the gashes of cleaving diners. The result of this fractures the possibilities in the relationship of land/society just as it fractures the relationship of Densmore/society and this fracture increases the sense of alienation in the novel and in Densmore himself. This inauthentic or disrupted and disturbed relationship between the natural landscape and society increases and consequently heightens not only the quality of Densmore's alienated relationships but also the atmosphere of alienation throughout the entire novel.

Of equal importance, the quote above is one of the very few that begin to depict the textural landscape as was so common early on in the novel. Increasingly the depictions are of streets lined with homes and houses, of cars, of people, buildings, city lights and city sounds. In other words, the world is no longer as it should be and neither is Densmore's life. Gone is the natural landscape and in its place, and increasingly so, is a manmade and alienating world. In the city, Densmore is in a world that 'presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless, as rigidified or impoverished, as a world that is not one's own, which is to say, a world in which one is not "at home" and over which one can have no influence.' (Jaeggi 3). In short, Densmore has become an alienated man in an alienating world. This is the mode of being in the noir world.

## NO END TO ALIENATION

Though represented in myriad ways, the noir protagonist is fundamentally suffused in alienated or alienating relationships. So much so that this very existentialist concern can be seen as a defining characteristic of noir fiction. Illustrated through depictions

of loneliness, isolation and further existentialist traits such as anxiety and despair, the noir protagonist nearly always exists in a state of disharmony. More specifically, the noir protagonist is often engaged in several deficient and/or faulty relationships, resulting in various modes of alienation. Often with one's self, virtually always with society where one is marginalized and enduring an ultimately ill-fated relationship, and often with the greater or natural world; the noir hero is always on the outside.

A question I aimed to raise and examine in my novel regards the states of being in the relationship between man and nature and society and nature. My hope was to show that while nature may well be violent and difficult, it obviously exists in harmony with itself. However, both the individual and society at large do, in the noir world and hopefully in *Shoot the Wild Birds*, so often exist in worrisome conflict an individual self, with society, and with the natural world.

As a thematic tool, alienation is pivotal in creating the atmosphere, discontent, self-destruction, and perhaps most importantly to my own writing, the sense of loss that characterizes noir fiction. Just as it is a core characteristic to existentialism, alienation in its various modes is central to crafting the noir world and its characters.



## CHAPTER TWO

### WRITING ANXIETY AND DESPAIR IN THE NOIR OUTSIDER

Once again she had afflicted him with what he had begun to call, with a sense of irony and guilt, Kat-fever. It was a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with all the familiar comforting routines.

He wanted to return to his normal blandness of spirit, maintain an uninvolved equanimity, suppressing the little bulging's of guilt and barbs of conscience... Were a man able to use his own fictions and realities interchangeably, he could be much more at home in a muddled world.

(18)

The above quotation, from John D MacDonald's *A Flash of Green*, captures the ambiguous malaise of Jimmy Wing, one of the novel's two leads. The passage characterizes Wing not only as an outsider, as someone distinctly *not* at home in his muddled world, but it also portrays the early signs of the anxiety and despair that affect Wing. The restlessness Wing feels, the dissatisfaction with common everydayness, causes a fracture in his thinking, and a fracture within his self. At times this fracture prevents Wing from thinking of anything but his dissatisfaction. This provides a characterization that aligns effectively with Kierkegaard's concept of

despair. In the above passage, MacDonald spells out Wing's emotions and describes Wing's conflicting sense of self. Similarly, though it remains nameless, the author also describes the despair that will drive Wing's actions and inactions, both honourable and dishonourable, throughout the novel.

While noir is often characterized as having an atmosphere of anxiety and/or despair (Horsley, *Noir* 48; Porfiro 77; Brevda 321), I suggest this mood stems not from environment and setting, but rather from character, and more specifically from an existentialist-coloured outsider, an outsider riddled with a very Kierkegaardian sense of anxiety and despair.

Portofino notes the difficulties in labelling the noir protagonist as a hero, and points to several alternate terms such as the rebel, the Hemingway hero, the non-hero and – which is the most commonly used – anti-hero. More recently, critics such as Mark T Conrad and Alan Woolfolk have characterized noir by the anti-hero or more specifically the noir anti-hero. I agree with Lee Horsley, in her argument that both heroes and anti-heroes fulfill the roles of noir protagonists (*Noir* 53). However, I argue that using heroes and heroic characteristics as a measuring stick does a disservice to noir and its characters. Noir is too broad a genre, and at times can be too naturalistic to use *hero* and *anti-hero* with accuracy or comfort. The noir protagonist can be either/or, and often does demonstrate traits attributed to both the traditional hero and the antihero, sometimes both at the same time. In the case of *A Flash of Green*'s Jimmy Wing a large part of his character trajectory is the movement from anti-hero to antagonist to almost-hero. What remains steady throughout Wing's story, however, is the despair and anxiety and their symbiotic relationship with the conflict between self and society. Therefore, I argue throughout this chapter that a more fundamental and reliable characteristic of noir protagonists is their status as

existentialist outsiders, and their tendency toward despair and anxiety, which serve as tools to provide character agency.

This anxiety and despair in the outsider protagonist are part of what I attempt to create in my own work, not only with Samuel Holiday, but further I wanted to illustrate Samuel's recognition of these emotions in his daughter Willa, and in fact, to use one (Willa's possible or perceived anxiety) to fuel the other (Samuel's anxiety).

The characteristics of the hard-boiled or noir protagonist have been much debated, and from a creative stand-point, deservedly so. My own work, *Shoot the Wild Birds*, is a novel about Samuel Holiday. Other issues such as themes, events, narrative structures, all come afterward and their purpose is to serve as illustration as to Holiday's character. Similarly, Chandler's Marlowe novels center on Marlowe, more so than they do any crime or event, both from a reader's perspective and from Chandler's (as discussed in the introduction). Interestingly, while Chandler identified Marlowe as a hero, rather than anti-hero, and consciously worked toward creating Marlowe thus, Marlowe still has many of the traits of the typical anti-hero. While the hard-boiled and noir heroes have their roots in mythological hero, as seen for example in Chandler's many allusions to chivalric knights and his essay *The Simple Art of Murder* (1934) many of the attributes of the anti-hero are also present in Marlowe. Chandler's detective hero is a man 'who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor... He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world' (18). Following tradition, the hard-boiled noir heroes are typified by characteristics such as extreme bravery, noble and honourable thoughts and actions and a powerful sense of agency. They purport to

be bastions of moral clarity, whose goals are those of greater society, whose actions are undertaken for greater society. Marlowe is such a man, or such a hero. His thoughts and actions, though often not his words, are honorable, and all aimed at improving the world he lives in.

At the same time Marlowe (as well as many hard-boiled noir heroes, notably Hammett's) breaks from the traditional hero 'who upholds the law as sacrosanct, attempts to avoid unnecessary violence, and appears to protect all of humanity equally (not solely his family or self)' (Gilchrist 119). No longer is the hero unmatched in physical prowess. Now the hero is quite regularly beaten and bested, which while breaking from tradition does further serve to enhance the hero's bravery and doggedness and determination to right wrongs, to find hidden truths.

The noir protagonist retains some of the characteristics of the traditional hero, but this hero 'is replaced by a flawed but essentially spiritually intact everyman figure who allows for the empowerment of the individual without the problematic elitism' (Simmons, *Anti-hero* 12). Thus, the noir hero simultaneously adopts traits usually attributed to the anti-hero while keeping fundamental hero qualities such as bravery and honour. Typically, anti-heroes are less effectual, even clumsy in their unlucky situations. While this ineffectual clumsiness in the face of unlucky and absurdist situations is clearly marked in noir featuring protagonists such as the falsely accused anti-hero in Goodis' *Dark Passage* (1954), it also typifies Marlowe. Despite his final success in his cases (or rather than success, perhaps conclusion is a more appropriate term), Marlowe's methods and results are often long-winded, misguided and wayward and in fact result in more dead-ends than in swift successes. It is Marlowe's sense of personal honour and his determination that see him through, rather than any resounding efficiency or capability.

While noir is populated by heroes, anti-heroes and protagonists that are both at once, what they have in common is their singular version of outsider status, (discussed further in my chapter on alienation), which in no small way is characterized by existentialist despair and anxiety.

It is this movement away from heroic or anti-heroic concerns and characteristics that I am concerned with in my own writing, and one of the reasons I have always been so drawn to the more naturalistic noir. Horsley points to the character of the noir victim, who ‘can be so far reduced to hopelessness and fatalistic inertia that his narrative ceases to be recognizably a “thriller”’ (*Noir* 69). Cain’s *Mildred Pierce*, McCoy’s *I Should Have Stayed Home*, and several Goodis’ novels all fall under this umbrella. However, Horsley’s hopelessness and fatalistic inertia, I believe, are other forms, or by-products, of existentialist despair and anxiety. Furthermore, these existentialist characteristics are not exclusive to the victims, and are found in heroes and anti-heroes, victims and transgressors alike.

My intention in this chapter is to show that an existentialist version of both anxiety and despair bear at least equal if not more weight as hallmarks of the noir character than other genre norms such as the hero/anti-hero dichotomy. In the first main section I will first discuss the existentialist concept of anxiety, primarily drawing on Kierkegaard, and then examine how noir authors Raymond Chandler and Jim Thompson illustrate and exhibit a sense of existentialist anxiety in two of their protagonists. This exemplifies how noir exhibits a fundamental preoccupation with ideas and themes that are foundational to existentialist thought. Likewise, I will discuss my own aims in imbuing the characters of my creative work with a sense of existentialist anxiety. In the second main section, I will discuss existentialist despair, again primarily looking to Kierkegaard and his treatise on despair and the self,

*Sickness Unto Death*, and then apply this understanding of despair to the protagonists of John D. MacDonald's *A Flash of Green* and David Goodis' *Of Tender Sin*. This choice of novels highlights the lack of a protagonist (in three of the four novels) who might comfortably fit most traditional hero or anti-hero roles. This, I suggest, draws noir quite near to what might be called existentialist fiction, or at the very least shows that the noir genre is deeply imbued with the very same themes, concerns and characterizations found in existentialist thought. Hence this chapter is an attempt to see how particular aspects of these 'existentialist emotions' (anxiety and despair), mostly drawing from Kierkegaard, manifest in noir and how this understanding and use of despair and anxiety was used to shape my own characters.

## THE EXISTENTIALIST ANXIETY OF NOIR

Brevda suggests that the concepts of anxiety and despair, as understood by existentialists in general and Kierkegaard specifically, are the central emotions to noir. He writes: 'Anxiety (a.k.a. dread, angst) differs from ordinary fear. An animal fears. Fear is fear of *something*. Only human beings are afraid of *nothing*' (326). However, Brevda's understanding of anxiety rests perhaps too heavily on fear, most notably in that he suggests anxiety is a type of unordinary fear, or the fear of nothing. In *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard writes of anxiety and fear: 'I must point out that it (anxiety) differs entirely from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite; whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility' (51). While, especially in creative writing, there may be some superficial physical or emotional resemblance, fear and anxiety are two distinct emotions, with different causes and different outcomes and possibilities. Rather than a fear, even a fear of

nothingness or the possibility of personal choice, anxiety differs from fear so as to have more in common with an overwhelming sense of internal panic, the cause of which is often unknown to the fictional characters.

According to existentialist thought, anxiety is a general distress due to the possibilities inherent in personal freedom; a malaise and/or constant worrying, brought on by the knowledge that our lives, selves and futures are not predetermined by any outside forces. While Kierkegaard, ever the theologian, roots his discussion of anxiety in the story of Adam and Eve and the emotions following Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit, the anxiety Adam feels in eating the apple do not in fact stem from his 'sin', but rather from the fact that Adam was free to make his own choice; to eat or not to eat. It was the awareness of possibility of personal choice, of freedom, that (even in this religious allegory) there was no predetermined path or meaning for Adam. The choice was Adam's alone and this freedom of possibility was overwhelming. In essence, for Kierkegaard possibility begets anxiety.

Existentialist thought suggests when this same anxiety overcomes a person they experience an emotional and mental discomfort, their psyche becomes disturbed and burdened. Söderquist notes that while not fear itself, in anxiety 'something *akin* to fear is at work'. (88; emphasis mine). I would also add emphasis on the words 'at work'. In anxiety, more so than in fear, the emotions are continuously evolving, shifting, eating away at the psyche and most notably in noir, prying away at the inner selves and driving the demons of protagonists. These anxieties are hard at work in noir, most often to propel the inert protagonists into action, by reflecting on their 'ultimate constitution as factual beings endowed with the freedom to pursue our own individual projects' (87 Söderquist). This free pursuit of individual projects often comes to a frightful realization in transgressor noir, such as Jim Thompson's *The*

*Killer Inside Me* (1954) or Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The choices made, freely, by the protagonists are harrowing. Noir takes full advantage of the disturbed inner turmoil protagonists feel in, as Sartre put it, 'the face of freedom' (*Nothingness* 53). Of course, in noir the dizzying feelings of unease, the symptoms of anxiety, are not identified or understood as the result of the confrontation with the freedom of possibility and the possibilities of freedom. Here noir takes a wrong turn away from fictional existential treatises such as Sartre's *Nausea*. While Sartre, like most noir writers, begins with the symptoms of anxiety as impetus for his protagonist Roquentin, writing: 'I am ill at ease ... I know there's something else. Almost nothing. But I can no longer explain what I see. To anybody. There it is: I am gently slipping into the water's depths, towards fear' (*Nausea* 19), Sartre does offer a reprieve for Roquentin. By the end of the novel Roquentin is *aware* of the source of his anxiety, he has understood that his debilitating emotions were due to the lack of predetermined recognizable meaning in the world and his subsequent existentialist freedom. However, while in my view this coming-to-awareness is somewhat rare in most other existentialist novels, such alleviation of anxiety is virtually nonexistent in noir. As Sartre says of anxiety (anguish) 'I have to realize the meaning of the world and of my essence; I make my decision concerning them – without justification and without excuse' (*Nothingness* 63), Sartre realizes, as does his character Roquentin, that he must make his choices – responsibly – in the face of freedom, and so is beneficiary to a sense of constant anxiety or anguish. The noir outsiders, on the other hand, seldom realize the meaning of the world, in fact they are often searching for just that, and yet they too are confronted with the freedom of choice and so are affected or afflicted by their own anxiety to varying degrees.



Unlike Sartre's acceptance of freedom, choice and responsibility, and unlike Kierkegaard's leap of faith, noir seldom offers a reprieve. Instead, noir offers unlimited and undiluted exposure to the nightmare of anxiety and despair, it peels back the psychic Band-Aid to expose the workings and the depths of anxiety and despair, but by and large it offers little relief. Instead, noir focuses on the despair brought on by the battle of inner demons, or a conflict of selves, as well as what May sees as the symptoms of anxiety such as 'the pronounced sense of loneliness, the quality of persistent searching—frantically and compulsively pursued but always frustrated' (4).

This pronounced sense of loneliness is something I wanted to explore in *Shoot the Wild Birds*. For Samuel his love/hate relationship with solitude is one of the biggest symptoms of his own anxiety. As a taxi driver he is compelled to become – in a small way – a part of the others, to drive for them, but he remains a somewhat remote observer, rather than becoming a full-fledged, *active*, part of society. Instead, he spends much of the novel in pursuit of solitude, driving empty highways at night, at a race track before the crowds arrive, trying to stay away from others so as to both relieve the burden he feels from crowds and society, and to better confront his own inner self, without distraction. Yet this same confrontation often overwhelms Samuel, leading to panic attacks and often a simpler sense of constant worry. More importantly, this chasing of solitude is something Samuel also worries he has passed on to his daughter, as he finds when they discuss her desire to run away, but not in the normal sense but in a more all-encompassing sense:

She asked him if he ever felt like running away.

“What? When I was a kid? No, not really. It didn’t cross my mind. Go away, sure, for a little, but not run away.”

“No,” she said. “Not when you were a kid. Now. Do you ever feel like running away now?”

He looked at her. She watched him, thoughtfully and he thought she would know right away if he were lying. “I guess. In a way. Sometimes.”

(103)

In the conversation above my aim is to have Samuel see Willa’s worry as twofold; she is both worried about Samuel disengaging because of his constant pursuit of solitude and his comfort within the loneliness, and also, Willa is having similar thoughts herself, and Samuel can see something of both himself and his suicidal father in Willa. For Samuel and Willa both, these are not momentary behaviors but rather permanent and deeper aspects to their character, aspects which will never really go away. My intention is to have the anxiety linger in the two long after the novel ends; for Samuel and Willa, there is also no genuine reprieve.

#### ANXIETY AND POSSIBILITY IN CHANDLER AND THOMPSON

For some noir outsiders, such as Philip Marlowe, there may be a sense of understanding and therefore an implied (or perhaps only inferred) sense of relief and hope; the case is solved, Marlowe lives, the world turns on, but there is also often a sense of fleetingness to this reprieve; lingering reminders of the absurdity, freedom and possibility (and hence anxiety) inherent in the noir world. This very duality of momentary relief and the endlessness of anxiety is captured in the final paragraph of

Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*: 'I rode down to the street floor and went out on the steps in the City Hall. It was a cool day and very clear. You could see a long way – but not as far as Velma had gone' (292). In effect, the wrong-doers and crooked cops in the novel have been revealed, the mystery of the Velma/Grayle identity is likewise solved, it is outwardly a good day and the future looks bright, however Marlowe's anxiety will continue, both his own personal anxiety and a second-hand anxiety regarding Velma and her choice of suicide. Through the course of the novels Marlowe's anxiety seems to deepen. I argue this is because with more experience he has been confronted with more choices, often none of them promising, and the more awareness Marlowe has of the growing possibilities and – importantly – responsibilities of his choice serves to heighten his anxiety. Chandler's penultimate novel *The Little Sister*, has Marlowe grapple with his choices and his conscience, on the final page of the book:

Perhaps I ought to have stopped him. Perhaps I had a hunch what he would do, and deliberately let him do it. Sometimes when I'm low I try to reason it out. But it gets too complicated. The whole damn case was that way. There was never a point where I could do the natural obvious thing without stopping to rack my head dizzy with figuring how it would affect somebody I owed something to. (250)

The above passage is a typically existentialist encounter with anxiety itself. The very dizziness Marlowe experiences when confronted with the possibilities of his own choices and actions is his anxiety manifested. In 'racking his head' Marlowe is opening himself up to and considering the possibilities at hand, and this freedom and

responsibility of possibility produce the sense of dizziness which, as Kierkegaard argues, is anxiety (*Anxiety* 75). Ending the novel on this note is typical of noir fiction in that in noir anxiety and despair may shift in form or understanding or consciousness, but they never really go away. As McCarthy writes: ‘So long as a subject lives, he has possibilities, and hence anxiety is never annihilated’ (43). Noir outsiders don’t wake up from their nightmares.

Kierkegaard argues that ‘anxiety appears when the possibility of freedom presents itself’ (Grøn 14). This possibility, and its resultant anxiety, is what drives the protagonist, Dr Peter Murphy, in Jim Thompson’s *The Alcoholics* (1953). The novel starts with Murphy confronting the utterly existentialist notion of his own freedom to choose suicide, but it is the subsequent self-questioning which prompts Murphy forward and which characterizes him as riddled with anxiety. Thompson writes:

Perhaps it would not have been a good idea. Perhaps his voyage would have terminated in the phosphorescent muck of the ocean bottom. But – well, that was the point, you see. The fact that he *wasn’t* sure... and if a man wasn’t willing to act on his ideas – if he didn’t have the guts to act on ‘em – why in the hell did he have to keep having ‘em?.. Life had teased and taunted Doctor Murphy severely. It had constantly confronted him with problems, then presented him with solutions. (5)

The repetition of the word ‘perhaps’ here, and with the Chandler passage above, illustrates the possibilities of choice available to the protagonists and their respective manners of dwelling on the possibilities. When Marlowe questions his actions and the reasons for them, he is directly confronting the freedom of his choices.

Jim Thompson's *Murphy* also questions the possibility of choice; perhaps suicide would *not* have been a good idea, but clearly the use of the word 'perhaps' offers the alternate possibility that perhaps it *would* have been a good idea. Regardless the possibility of his choice, to commit suicide or not and the subsequent ever-sinking anxiety *Murphy* feels are the novel's first inclinations toward a building and finally over-whelming anxiety related to much more than only the possibility of suicide. This moment is the start of the crescendo of his anxiety as he ponders the fact that life presents him with problems and then solutions, which paints his life as an endless cycle of possibility. *Murphy* is characterized by an almost claustrophobic amount of questioning, a trait Thompson also employs in *The Nothing Man* (1954), *After Dark, My Sweet* (1955), and elsewhere. This constant questioning and self-questioning by Thompson's protagonists highlight the malaise that affects them; it illustrates very clearly the many possibilities and choices available to the protagonist as well as the sense of drowning in panic (i.e., anxiety) resultant from both the fact that *they*, the protagonist alone, must make a choice and from the fact of choice itself. There is a pronounced sense of unease in these questions and in the act of questioning itself; a familiar threat from some unknown thing that usually comes from within the protagonist themselves. Thompson highlights this effect with the erratic conversations *Murphy* has with himself, such as in the passage below. Sometimes speaking as though he is two selves, each self seemingly exasperated with the other, each self interrupting the other to comical and anxious effect, and often using italics or irregular punctuation to highlight the stress of the conversation, the stress and anxiety within *Murphy*. All their questioning is an analysis of possibility and illustrates the source of their anxiety. Though these noir protagonists are not necessarily conscious of it, they are experiencing the anxiety of freedom's possibility.

In *The Alcoholics*, Murphy's greatest 'fear', or the source of his anxiety, is very much in line with an existentialist 'nothing'. Barrett writes that anxiety is 'the uncanny feeling of being afraid of nothing at all. It is precisely Nothingness that makes itself present and felt as the object of our dread' (226). Ostensibly Murphy is worried about his rehabilitation center being closed down by the city, unless he can come up with fifteen thousand dollars by day's end. However, throughout the novel 'the city' remains a non-entity. There are no workers or representatives, no telephone calls, no building or city hall Murphy must visit. The city stays a background 'nothing', present only cursorily in the thoughts of Murphy. It is a nothing, however, that forces Murphy to consider the various means and ethicalities of raising the needed funds, the most likely option being to swindle the wealthy family of a patient. Murphy debates these considerations between his conflicting dual selves:

*Listen, you stupid jerk! Face the facts. Do you want to keep this place going or not? Damned if I know why you would, but do –*

*You know the answer to that.*

*Then there's just one thing for you to do. Start thinking about a nice round sum from the Van Twyne farm–*

*You think I'd do that... You think I'd keep a man buried here alive, a hopeless imbecile, just because his family is willing to pay for it? (35)*

These conversations Murphy has with himself pepper the novel, until Murphy almost reaches a breaking point in being overwhelmed by the anxiety produced by his choice. In fact, much the same as Kierkegaard's view of Adam, who 'saw the possibility of his own freedom in the committing of a future act against the

background of Nothingness' (Barrett 226), the source of Murphy's anxiety is his own freedom to choose how and if to raise the necessary money in a less than ethical way. While Adam dwelt on the possibilities of eating an apple, Murphy focuses on the possibilities of raising fifteen thousand dollars; for both it is the possibility of free choice in the face of nothingness that results in anxiety. Of course, Murphy is contemplating extra-legal action, yet I suggest this is not a simple crisis of conscience because, as Fiona Peters notes regarding Highsmith's Ripley, Thompson's novel, like Murphy himself, is imbued with a 'consistent presence of anxiety unmediated by a moral sense of right and wrong' (*Highsmith* 9). For Murphy it is the overwhelming scope of his existential possibilities, rather than considerations of right and wrong, that produces anxiety.

These reflective moments by Murphy and Marlowe offer ample opportunity for the writer to illustrate the mindset of the character. Readers can see the process of questioning and/or reasoning that accompanies the demands of personal choice. Characters can directly consider issues not only of personal choice but also of personal responsibility; issues like anxiety can be clearly examined and even explained. Further, building up the questioning, especially if in an erratic way as with Thompson, often serves to highlight the growing sense of anxiety within a character. Chandler's use of first person makes reflection almost a must for Marlowe, while Thompson's use of third person is highly personalized; a very close third person, with moments breaking out of mode like the above passage with Murphy in conversation with himself. However, I aimed to write in a very strict objective third person mode, with very little direct insight into Samuel's thinking. While there is some, my aim was to avoid direct reflection in the writing of the novel, just as Samuel would have avoided it in his own thinking. Hence, I relied on the physical. Physical descriptions

of Samuel's movements, of his sitting still in the dark, of his driving on empty highways, are attempts to show Samuel feeling a sense of internal, perhaps psychic pressure coming down on him and his efforts to escape this pressure. Just as Samuel endeavors to sidestep conversations that April and occasionally his daughter want to have, conversations that may provide some insight into Samuel's own anxiety, my own writing sidesteps the internal dialogue and its potential as reflection and illustration of Samuel's inner workings.

Wild Birds begins with Samuel, alone in the night. The sound of birds calling triggers a panic attack, but he does not know why:

They came at night, late, when the wind had gone and left nothing but the humid edge of the sea, sinking mangroves and lost air. The cries were wild and lonesome and when Samuel heard them, he wondered why they were still awake, looking for someone, looking for something... He tried to breathe, tried to feel the clean, midnight air in his lungs but there was nothing there, nothing but the burning weight and the airless night that crushed his chest. His heart shook, tried to escape, and then it was over.

(1)

This opening is intended to depict the overwhelming sense of anxiety that is a common part of life for Samuel. In the above excerpt my intention is to have Samuel confront the ubiquitous 'nothing' similar to the 'nothing' discussed in Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety. This nothing is omnipresent through the novel and Samuel's life. It is these quiet moments, the 'nothing moments' which lead to Samuel confronting, and often being over-whelmed by, the freedoms of his own life and also the



remembrance of his father's suicide. Samuel must also contend with the worry of what choices his daughter will confront as she grows, haunted as she is by her own anxieties, which in turn serves to intensify Samuel's own anxieties.

## NOIR'S EXISTENTIALIST DESPAIR

Despair is often broadly defined as a lack of hope, and in this more basic understanding, it is easy to see how and why it is so often linked to and found within noir. In noir, happy endings are never guaranteed, seeming resolutions leave many a string untied, and there is often a sense that the meaninglessness will continue, and the pessimism will linger. At the end of a case or situation or novel, Marlowe will go home and sleep, and in the morning, he will wake up, shave, make coffee and drink it. Much like Jimmy Wing in this chapter's opening excerpt, Marlowe is in search of that blandness of the everyday, the 'uninvolved equanimity' (MacDonald 18) in which he might hide. In these simple actions, and others like it which populate the Marlowe books, Marlowe attempts to 'put a proprietary stamp on his own insignificance, constructing an existential framework in which the ridiculous seems to be finally conquered (Mihaies 162). Yet these common, repetitive actions portray and emphasize 'the muffled despair into which Marlowe has fallen' (ibid).

In existentialism and in noir, despair can have deeper meanings, and deeper roots than simply a lack of hope. I suggest it is a concept of despair close to Kierkegaard's which is a hallmark of noir and its protagonists. In *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard develops his ideas on despair and tries to offer an understanding of and a reprieve from the affects of despair. He distinguishes between the more precise, expert understanding of despair and the common understanding of despair,

that of despairing over something or over a situation that has not worked out as one had hoped. As Kierkegaard writes: 'despair over something is not yet properly despair. It is the beginning, or it is as when the physician says of a sickness that it has not yet declared itself. The next step is the declared despair, despair over oneself' (*Sickness* 49).

However, Kierkegaard suggests the above-mentioned feelings are symptoms of particular situations and outcomes rather than true despair, which he views as despairing over oneself. He is more concerned with the illness and less so with the symptoms, or 'more concerned with despair over *oneself* (italics mine), which is the illness, than despair over some thing or situation, which is merely a symptom of a misrelation in the self' (Beabout 99).

For Kierkegaard, despair is 'a sickness of the spirit, of the self' (*Sickness* 43), or more specifically, despair is the by-product of one's misinterpretation, misunderstanding, or even denial of one's self. It is seen as a conflict with a self's relationship with the self, where not only the selves but also the relationship itself is fraught and exists in tension. More simply, despair is the result of not being, or of denying, one's true self. Despair arises when 'we do not will to be directly what we are' (Theunissen 5). For Kierkegaard, this misinterpretation is partially due to the fact that a person's own understanding of their self is often obscured by indolence and apathy toward understanding their self and oftentimes even through proper self-deception, or a full denial of the true self. However, this misinterpretation of the self and its relation is not seen by Kierkegaard as accidental but rather as intentional, amounting to an effort to snub one's self out of existence. He writes: 'To despair over oneself, in despair *to want to be rid of oneself*, is the formula for all despair' (*Sickness* 50). As such, despair can be seen as 'an attempt to do away with oneself, either by

fleeing from oneself or by defiantly attempting to be a self that one is not' (Beabout 98).

Kierkegaard identifies three primary forms of despair; the two forms of genuine despair: 'not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself' (*Sickness* 43), and the inauthentic despair of 'being unconscious in despair of having a self (ibid). The first form, not wanting to be one's self, is a fairly straightforward concept and more directly translates to a person actively being untrue to themselves. However, with the second form Kierkegaard suggests this despair stems from those who tell themselves, perhaps even believe, that they are working toward being their self (in the contemporary sense of self-actualization), yet their concept of self is, in essence, a false concept. In this second form the self may be misinterpreted so that one tries to be what a parent or spouse or the masses expects them to be, rather than the self being a genuine or authentic self. Or worse still, in Kierkegaard's opinion, is that one may have constructed an inauthentic self (for Kierkegaard this means without the appropriate respect for God), and it is this false self that they despair over not being. Essentially, these two forms of despair consist of 1) actively trying not to be one's self and 2) actively trying to be a false self. Consequently, these two forms of despair can to a large degree be reduced to one: 'that we will to be what we are not because we do not want to be what we are' (Theunissen 13).

These forms, or levels of despair, are differentiated by the degree of awareness or consciousness one has (or is willing to admit to) regarding their own state of despair. Kierkegaard writes: 'With every increase in the degree of consciousness, and in proportion to that increase, the intensity of despair increases: the more consciousness, the more intense the despair. This is everywhere to be seen, most

clearly in the maximum and minimum of despair.’ (*Sickness* 72). When applied to, and developed with, characters in noir fictions, this increase in awareness of both self and despair has the potential to provide the fundamental shape of the character arcs. At times, such as with *A Flash of Green*’s Jimmy Wing, the back and forth of the relationship between despair and awareness provides the impetus for the action of the novel. This is the narrative drive, the action and reaction that moves the novel and provides both motive and tension, that less existentially inclined fiction often depicts through violence or the actions of another characters.

In much of my own work it is the third form of despair – so-called inauthentic despair – that interests me. I find in writing it is harder to clearly manifest this form of despair in character and this may stem from the same reasons that it is sometimes seen as the most ambivalent form of despair. By the same token, one reason I am drawn to this form of despair is that it is a more insidious and, according to Kierkegaard, more dangerous form of despair. In this form a person is unaware of being in despair, and also unaware of their own self; it is an unconscious despair, it is ‘Despair that is ignorant of being despair, or the despairing ignorance of having a self and an eternal self’ (*Sickness* 42). Seen thusly, one suffering inauthentic despair is not aware of their self *and* not aware of their despair.

Theunissen questions how an unconscious form of despair is at all possible, arguing ‘There cannot be despair without self-consciousness in the sense of an accompanying self-presence. A person in despair always has himself before him’ (15). I argue this reading of inauthentic despair misses the fact of, or perhaps level of, awareness. One does not need to be aware of concepts to be affected by them. Kierkegaard makes an apt comparison to physical health, in which a person might feel and think they are physically sound but a physician might find otherwise. Likewise, I

argue, the self can be out of balance without one being consciously aware of the imbalance. Furthermore, while characters might be unconscious or unaware of their self and of their despair there are still the feelings, both mental and physical, which accompany despair. Of these feelings, or symptoms of despair, Kierkegaard writes:

Despair is exactly a consumption of the self, but an impotent self-consumption not capable of doing what it wants. But what it wants is to consume itself, which it cannot do, and this impotence is a new form of self-consumption, but in which despair is once again incapable of doing what it wants, to consume itself.... This is the hot incitement or the cold fire in despair, this incessantly inward gnawing. (*Sickness* 48)

Kierkegaard's concept of the self does not need acknowledgement, awareness or understanding to produce its by-product, that of the above mentioned feelings that accompany despair. The coming to awareness is a possible process and wrestling with the possibilities of this process is, in my view, one of the key factors in providing characters with motivation and agency in fiction, notably noir and existentialist. This ambiguity, the seemingly unfounded feeling or emotion produced by despair, is something I grapple with displaying in *Shoot the Wild Birds*. In his memoir *Off to the Side* (2002), Jim Harrison adroitly describes the outer, or physical, manifestations despair may produce: 'The most constant feeling is the lack of oxygen, an atrophication of the strange breathing apparatus of the soul of life' (44). In fiction these very feelings can incite and propel a character into investigating their reasons and causes and so they may become aware of both the self and their despair.

Just as one of the central themes of existentialist fiction is the despair that characterizes the protagonists as they attempt to create and understand their relationship with their self to their self (even if at a subconscious level), consideration must also be paid to the relationship of the world to a self.

## DESPAIR IN JOHN D MACDONALD

In *A Flash of Green*, Jimmy Wing is perpetually adrift in the solitude of the masses or the ‘others’; he is beset by what Kierkegaard refers to as finitude’s despair, a ‘kind of despair (that) allows itself, so to speak, to be cheated of itself by “the others”’ (*Sickness* 63). Kierkegaard writes:

By seeing the multitude of people around it, by being busied with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such person forgets himself, in a divine sense forgets his own name, dares not to believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd. (*ibid* 64)

As a seasoned reporter for the local newspaper, Jimmy Wing is in the perfect position to be overwhelmed by the worldly affairs of which Kierkegaard writes. Knowing the ways of the world is Wing’s very livelihood, in a material sense, and he spends his free time and energies focused on his job, on the goings-on in his town and state and prides himself in what he sees as ‘his own role of observer’ (77). However, in this definition of Wing’s self, that of unattached/uninvolved observer, Wing

perpetuates his own despair as it is a denial of his genuine self and demonstrates ‘the self which, in his despair... wants to be a self he is not... he wants to tear his self away from the power which established it. But despite all his despair, this he is incapable of doing’ (*Sickness* 50). By and large this attempt to become an observer is an effort to move Wing’s thoughts not only away from Kat Hubble, the novel’s other protagonist, but also away from what I view as his sense of self, away from taking an active role in creating both his life and his self. Though Wing may tell himself he is an observer, he becomes involved in the real estate swindle – on the unethical side – that Kat Hubble is fighting. In an early conversation with the corrupt Elmo Bliss, it is Bliss who, mid-bribe, points to Wing’s self-denial: ‘You’ve been telling yourself too long you like to live small and quiet. You sit back inside yourself and sneer at how crazy the world is, and you like to think you don’t give a damn about anything’ (73).

Instead of maintaining his observer status, Wing joins the crowd, and lets himself be swept away because, as Kierkegaard suggests, it seems to be ‘safer to be like the others’ (*Sickness* 64). He denies his affections for Kat Hubble and instead reports her actions back to Bliss, so that Bliss might succeed in building a real estate development Hubble is fighting and of which Wing does not approve. In doing so, Wing actively seeks to destroy or deny aspects of his true self. Further, Wing bases much of his life, many of his actions and perhaps more importantly inactions, his sense of self, on others, on the actions and behaviors of others. When reflecting on his actions and on his past, he holds himself to a low standard based on ‘others’ and ‘otherness’: ‘He had used a flexible judgement based less on morality than on convenience. He took what it has seemed plausible to take, measuring himself against what he believed others would take and did take, seeking that comfortable level.’

(*Flash* 112). Wing becomes a cog in the machine that is Bliss' real estate scam, and in doing so forgets, perhaps even abandons, his self.

As mentioned, despair is often accompanied by the physical manifestations, the cold fires and inward gnawing, feelings of suffocation and 'an uneasiness, an unquiet, a discordance, an anxiety in the face of an unknown something' (*Sickness* 52). In writing fiction these are perhaps the most obvious sign-posts and characteristics of despair and, as I will return to, features I myself employed in *Shoot the Wild Birds* and find in other noir. However, in *A Flash of Green*, the type of despair that afflicts Wing – finitude's despair – is less obvious, and also much harder to write. This form of despair is the despair of the narrow-minded follower who disappears their genuine self by attempting to be the same as everyone else. As Kierkegaard writes, finitude despair 'goes practically unnoticed in the world. Precisely by losing himself in this way, such a person gains all that is required for a flawless performance in everyday life, yes for making a great success out of life' (*Sickness* 64). In Wing's 'flawless performance', rather than becoming more anxious, for most of the novel he becomes more callous, which he feigns as a sardonic attitude. One example of this is highlighted when he is asked to report on the drowning of a child:

On his way back into town from Lakeview Village he thought this could be simplified by the use of a mimeographed form. "The (two-, three-, four-) year-old child was playing in the back of (his, her) home...." The purposeless death of a child is a horrible thing, he thought. If I unlock the



little box labeled Empathy, I can even manage to squeeze a little water out of my eyes. But I have to work at it. (221)

There are very few, very minor indications of Wing's uneasiness as the novel begins. Wing loses himself in his work and even more so in the details of Bliss' swindle. He creates meaningless reasons to be near Kat Hubble, and at the same time creates artificial rationalizations for not acting in a manner true to his genuine or authentic self. Wing is aware of his deep romantic desire for Hubble but not only does he stifle these desires and act against them, that is, against a part of his self, he also actively acts against Hubble and her best interests, albeit discretely. This same pattern of self-denial is found in his assisting Bliss in developing the natural world, a world he stems from, a world he thinks fondly of in his rare moments of self-honesty. One such moment occurs when he remembers an evening flight:

The Gulf was a silvery gray and the land was blue-gray. Stretching all the way down the coast, almost without interruption, was the raw garish night work of man, the crawl of headlights, bouquets of neon, sugar-cube motels, blue dots of lighted pools... Jimmy Wing had seen it all in a fanciful way which he had never been able to get out of his mind. The land was some great fallen animal. And all the night lights marked the long angry sore in its hide, a noisome, festering wound, maggoty and moving, draining blood and serum into the silent Gulf...The plague of man. The sore was spreading. (254)

As seen above Wing is clearly aware of his own sentiments toward the development of the natural environment in favour of concrete jungles. Yet, he goes along with the 'others', with Bliss and the various developers all seeking material gain, and so Wing forgets himself, as Kierkegaard suggests; does not believe in himself and, of course, engages in risky behaviors, from deception and lies to blackmail schemes.

Rather than showcasing and describing Wing's unease, rather than describing the more physical feelings that accompany despair, MacDonald has Wing lose himself in the masses and, as mentioned, in his work. However, his constant rationalizing of morality and moral concepts mask and deflect the inner discord growing in Wing: 'Morality is an unreal conjecture, for younger men than I am. Morality is the conflict of rationalizations' (156) and later 'In all this, he thought, in all this which diminishes me, no act of mine, or of anyone else, has consequence. Morality is a self-conscious posture... the only valid role is that of observer' (255). These instances grow and become more pronounced as Wing becomes more and more aware of the growing betrayal of his self, or the fact that he is, as he sees it, diminishing himself. And so, as he becomes more aware of his self, he becomes more conscious of his despair and its physical embodiments grow.

MacDonald starts with small displays: 'For a few moments his mind wandered. He did not hear what she was saying' (256). For the normally sharp, hyper-focused and self-described observer this lapse stands out. MacDonald does not suggest to what Wing's mind wandered and so the implication is a blank, into some void inside of Wing. I view this as Wing finally, perhaps even accidentally, confronting his inner self, his genuine self, away from the 'others' away from his usual and constant thoughts of others. The moment is fleeting and in over 350 pages a

once-off. It is not until near the end of the novel that the conflict between/within Wing's self begins to shift and manifest. MacDonald increases the 'blanks' Wing experiences both in quantity and in severity:

Wing was intrigued and sometimes mildly alarmed by an apparently interrelated disruption of both his sense of time and the quality of his capacity to remember... Now the internal time-keeping device had stopped. Three hours could disappear between heartbeats... The segments of each day were protracted and compressed without reason... He was absent-minded, forgetful... he seemed to hear the other's words a fraction of a second before the words were said. This was a hypersensitivity which made his brain feel as if it had been stripped raw... At times he was alarmed... And at all times he felt as if he was braced for some huge horrid unimaginable noise that might come at any time. (367-369)

Finally, more than three quarters of the way through the novel, MacDonald properly and definitively afflicts Wing with the bodily and psychic effects of his constant denial of the self and subsequent despair. That the above description runs uninterrupted for three pages, and that it is one of the first and few times the reader is clearly privy to Wing's inner state, highlight the importance and the change in Wing's consciousness. Likewise, it is also the beginning of Wing's attempt to take action, rather than to remain an inactive observer. Seen in an existentialist light, this is when Wing begins to attempt to live authentically, to create an authentic life and a self that might align with his genuine self.

This is not in any way the end of Wing's despair, nor the end of Wing's suffering. It is, perhaps a moment of discovery, as Kierkegaard writes: 'For when whatever causes a person to despair occurs, it is immediately evident that he has been in despair his whole life' (*Sickness* 54). As such this moment is one which helps build an awareness – for both Wing and reader – of the shift from one despair to another, away from the other-driven despair of not wanting to be oneself, to, hopefully, the despair of wanting to be oneself.

Ostensibly, *A Flash of Green* offers the character of Elmo Bliss as antagonist, but the more impactful *conflict* of character – between character – comes from Wing vs Wing. It is Wing who opposes himself, who acts against himself, who in fact threatens himself, rather than Bliss. In *A Flash of Green* most of the antagonizing comes from Wing himself, from the way in which he both manifests and deals with his inner self.

## DESPAIR IN DAVID GOODIS

Going one step further toward Kierkegaardian despair, much of David Goodis' work dispels completely with the usual antagonist-like figure, such as Elmo Bliss, in that the protagonist is their own antagonist. Other characters are peripheral in the extreme so that the conflict within the self, between the selves, is highlighted, and in fact despair in its various forms is highlighted. This is most pronounced in *Of Tender Sin* and *The Wounded and The Slain* (1955).

In discussing noir protagonists Horsley points to characters who exhibit a powerless uncertainty, suffering from lack of clear motivation, action, and agency; characters who are 'Obsessed, alienated, vulnerable, pursued or paranoid... suffering

existential despair as they act out narratives that raise the question of whether they are making their own choices or following a course dictated by fate' (*Noir* 11). This type of characterization is often portrayed as someone flailing – psychically and physically – through their existence. David Goodis begins several of his novels (*Of Tender Sin*, *Nightfall*, *The Wounded and the Slain*) with this type of description, immediately letting the reader into his protagonist's sluggish and claustrophobic form despair. He opens *Of Tender Sin*:

It began with a shattered dream. The winter night was suddenly real and Alvin Darby was wide awake, seeing the darkness...He took it all in to assure himself that he was truly awake... But the contents of his mind did not seem to be wakeful thoughts. He had a feeling that someone uninvited had entered the house. (5)

So begins Darby's journey through his own bleak consciousness. Moments like the above opening, later a brief telephone call he sees his wife engaged in, and a shift in observed behavior – are assumed by Darby to be the result of a third person, perhaps a lover for Darby's wife. These moments build early in the novel but it is not so much the moments of perceived infidelity as the symptoms of despair that increase until they drive Darby to an almost inactive form of action – action that involves aimless wandering, sitting and drinking, the inertia-inducing effects of drink and narcotic. Following the above opening passage, the symptoms of despair grow:

It was a dark shape, much darker than the unlit space where it moved slowly, with a kind of calm furtiveness... The idea of a burglar has floated

away, replaced by the idea of something less practical and certainly less realistic. (6)

Goodis provides the suspicion of an intruder, a physical human who has entered the house, a lover on the other end of the telephone line, but there is no one in the house. In the later phone call, Darby quickly learns of the ‘innocence’ of the speakers, and the shift in his wife’s behavior are simply Darby’s own inner tensions affecting his perception. It is only Darby’s own mind, or as I argue, his own self, which is pressing into him, creating a paranoid despair.

This sense of paranoia stems from Darby’s own memory, and we later learn Darby is in effect psychologically haunted; to a lesser degree by memories of his older sister but to a greater degree by his own incestuous feelings toward his sister and by the memory of an unwanted physical advance or possibly even rape. This is, in effect, Darby’s self relating to itself in dramatically awful ways so typical of mid-century noir, coercing and compelling the misrelation that is Kierkegaard’s despair. It is the ‘unknown something’ Kierkegaard writes of ‘a something he doesn’t even dare strike up acquaintance with, an anxiety about a possibility in life or an anxiety about himself’ (*Sickness* 52).

Despite the lack of an intruder, or a physical outsider entering his life in any way, the bodily and psychic manifestations still overwhelm Darby: ‘The feeling of nothingness began to climb and it went up very slowly along a stairway of musical sounds that he could hear distinctly even though he knew there was no sound’ (7). It must be noted that this bears a striking resemblance to Sartre’s ideas on, and illustrations of, nausea: ‘I have it, the filth, the Nausea ... I felt a sharp disappointment in the sexual parts, a long, disagreeable tickling... I felt myself

pushed forward. I floated, dazed by luminous fogs dragging me in all directions at once... I no longer knew where I was; I saw the colours spin slowly around me, I wanted to vomit. And since that time, the Nausea has not left me' (Sartre, *Nausea* 32). This self-disassociation, in Sartre and in Goodis, suggests the rising of the internal conflict within the character. Goodis spends much of the first chapter expanding upon this:

It was like cowering at the base of an icy mountain and seeing the approaching avalanche. He begged himself to realize it was only his wife, this was only a kitchen, it was just a night in January in the city of Philadelphia, and a man named Darby had climbed out of bed to get a drink of water. That was all. And his tongue tasted blood as panic caused him to bite deeply at the side of his mouth. (12)

While the despair in Goodis' novels is often seen as a result of sexual jealousy (Wootton vii; Gertzman 125), I disagree. Sexuality and sexual themes proliferate the novels but are not the root of the despair. Passages like the above are commonplace in *Of Tender Sin*, and other novels, and serve as decent thematic microcosm of the novel as a whole; with notions of a wife (i.e., source of sexual jealousy) being placed alongside themes of home and family and of the loneliness that a cold winter night in Philadelphia often resembles for Goodis. They are given equal footing and fairly short shrift. The emphasis rests more on Darby's dislocation, of fractured self, than on anything sexual; being almost out of body, watching an avalanche approach and even watching himself going to get a drink of water. I argue that the above shows Darby's self, his inner psyche, coming into conflict with his being, that it is Kierkegaard's

despair, resulting from the misrelation of Darby's selves. Darby's despair continues to grow even when he knows there is no one in the house, and later, even when he knows his wife was on the telephone to her parents. In other words, the despair is coming from within Darby himself, and the outside reasons (such as sexual jealousy) for Darby's despair are but red herrings. The true, more thematically important 'dangers' for Darby are, as Kierkegaard suggests, his loss of self: 'for a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for person to show signs of having. The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed.' (*Sickness* 33)

Goodis goes to great lengths to illustrate Darby's loss of sense of self. The novel is peppered with the growing disconnect between his body and his mind, with the world or reality and his perceptions: 'Darby was smiling, he didn't know the smile was there, but his lips played with it' (22) and 'Well, he thought mildly, knowing the mildness was only a breeze riding in front of a raging storm' (23) and the disconnect grows as he sees himself strangle his wife only to suddenly realize he had never touched her. Goodis ends the second chapter with a single sentence paragraph: 'He wondered if he was falling away from himself' (27).

Gertzman discusses the conflict of the self in Goodis' work in similar terms:

One must keep repressed, especially from oneself, an act which threatens his very self... It is like having a double self, one of which copes with other people: "the Chestnut Street look" that he (Darby) and friend Harry have cultivated, which is part of being a good breadwinner and loving husband. The other struggles demonically to come to the surface, and



sometimes does, in the form of a substitute for the tabooed object of desire. (125)

This very negotiation of the self that Gertzman discusses, is, in my view, the noir interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair. However, the struggling self does not need to ‘surface’ as Gertzman suggests but simply needs to *be*, to exist, in conflict with itself. It is this very conflict that provides the misrelation – the ‘falling away’ from oneself as Goodis puts it – that results in Kierkegaardian despair.

To achieve this ‘falling away from himself’ Goodis takes Darby out of the house and, for most of the novel, into the nighttime and nightmarish Philadelphia streets that typify Goodis’ work. In being away from his house and wife, Darby’s confrontation with his self is magnified in a similar manner to Philip Marlowe, by the time Chandler wrote *Playback* (1958) – six years after the publication of *Of Tender Sin* – in which ‘the character (Marlowe) is almost disfigured by loneliness, discouragement, and despair. Wandering thoughts, pathological daydreaming, bitter expressions of frustration, an incipient phase of purely mechanical responses’ (Mihaies 35). Mihaies’ description of Marlowe is easily applied to Darby (and most Goodis protagonists). Darby’s daydream of an ex-lover focuses on the negatives of both the woman and the relationship between them; Darby wanders Philadelphia just as his mind wanders through his past and he tries desperately to avoid thoughts and memories of himself, thoughts of his wife and the life, perhaps the self, he is avoiding. Darby uses drink, drugs and people, the ‘others’, to avoid the conflict *within* himself and the resulting confrontation *between* the selves. He is almost active in his seeking of inaction; he strives for inertia and apathy: ‘Everything was hazy. Much too

hazy for talk or any kind of motion or any effort at all. It was the passive drifting in the middle of the ocean and no way to battle the tide, so why try?’ (130)

## ENDINGS... AND ETERNAL DESPAIR

In *Shoot the Wild Birds* anxieties are not cured; possibilities of, and responsibilities inherent to, individual freedom loom and hence so does anxiety. However, in my work, and to some degree in Chandler and Thompson, the protagonists have adapted to their anxieties. One of my aims in characterizing Samuel was that he, like many noir protagonists, might have in some small way learned ‘to be anxious in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing in anxiety’ (Kierkegaard, *Anxiety* 110). To some degree this is achieved by moving forward with their actions and choices and likewise it is through the acknowledgement and acceptance of possibilities and ‘the inner certainty that anticipates infinity’ (*ibid* 111). In short, in *Shoot the Wild Birds* and in much existentialist leaning noir, anxieties are dealt with to the extent that a character’s anxiety is – often but not always – lessened. However, the thematic threads of despair are not tied up so neatly.

*Of Tender Sin* ends abruptly. Right on the cusp of accepting an implied eternity of ‘passive drifting’ with Geraldine, Darby’s human heroin, Darby leaves, ostensibly to go back to his wife and the life he had created:

He walked out and closed the door and started across the pavement. But something caused him to turn and look back. And through the door window he saw the dark hallway in there and a thing that glowed in the

darkness. It was the platinum-blond hair, going away. Going farther and farther away and gradually drowning in the shadows. (181)

However, Darby is not back at his own home, nor still with Geraldine; he is out on the street again, is in effect between worlds, or between Selves. The implication is Darby is going toward one while looking back at the other, the selves still grinding against each other in a misrelation.

*A Flash of Green* ends similarly, albeit on a slightly more positive note, but with a lot of unanswered questions and a very ambiguous future. The tension is rife, because Wing's selves will continue to exist in conflict, in an imbalanced misrelation. Both novels end with the protagonists' selves still existing in conflict and misrelation, or still suffering existentialist despair in the face of an outwardly, or materially/physically potentially happy ending. This evokes the Kierkegaardian idea that despair never truly ends, never goes away, but only shifts in its relationship, in its synthesis, and/or in its degree of consciousness or awareness. For Kierkegaard despair is eternal, in one form or another: 'despair is a characteristic of the spirit, is related to the eternal, and therefore has something of the eternal in its dialectic' (*Sickness* 54). In my view, this 'eternal despair' – for example the fact that Wing and Darby will continue to exist in despair – is part of what gives noir fiction its distinguishing pessimistic mood and provides the remaining and lingering tension at the end of noir novels. There is often the implication that the protagonists' struggles will continue in some way (should they still be alive), that conflict will not actually cease or get any better. As despair never ends but may shift in form or awareness, the conflict and tension to a noir story never ends, never fully goes away, but only shifts and changes form.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE INNER QUESTS OF NOIR

He had to get back to New York. As close as he could figure, he was about a thousand miles from New York, but the first thing to do was get back to the city. His life was there, and whatever future he had was there.

And then there was this memory thing. He didn't think it was getting any worse, but it didn't seem to be getting any better either. If he could get back to the city, back to familiar surroundings, the memory would maybe improve faster. (Westlake, *Memory* 31)

In Donald Westlake's posthumously published novel *Memory*, the despondent hero, Paul Cole, must make his way from the American mid-west back to his home, in New York City. Suffering from a slowly growing case of both short and long term memory loss, Cole is in a constant state of trying to remember his past and to create a future. He has an external goal, New York City, but it is a means to an end, a tangible to which Cole can attach his hope. But his memory is gone, leaving his sense of self a blank, and his sense of future purpose in a constant state of fade-away. He is, quite literally, trying to find his Self. Yet with no memory, there is no longer a self for Cole to find and so with each day, with each act, Cole creates himself. For a moment.

While Cole fulfills his external quest and returns to NYC, temporarily at least, the thoroughly existentialist inner quest, the metaphysical search for meaning, identity, Selfhood, is forever unattainable.

In *Memory*, and the other noir fiction that influenced *Shoot the Wild Birds*, the balance between the external quest plot and inner quest plot increasingly places the emphasis on the internal quest, on the metaphysical quests and the search for the various forms what might be called existential meaning, purpose, or relief. At times these existentialist quests fairly push out the typical crime fiction tropes that so often tie noir to crime fiction. Hence, one of the aims of this chapter is to examine if a truer cornerstone of noir is the recurring theme and emphasis placed upon the existentialist quest, rather than any crime-orientated convention.

The quest motifs, principally the varied forms of existential quests and more specifically the search for meaning, or order, in the face of the absurd, are central concerns to most all of my writing, particularly *Shoot the Wild Birds*. Therefore in this chapter I explore the nature of the quest motif and discuss how it applies to in 20<sup>th</sup> century noir fiction. Further, I will examine the dichotomy between external quests and the various internal existentialist quests to show that, while the two are complimentary, noir tends to favour the latter. By examining Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* and Westlake's *Memory*, I aim to show the shifting emphasis of noir fiction, and propose that this shift away from the external, often tangible or outer-focused 'grail', toward the inner, existentialist thematic concerns (specifically here the search for meaning and the search for self), is one of the tenets of noir fiction.

## EXISTENTIALIST QUESTS – SELF AND AUTHENTICITY, MEANING AND ORDER

As MacIntyre suggests of life itself, existentialism, or existentialist thought, can be seen as a quest, or a number of various quests, and this is evident in noir fiction. At existentialism's core are quests, pursuits, or searches for truths, understandings, and answers to personal meaning, identity and significance. Kierkegaard – often referred to as the father of existentialism (Marino, *Writings* ix; Cooper, *Movement* 31) – was critically concerned with his quest for a genuine self – what he called 'selfhood' – and identity. Existentialism conceives of life as a quest for the acceptance of freedom, humanism, a quest for individuality, or 'a perspective on life which emphasizes the centrality of human beings in their actual needs, values and quest for meaning' (Litwack 3). In literature widely considered existentialist fiction or in fiction that focus on existentialist themes there is often 'an overwhelming concern with describing and diagnosing the state of existential disorder that arises out of the anxiety that characterizes the human condition and ... demonstrates a struggle to recover order from the disordered environment' (Embry 5). This very struggle for order is yet another quest; it is, in my view, the quest for meaning in the face of chaotic and meaningless world.

Echoing Kierkegaard, Sartre offers the view that creating one's self is the defining feature, or 'first principle', of existentialism: 'It is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself' (Sartre, *Humanism* 22). However, while the primary focus of existentialism may be the creation or pursuit of individual identity this occurs amid, and sometimes

in conflict with, ‘the social and economic pressures of mass society for superficiality and conformism (Flynn 20). By and large, the existentialist concept of identity posits that identity ‘is never a given but must always be continually created in our actions and not in some fact of our circumstances’ (Reynolds 73). Such is the basic premise of Sartre’s idea that “existence precedes essence” (*Humanism* 22), which suggest that one’s identity is not a fixed, noumenal entity already within us in the transcendental sense, nor is it determined by external societal norms and forces. Instead one’s identity is forever in the act of becoming, or forming, through action and the fact of existing. Accordingly, following Sartre, existentialism can be seen as a quest to ‘determine what you (in essence) are’ (Gravil 8). In Sartrean terms, the primary existentialist quest is to create one’s Self.

Also characteristic to existentialist thought, and I argue the most pronounced existential quest to be found in noir fiction, is the quest for meaning. Albert Camus views the search for meaning as the most dominant force in human life. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Camus grapples with the issue of how to live if there is no predetermined meaning, or how to live when confronted with the arbitrary meaninglessness of the world. He argues ‘that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions’ (6) and that man is driven by ‘his longing for happiness and *for reason*’ (22, italics mine), which of course suggests an inherent and inevitable drive to search for objective meaning in life, and therefore, that life itself is a quest for meaning and reason. However, while Camus suggests that life is meaningless and will remain so, the quest to find or create meaning is intrinsic to human nature and will continue nonetheless. Essentially life is a quest with no clear ‘grail’, with no clear end. This internal propulsion, this innate human need to embark upon a quest for meaning

though it may ultimately and forever be futile and unachievable, is very typical to noir fiction, as illustrated by the Chandler and Westlake novels discussed later.

However, Camus is careful to stipulate that no predetermined meaning in life does not equate to a life not worth living. He argues much the opposite in fact, with his example of Sisyphus, who finds happiness, purpose and – and in my view though perhaps not Camus’ – a semblance of meaning in endlessly pushing a boulder uphill. Similarly, in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007), Sartre posits that without God, or predetermined meaning ‘there has to be someone to invent values... to say that we invent values means neither more nor less than this: life has no meaning... Life itself is nothing until it is lived, it is we who give it meaning, and value is nothing more than the meaning that we give it’ (*Humanism* 51). Being that in the existentialist view as there is no predetermined meaning of life, humans are meaningless objects in a meaningless universe, the quest to find meaning becomes also a quest to *create* meaning.

## QUEST NARRATIVES

W.H. Auden famously noted “To look for a lost collar button is not a true quest: to go in quest means to look for something which one has, as yet, no experience; one can imagine what it will be like but whether one’s picture is true or false will be known only when one has found it” (1). The tradition of the Quest has long been a cornerstone of myriad categories of fiction. It is one of the oldest, most wide-spread and perhaps most resilient narrative motifs still in use. From the epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, and Parzival, on to modern fiction by Kafka, Joyce and Auster, both the



shape and the central themes of the quest are still very much alive in modern literature.

The most archetypal patterns of the quest narratives are closely linked to the hero's journey, most famously analyzed by Joseph Campbell, from the call to action, through the various trials and ordeals along the way in search of a treasure of sorts, often a treasure that changes the hero's character. However, the distinction between a hero's journey and a quest must be made clear, particularly in reference to Campbell. When Campbell speaks of a quest, particularly a *grail* quest, he is often pointing toward the chivalric or romantic hero's journey, which he sees as an *inner*-directed search for free will and Jungian individuation. In this view, the mythological hero's journey is always essentially the same, while every quest is different. That is to say a journey is the action-orientated physicality occasioned or necessitated by the quest. While a quest 'provides both the subject of a work and its shape' (H. Cooper, *Romance* 46), the famed monomyth of the hero's journey is rather only a temporal outline of the shape, but not the subject. That said, the quest does still imply a great deal as to shape and structure, as Cooper notes that the quest narrative is 'essentially linear, following the line taken by the protagonist's journeyings... a series of adventures encountered along the way: adventures that are usually in some way related to the final object of the quest itself. A journey, however, allows for the easy addition of further adventures, for extra stopovers or digressions or diversions' (47).

The archetypal patterns of the quest have been well analyzed. To name a few: Carl Jung from a psychological perspective, in cross-cultural mythology by James Frazer and Joseph Campbell in his *Hero's Journey* structure, and in literature by Vladimir Propp, Algirdas Greimas and W.H. Auden, whom I will discuss further on, and Northrop Frye, who argued that the quest was the 'element that gives literary

form to the romance' and 'the most complete form of romance is clearly the successful quest' (*Anatomy* 187).

In the most well-known quest narratives, particularly medieval Arthurian romances and, as I argue, twentieth-century noir, a hero must travel a wasteland in search of a holy grail, or hidden truth. However, the wasteland and grail often acquire an allegorical meaning and, like the grail romances themselves, offer much by way of interpretation. At times both the quest and the grail need not even be physical, as the quest has 'long operated as a metaphor for transformation of consciousness' (Rawa 7). In these narratives, the quest motif is used as a vehicle to follow a hero on their journey in pursuit of some meaningful goal, and while the central, physical *action* of these stories is the dangerous adventure the heroes undertake, the quest is in fact a spiritual and/or philosophical search for meaning and truth.

In more modern incarnations, the due influence of quest narratives is clear and, in crime fiction, it saturates the market. A hero is a thousand miles away from his home of New York and he must travel this distance to achieve his goal, that of being home in order to find his lost identity. For Hammett's characters a bird may need finding and for Chandler a woman may be missing, while Christie's Poirot is most often in search of a killer. Nearly all crime fiction does indeed have a quest element. Fredric Jameson echoes this sentiment in his book on Chandler, noting 'Chandler's stories are first and foremost descriptions of searches' (24), which is to say they are, in fact, quests. George Grella succinctly sums up the hard-boiled novel as quest narrative: 'the detective in the hard-boiled novel generally solves his mystery in a hurried, disordered fashion' because 'the progress of the quest is more interesting than its completion further distinguishes the hard-boiled thriller from the formal detective novel. Because he does not suit his society and its rules and because his quest once

again fails to achieve the Grail, the American detective experiences none of the admiration or satisfaction that accompanies the transcendent sleuth's success. He has solved little, he has cured nothing' (Grella 115).

However, it is the nature and purpose of the quest, the metaphorical Holy Grail, that gives noir fiction much of its existential bent. David Goodis was prone to giving more weight to these existentialist concerns than to any crime trope. In *Down There* (1956) the protagonist Eddie Lynn struggles with *how to live* with the grief of his wife's suicide, and the hoodlums in pursuit become secondary to the story, while in *The Wounded and the Slain* (1955), James Beven spends much of the novel contemplating suicide, trying to decide *if and why* life might be worth living, trying to search, internally, for some meaning to his life, in a view that very much echoes the questions Camus' discusses in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Alasdair MacIntyre sees life itself as a quest, and he echoes Auden's concept of the quest noting:

without some at least partly determinate conception of the final telos there could not be any beginning to a quest... it is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A Quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge. (254)

## CHARACTERISTICS OF QUEST NARRATIVES

Auden's essay 'The Quest Hero' offers a useful starting point, not only into the common characteristics of the quest, but also with regard to a (brief) typology, as can be seen in how Auden lays out four variations of the hero quest: the detective story, the adventure story, *Moby Dick* and the Kafka Novels. He begins with the detective story: 'Here the goal is not an object or a person but the answer to a question—Who committed the murder?' (4) Auden emphasizes the lack of physical journey in this search for truth, yet the detective story is still an external plot, one that focuses on the outer world and change in situation, from unknowing to knowing, from hidden to caught, rather than a change in internal character. Next, Auden notes the Adventure quest in which the hero's journey and the hero's grail are one and the same, that is, to seek further adventure. Continuing on, Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) is given its own category, one which combines some of Auden's six essential elements.

But it is Auden's final category that merits special mention here in regard to noir fiction – The Kafka Novels. Auden notes that 'in these the hero fails to achieve his goal, in *The Trial* either to prove himself innocent or learn of what he is guilty... and he fails, not because he is unworthy, but because success is humanly impossible' (4). Much of Kafka's work is, essentially, narratives of metaphysical quests to find a (or the) meaning and purpose of existence in an absurd world, or as Camus put it when discussing Kafka, the novels are centered around 'the essential adventure of a soul in quest of its grace' (*Myth* 93). While Kafka's metaphysical quests are instigated by external forces – being turned into an insect, an inexplicable arrest – they are still internal quests for understanding. The hero must brave an absurd world in search of meaning, which in my view aligns with Philip Marlowe's quest in *The Long Goodbye*, to take but one Chandler sample, which is a quest to understand the chaos surrounding

the detective. This combination and the relationship of external action and its propulsion of the internal action/quest differentiate these quests from the more fully internal quests of Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* or David Goodis' *Of Tender Sin*, novels in which protagonists undertake their various existentialist quests based on internal feelings of angst or despair and the need to find what might be called existential relief or freedom. In these novels it is the inner mentality and character that propels the quest.

As mentioned, Auden set forth what he saw as the six essential elements to the typical quest narrative; 1) the object and/or person to be found, 2) a long journey to find the object, 3) a hero, one who is not just anybody, but one who 'possesses the right qualities' (3), 4) a test or series of tests to filter away the unworthy and reveal the hero, 5) guardians of the object, and finally 6) the helpers. More recently, Carl Malmgren, echoing Propp and Greimas, put forth a similar pattern for quest analysis and identifies his own 'six basic elements in a quest narrative: The Sender, the Subject, the Object, the Helper, the Opponent, and the Receiver' (Malmgren, *Pursuit* 153).

However, in all the above quest typologies, the most important characteristic to any quest narrative is the metaphorical grail, or the Object. In many quest narratives, particularly in medieval romances and the more existential of noir fiction, the grail episode, or rather the search for the grail itself in various metaphorical forms or what Auden calls The Object, are but one of a number of adventures or incidents within the story. A common convention to quest narratives is that what the hero thought was The Object, is not in fact 'the obvious point of the story' (Wood 6). This variation of the assumed Object of the quest is a staple of crime fiction – often manifested, though artificially so, as red herrings – but also more profoundly with the

original call to action, assignment, or job offer. Many times, the hero is sent in search of the initial (false) Object (by which I mean a tangible object; a missing person, lost diamonds or valuables) but ‘in nearly every case the search ends up focusing on the person responsible for the crime’ (Malmgren, *Pursuit* 12).

In a sense, for many quest narratives the purpose of the quest and the Object begin as unknowns. It is only through questing for knowledge that the *true* Grail or Object reveals itself. Furthermore, while many crime novels deal with external or socially-oriented ‘true’ Objects, I argue there is a shift away from this socially-oriented goal in Chandler’s work, and eventually more so in the noir of Goodis, MacDonald, and Jim Thompson. In these later novels the Object shifts, or the ‘true’ Object is revealed so that while the ‘narrative has lost its *social* (italics mine) function, it has acquired another meaning: it is the hard-boiled investigator’s only means of ordering chaotic and fragmented experiences and of achieving a sense of self and self-control’ (Pyrhönen 187). While the true Object can shift or be revealed along the journey it must be noted that obviously this is not always the case. Many ‘modern literary narratives are likely to have conditions summarizable as fulfillment, liberation, happiness, self-knowledge, or mental peace, as their object’ (Toolan, *Narrative* 83), and in fact, they begin that way.

While medieval romance-quests can potentially ‘be read on more than one level: that of the story proper, and that of the meaning it served to illustrate’ (Matarasso 9), it is also interesting to note that the early romance quests were often ‘narratives where object and subject are merged into one character, as in narratives centered on the quest of oneself, of one’s identity’ (Barthes, *Structural* 23). This merging of the subject and object of the quest is highlighted in *Yvain, The Knight with the Lion* (de Troyes, fifteenth century) in which Yvain seeks to regain his wife’s

favour by questing for his own true self, a self that had become muddled due to too many knightly exploits that served no genuine, internal purpose. As noted above, this quest for one's identity, the quest for selfhood is fundamental to existentialist thinking, from Kierkegaard on. Here I do not mean to suggest that Yvain is a full-fledged existentialist hero, but rather to point out that much of the noir I discuss later in this chapter (Goodis, Westlake, Chandler to a degree) diverges from traditional hard-boiled quests objects and returns to the medieval, almost Kierkegaardian, quests Barthes points to above.

This specific quest element is a fundamental reason I suggest that noir fiction can be read as existentialist quest fiction. That is to say, noir fiction can be read at the level of the adventurous, external plot, as a story full of gun fights, blackmail and bloodletting, as much as it can be read as fiction that reframes the quest as a series of transitions that 'express a human pursuit towards resolving certain typical and crucial moral, psychological and metaphysical problems' (Sadowski 13), problems which are all central to existentialist thinking. It is this very internal existentialist slant that I suggest is foundational in aligning noir with the medieval romance quests, where one of the 'most important human quests is the quest to move beyond unresolved conflicts in order to become more conscious' and the dramatization of 'the struggles of the psyche in search of equilibrium' (Rawa 10).

In these romances the knight's internal conflict 'finds its very genesis in the external world and, once internalized, becomes not a social but an existential dilemma which is then projected back onto the external world' (Dowsett 50).

It was Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte D'Arthur*, which was to become perhaps the most well-known adaptation of the Arthurian story cycle. However, for Malory 'the *tale* was paramount' (Matarasso 28) and he did away with the more

internal plots that focus on changes of inner character. In Malory's interpretations of Arthurian legends, the emphasis shifts away from the *internal* dilemmas of character toward the *external* plots, toward action and reaction. In Malory we find little, if any examination of reason and character, with little search for meaning. As Lambdin notes 'Malory's version of the legend examines the hard facts, leaving style and the psychology of justification to other writers. *Morte d'Arthur* is not about the inner thoughts of its characters; it is a book of acts and deeds' (136).

What was once an internal examination framed as a quest for identity, individualization, spiritual and/or psychological understanding has become a quest for a grail of a more material value, one which will better society. In Malory we see the external action plot in all its glory and gone is the focus on the mental life of the isolated hero, gone are the metaphysical quests for meaning and gone are the existential quests for freedom.

Malory's influence on crime and detective fiction is substantial and well-documented elsewhere, from Sherlock Holmes being called a pure-hearted Galahad (Rzepka, *Detective* 133) to the many Arthurian tributes found in the works of Raymond Chandler. However, I argue it is Malory's emphasis on the brisk action of the external plot, at the expense of the internalized metaphysical quests, that most influenced hard-boiled fiction and it is this same internal/external relationship that distinguishes noir from hard-boiled fiction. Noir moves slowly away from the physicality of Malory's adaptation and hard-boiled fiction, to focus, once again on the inner, existential quests for meaning and for selfhood. This external/internal relationship is most evident in Chandler's work, and it finds its purest achievement in his *The Long Goodbye*, where Marlowe's quest for inner meaning and understanding are sparked by external forces. The emphasis is not on any neat and clear solution to



the supposed crimes or suicide, but rather the emphasis is on Marlowe 'confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity' (Merivale 2). In fact, as will be discussed later in this chapter, I believe that Chandler, despite his debt to Malory, serves as one of the bridges from the traditional hard-boiled detective novel to the existential noir novel. In other words, Chandler returns a level of interiority to the quest narrative (found in pre-Malory Arthuriana) that begins to distinguish noir from hard-boiled.

#### THE QUEST FOR MEANING AND ORDER IN *THE LONG GOODBYE*

Noir begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man creates for himself. (Porfirio 81)

In examining the existentialist quest motif in Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, I am most concerned with Marlowe's quest for meaning and order. Marlowe's quest is not necessarily to answer the question of 'why are we here?' but rather to probe the issue of finding meaning and purpose in his world, a world that continuously presents itself as meaningless (in the existentialist's sense of the word), a world that steadily disrupts his 'happiness, preservation, knowledge and purpose' (Hatab 143). I argue that Marlowe aligns with Hatab's thought that 'question is not "What is the meaning of life?" but "*can there be meaning in life?*" Is life as we have it meaningful, worthwhile, affirmable on its own terms?' (ibid). Following Sartre that in the

existentialist view there is no predetermined meaning to life, the quest for meaning becomes also a quest to find or create meaning, as 'our projects and our freedom are all that we have ... these provide meaning for human existence' (Raymond 41). For Marlowe this is specifically the pursuit of meaning in the sense of understandable value and values. As in existentialism, Marlowe must create his own set of values, and therefore meaning, and not simply adhere to those values set out by any of the societies that surround him, be it the law, his clients, or society at large.

Marlowe's personal quest for meaning illustrates how he attempts to define his own reality so as to determine how to exist and live a meaningful life in a world seemingly void of predetermined or intrinsic meaning. By 'order' I mean Marlowe's attempt to find an antidote to the chaos that surrounds him, or to find a personal set of values that might help guide his actions in an environment chaos and in which there is little to no moral order. In the Marlowe novels, as in much of the noir that followed, the crime, investigation, or physical reality serves as impetus and tool in the protagonists' internal search for meaning.

Cawelti suggests that "the goal of a detective story is a clear and certain establishment of guilt for a specific crime' (92), but if this is a trend, then in *The Long Goodbye* Chandler clearly bucks it, as Marlowe's *goal* is not the establishment of guilt for any crime. This does indeed happen but it is a byproduct of Marlowe's true goal - that of trying to makes sense of the world around him, or, to find meaning amidst the absurd. Further, this is as much the story of Marlowe's isolated friendship with Terry Lennox, and the aftermath or effects of this friendship, and 'a grueling dissection of the moral bankruptcy of contemporary society' (Phillips, *Creatures* 145) as represented by Terry and Silvia Lennox and Roger and Eileen Wade, as it is a tale of mystery and detection.

Briefly, when Silvia Lennox is murdered, Terry comes to Marlowe for help in escaping to Mexico, where Terry supposedly kills himself. Afterward, and independently, Marlowe is tasked with finding and then keeping an eye on the writer Roger Wade, who also seemingly kills himself. In the end, the two issues, or cases, are related and Marlowe unearths the truth about the murders and suicides.

However, the novel does not start typically, or at the beginning of any external quest plot. One of the ways in which *The Long Goodbye* stands apart from most detective fiction, and indeed even most of Chandler's fiction is the time Chandler takes in setting out the friendship between Marlowe and Terry Lennox. When compared with, for example, *The Big Sleep* and *The Little Sister*, both of which begin almost right away with the introduction of the mystery or job at hand (Marlowe at a clients' house for a meeting, and Marlowe in his office receiving a telephone call from a soon to be client, respectively), *The Long Goodbye* sees Chandler take four chapters, which spans some months, to set up the new friendship between Marlowe and Lennox. Little else occurs and certainly nothing notable to any action plot. While Chandler had already established Marlowe as a fairly solitary and isolated individual in the previous novels, he does so again here, taking the time to highlight the unusualness of the friendship for both Marlowe and for a detective novel, portraying the friendship as somewhat uneasy and unfamiliar.

Even so, Chandler sets up the novel's unusual *internal* quest at the end of the first chapter. The call to action is as subtle as the quest object itself.

I drove home chewing my lip. I'm supposed to be tough but there was something about the guy that got me. I didn't know what it was unless it was the white hair and the scarred face and the clear voice and the

politeness. Maybe that was enough. There was no reason why I should ever see him again. He was just a lost dog, like the girl said. (8)

While this is not a call to action in the traditional sense, it does establish the unconventional line of questioning Marlowe will follow in the novel: what is it about Lennox that gets to Marlowe? It is here that Chandler first shows that Marlowe will seek to understand what it is about Lennox that lingers and affects Marlowe, producing spells of melancholy and turns him into something of a 'philosopher who is obsessed with the metaphysical values of a life that has lost its meaning' (Mihaies 38).

Interestingly, Marlowe is not tasked with any detecting work until almost halfway through the novel, and this investigation work takes up very little of the narrative, both in terms of import and duration/page count. As Mihaies notes, Marlowe 'does not investigate but follows with puzzled fascination the threads of events in which he is unintentionally caught up, as if sleepwalking on the edge of a precipice' (157). In place of a traditional investigation there is the series of events, often random and absurd, some logical and causal, all of which sets Marlowe upon a quest for understanding, for meaning. Instead of being tasked with investigating and/or finding a murderer, Marlowe is arrested, briefly, in connection with Silvia Lennox's murder and Terry Lennox's escape. Soon Marlowe is released without charge when Lennox's body is found with a suicide note and a confession to his wife's murder. This is the moment that sets Marlowe off on his quest. He doesn't believe it. Despite the written confession, Marlowe cannot believe Lennox murdered his wife, especially in so brutal a manner. Uncharacteristically, when Marlowe finally does begin any real investigation work, it is not to find Silvia's killer. Rather,

Marlowe's reasons are to find answers as to if and how and why his friend (perhaps even his only friend) has committed suicide and to understand how and, importantly, if his friend was capable of murder.

These two aspects set up Marlowe's quest in *The Long Goodbye* as quite different from most hard-boiled detective fiction. The focus is on friendship, relationships, and the search for understanding the human condition. Marlowe's initial quest is not to find Silvia's murderer (though he does in the end), but rather to come to some understanding of Lennox's suicide, to try to find meaning and reason in his friend's supposed actions. The initial lack of meaning or understanding to Lennox's actions, this confrontation with meaninglessness, slowly consumes Marlowe and his thoughts, until he must go searching, or questing, for answers and meanings.

This can be seen not long after Marlowe is released from jail and told of Lennox's death. Marlowe goes home and attempts to settle back into his daily existence: 'I shaved again and dressed and drove downtown in the usual way and parked in the usual place' (72). His attempts to ignore the chaos and meaningless death of Lennox are, of course, unsuccessful. Marlowe suggests that he thinks of Lennox vaguely 'in a detached sort of way' (72), but this is demonstrably false as his thoughts spiral. Marlowe cannot detach, he cannot exist in any harmonious manner, though he tries to diminish the importance of Lennox: 'He was like somebody you meet on board a ship and get to know very well and never really at all.' And later: 'You only talked to the guy because there wasn't anybody around that interested you' (73). But Marlowe's attempts to 'move on' fall short: 'No, not quite. I owned a piece of him... Now he was dead and I couldn't even give him back his five hundred bucks. That made me sore. It's always the little things that make you sore.' (73). To exist

properly in the world, Marlowe must find the meaning behind his friend's death, and this quest is in turn Marlowe creating his own meaning in life.

In *The Long Goodbye* the external quest mingles and even merges somewhat with the internal quest. If Marlowe's internal quest is for meaning, his external quest is for truth. In examining the differences between the internal and external quest Greimas' Actant model, though fairly old, is still useful in demonstrating where and when the two quests merge, and to illustrate my argument that in noir the emphasis is on the internal, often existentialist quest.

## MERGING QUESTS

*The Long Goodbye* meanders somewhat. It starts with those first chapters of friendship, examining the moments that plant the seeds in Marlowe that will provide the meaning and reason that see him send himself upon his quest. Pyrhönen argues that 'Marlowe's quest in *The Long Goodbye* stems from his dedication to Lennox. He feels guilty for not having done everything in his power to help Lennox, even claiming to be responsible for his friend's death' (235). Thus, this guilt and loyalty of Marlowe's provides the reason, or following Greimas acts as the Sender, for Marlowe's more external quest, that of proving his devotion and loyalty to his friendship by setting out to clear the name of a friend he believes innocent.

Chandler's novels often feature two separate cases or plots which by the end fuse together and *The Long Goodbye* is no different, but this aspect of Chandler's work does have the potential to provide Marlowe with more than one external quest Object. In the case of *The Long Goodbye*, one quest is the search for truth in clearing

Lennox of murder, while the second external quest is the truth regarding Roger Wade's suicide. However, both external quests can be summed up as a quest for truths; societal and environmental truths regarding other people. Here the law, or Society, act as beneficiaries and so can be seen as Receiver. The fact that Society acts as Receiver is one of the fundamental reasons I argue these quests for truth are external quests.

Marlowe's internal and external quests are intertwined, one spurs the other, as illustrated in the conversation Marlowe has with reporter Lonnie Morgan after being released from prison:

"This case interests me, in a repulsive sort of way."

"It seems there isn't any case," I said. "Terry Lennox shot himself this afternoon. So they say. So they say."

"Very convenient," Lonnie Morgan said, staring ahead through the windshield. His car drifted quietly along the quiet streets. "It helps them build their wall."

"What wall?"

"Somebody's building a wall around the Lennox case, Marlowe. You're smart enough to see that, aren't you? It's not getting the kind of play it rates. The D.D. left town tonight for Washington. Some kind of convention. He walked out on the sweetest hunk of publicity he's had in years. Why?"

"No use to ask me. I've been in cold storage."

"Because somebody made it worth his while, that's why. I don't mean anything crude like a wad of dough. Somebody promised him something

important to him and there's only one man connected with the case in a position to do that. The girl's father." (68)

The conversation not only makes Marlowe question the veracity of what the police told him regarding Lennox, though he had his doubts to begin with, but it also goads Marlowe ('You're smart enough to see that, aren't you'). Further it points Marlowe to the father of Silvia Lennox, which is a thread he can pull at to unravel the truth. Morgan is a fairly rough helper, he pushes and prods at Marlowe almost dismissively, not unlike Marlowe might himself, but it works, Marlowe responds and is left uneasy at the end of the chapter. This conversation and its after-effects act as a call to action for both Marlowe's external quest for Truth and his inner quest for meaning.

It is the inner quest, the existentialist quest for meaning and order, that both sustains and carries *The Long Goodbye* from beginning to end, and gives the novel its emotional weight and tension. The reader cares about Marlowe and Marlowe's suffering, not about the Wades or the Lennox family. It is the Object of Marlowe's *inner* search that is of greater interest than any Truths regarding unsympathetically portrayed characters. The import of this inner quest is greater, more significant to the narrative and to Marlowe's characterization, than the external quests for Truth. While in the case of *The Long Goodbye*, it is the external search for a society-related truth that starts Marlowe upon his quests, and in fact ignites the inner quest as well, Marlowe remains fairly ambivalent about much of the external quest. He cares less and less about finding the truth, particularly as it relates to the Wades. Marlowe was reluctant to find Wade and as he leaves the Wade house the morning after Eileen Wade's advances, he shows his desire to not be involved with any Truth-seeking:



‘Nice people with nice home, nice cars, nice horses, nice dogs, possibly even nice Children. But all a man named Marlowe wanted from it was out. And fast’ (220). Marlowe’s arc is peppered with moments like this, moments which are less quest-challenges, but rather moments that simply show that the metaphorical grail of truth is not quite valuable enough to warrant a quest. Yet Marlowe carries on. Partly because of his character, yet, as Camus suggests, it is this very character that continuously seeks meaning that is innate and integral to being a human. It is this part of being human, the part that compulsively ‘feels within him a longing for happiness and for reason’ (Camus, *Myth* 22), that leads to the quest for meaning.

Clearly, it is his inner quest for meaning, for understanding the meaninglessness of life, which propels and urges him to continue in his external quest. This need for meaning is evident not only in his desire to understand the Lennox situation. This characteristic of Marlowe’s is illustrated vividly just prior to Wade’s death, with his need for meaning paced out, repetitively, with two pages of rumination on Eileen’s behavior: ‘From here on it didn’t quite add up. You’d expect her to go looking for him... It still bothered me, but I had to leave it at that’ (201). Marlowe continues two paragraphs later, repeating ‘It still bothered me. It bothered me also that she had checked out... She said she loved the guy... All right, forget it. But somehow it still bothered me... There was something else’ (201-202). For Marlowe, when things ‘don’t add up’, when they appear meaningless, he must search for a meaning. Trying to understand the external world around him, trying to find rational meaning, will – hopefully – aid Marlowe in fulfilling his internal quest.

As noir fiction moves more toward what is typically termed noir, or further from hard-boiled detective fiction, I argue it is this internal quest that plays the greater and greater role. *The Long Goodbye*, in placing greater import on the internal quest,

acts as one of the foundational bridges or gateways to what might be seen as pure noir.

What with the existentialist meaninglessness inherent to Marlowe's world it is the physical act of the external quest for truth that is aiding Marlowe in creating a meaningful life, hence aiding him in obtaining his inner Object of meaning or purpose. As the world reveals itself to Marlowe as meaningless and chaotic, the quest becomes one not one of *finding* meaning but how to *create* meaning or how to exist in a meaningless world. Hence, Marlowe's true quest, his inner quest is the most existentialist quest of all, that of how to act, or be, how to exist in such a way as to create meaning in one's life.

If Marlowe is essentially a meaningless being in a meaningless world, how does he create his own meaning? How does he make something worthwhile out of his existence? Marlowe's life, his work and the world he inhabits; the violence, the greed, and the randomness, exists in direct contrast and conflict with his very human 'irrational and wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart' (Camus *Myth* 21). In light of this how will Marlowe obtain his Object? Not unlike Camus' Sisyphus, Marlowe creates meaning and purpose in his work: by constantly and persistently applying himself to it. This, I suggest, is one reason as to why, while the various mysteries are solved, there is little sense of satisfied completion. Marlowe's real quest, the search for meaning, is exactly what gives Marlowe's life purpose and meaning and so there is seldom a true sense of peaceful resolution. This lingering anxiety is seen in the novel's penultimate paragraph, as Lennox walks away: 'I kept on listening. What for? Did I want him to stop suddenly and turn back and talk me out of the way I felt? Well, he didn't' (379). Instead of any happy ending, Marlowe has a few answered questions and a dissatisfied angst and, always, the need to place order

and meaning on the chaos of his reality. The mood, Marlowe's mood, at the end of the novel is little different from his mood throughout the novel. It is this very mood of probing anxiety that prods Marlowe along, not unlike Lonnie Morgan and in fact, the mood intensifies most notably right after Morgan drops Marlowe off at his home:

I made some coffee and drank it and took the five C notes out of the coffee can... I walked up and down with a cup of coffee in my hand, turned the TV on, turned it off, sat, stood and sat again...

I put the lamps out and sat by an open window. Outside in a bush a mockingbird ran through a few trills and admired himself before settling down for the night. My neck itched, so I shaved and showered and went to bed and lay on my back listening, as if far off in the dark I might hear a voice, the kind of calm and patient voice that makes everything clear. I didn't hear it and I knew I wasn't going to. (71)

Here, Marlowe strives for some sense of normalcy, drinking coffee, shaving, he tries to drown out the creeping sense of anxiety, illustrated here by his waiting for a 'calm and patient voice' that never arrives, and further by turning the television on and off, sitting and standing and sitting again. As he tries *not* to think of Lennox this tension and anxiety build in Marlowe and as the days go on he keeps coming back to Lennox, wherein he expresses both disdain and a sense of personal injury; 'I just sat there and looked at the wall. The Lennox case died almost as suddenly as it had been born. There was a brief inquest to which I was not summoned.' (81). Granted it is a sardonic Marlowe-style anxiety. This restless anxiety builds, most often in relation to Lennox until it is this very anxiety that will send him on his way, to search for a

meaning, which will quiet the sense of dread. But it is that same dread which compels Marlowe and in fact, as the dread does not quite go away, it acts as both Sender and Helper, which, as Auden noted, is a common motif in quest narrative.

Marlowe's pursuit of meaning is very much the through-line of *The Long Goodbye* and the entire Marlowe oeuvre. Confronted with a meaningless world, a world of random acts of violence and buried truths, Marlowe's quests for truth and for order, his quests for meaning and the meaning of things, results in Marlowe creating his own meaning and his own purpose. The influence and aid of the external quests, the searches for hidden truths, are secondary to Marlowe's quest for the life-long goal of creating a meaningful life. And so, as Camus suggests of all humans, Marlowe is always searching, and he always will be. For Marlowe, his true quest will end only when he does.

#### THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND SELFHOOD IN *MEMORY*

For the person who does not know himself, his life is, in the deeper sense, indeed a delusion.

-Kierkegaard, *Four Upbuilding Discourses*

An illicit affair, a jealous husband, a chair to the head – all in two brief paragraphs – and Paul Cole's memory is gone forever. Paul Cole *himself* is essentially gone forever. Very suddenly Cole has become noir's prototypical mysterious man with no past, driven by inner desires that are hard to grasp, and perhaps even unobtainable. His long-term memory is shot and what little of the past Cole can remember is ever fading away. His short-term memory is going too. He forgets names and more

importantly, decisions and goals, moments after learning or deciding them. He knows his name and he knows he's an actor from New York City but he can barely remember his family or friends. With no money to return to New York he finds a job in the small mid-west town of Jeffords. For now, he can remember his goal, to get to New York, but the little things keep fading. Soon the important things fade as well. He writes himself notes, reminding him to go to work every day at four p.m. and, when he realizes the thought of New York is slipping away too, he writes that down as well. Soon, he knows he has to get to New York, but only because that's what his notes say; he can't remember why. Maybe answers are there. Answers about a man named Paul Cole, about who he was and who he is. Cole is gravely ill-equipped for his quest, it is almost a guaranteed failure, yet he undertakes it anyway. Cole needs to know who he is.

From Kierkegaard to Nietzsche to Sartre, one of the tenets of existentialism is the quest for identity, or more specifically the quest to *create* one's identity. As mentioned earlier in this chapter Sartre sees the creation of the self as fundamental to existentialist thought, arguing 'Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be... man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.' (*Humanism* 22). In Kierkegaard this quest for identity can be seen as his version of selfhood, the self one creates in the process or attempt to act or *be*, according to one's true and individual self, opposed to the sense of identity one adopts based on external conventions (*Sickness*). In that identity and selfhood are often used interchangeably I will follow Patrick Stokes' take on Kierkegaard's thought that he 'sees the cultivation of a consistent practical identity across time as essential to selfhood' (*Naked* 12). In this context, the continuous shaping of one's identity –

through actions made in good faith or authentically or genuinely – leads to the final goal and final product of selfhood.

To apply this to *Memory*, Cole had an identity as an actor and adulterer, which evolves after the attack to an identity as a lost and alienated man who tries to get to New York, and finally the identity of one who tries to survive day-to-day life without a memory. While he has various identities due to varied mental capacities, he has little sense of selfhood. In fact, Cole's identity has become that of a man searching for his selfhood. Cole is trying to find an identity or better still trying to shape and grow an identity, with which or, so that, he might achieve selfhood. Yet as Cole's memory problems grow he is in danger of forever losing any sense of identity. As Stokes notes: 'for a human being to become a self is for her to attain a particular type of psychological continuity through time, without which her entire personality collapses into atomistic incoherence' (172). With no memory Cole can never have that temporal continuity to find or create an identity. This identity requires an accumulation of information about the self in order to form. The only cohesion or purpose to Cole's life is the small goal he has written down for himself, to go to New York, where Paul Cole and all his trappings once lived. Now, Cole's life is a quest and, in fact, Cole *himself* is a quest.

Cole's quest, and even Cole as quest, grows more futile with each passing day and each faded memory. Midway through, when Cole discovers he once had a telephone answering service, he calls in for messages, hoping to find out something about himself and his past. However, when Cole dials the service, he finds it has been discontinued and yet again Cole has lost part of his self: 'A part of the past had been stopped, cut off. He was somehow less Paul Cole without the answering service that had been a natural part of Paul Cole's life, and less capable of being Paul Cole again'

(Westlake 171). Yet again, the possibility of Cole accumulating details of an identity is thwarted and so too are his chances of creating a self.

The double loss Cole faces – the loss of his world and the loss of his sense of self – results in Cole being an interesting case study for the existentialist sense of self or identity. In discussing the search for an authentic self, Golomb puts forth the argument that ‘When I lose my world, which becomes a strange and alienating objective world out there, I lose my sense of my own Being. I cease to be owner and master of my self and am owned by the public’ (101). In losing the memory of his previous life, of his old friends and his ‘world’, Cole loses his sense of self and identity. He has no pre-set identity and nor can he build upon past acts, or build upon his existence, to create either a growing identity or a Selfhood.

Sartre, again in developing his first principle to existentialism, notes:

We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (*Humanism* 22)

Such is the case with Cole. He has materialized in the world, without a memory, a blank slate, with no defined self; he is nothing. What Cole makes of himself is, at first two-fold. To start with Cole’s main concern is remembering and then finding his identity, while his secondary concern is simply being, or existing. This second existence, and eventual identity, Cole creates is fairly similar to Camus’ interpretation

of Sisyphus, who finds meaning and purpose in the physical acts of his existence. Early on, Westlake writes of the eased mental toll Cole finds in his work:

The work was hard, and he enjoyed it for that. He lifted heavy boxes, carried them to a prescribed place, and put them down again. He didn't know what was in the boxes, and he didn't care... Cole worked in the boxcar for nearly three hours, and he liked that part best. He enjoyed pushing the cartons along on their journey into the building. (52)

In investing himself in his actions, for the moment not trying to remember a past and defined self, Cole is simultaneously giving his life a purpose, and well as creating an identity. The two identities of finding a defined self and simply existing are at odds throughout much of the novel, and it takes nearly 300 pages for Cole – to follow Sartre's lead – to make something original of himself, Sisyphusian as it may be. Westlake writes:

He left there, walking purposefully once again... He had things to do. The apartment could only trap those who were meaningless and purposeless, those who had nothing to do, no reasons for existing. (337)

The meaningless and purposeless person here is the Cole that was questing for a predefined Cole, the Cole that was trying to find a past idea of a self in the belief that it would give his life meaning. Interestingly, Cole's new purpose is returning to the factory work he abandoned at the start of the novel in search of his self and his past. Cole's new purpose is 'physical labor, filling the day and using the body and easing the



mind' (Westlake 337), or as Sartre puts it 'creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be' with actions that will 'at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be' (*Humanism* 24). However, as so often in noir, this reprieve is fleeting.

As is often the case in noir, *Memory* shows 'the quest for individual freedom as a meaningless circle' (Naremore 121). This point stands out clearly in novels that deal heavily with existential crises and quests, and, I argue, is one of the characteristics that align noir fiction with existentialist fiction or better still, that existentialist themes are as much a convention to noir fiction, if not more so, than any other genre norm often proposed.

Kierkegaard argues that even when confronted with the absurd, one still has the freedom to choose how to act, or the freedom to shape one's existence/identity (*Anxiety*). It is this very freedom (notably when faced with the absurd) that produces dread or anxiety. And it is what we do once confronted with this anxiety, once we accept our freedom, that goes on to cumulatively shape an individual selfhood. In this sense, Cole's freedom to choose each act, each moment of existence, is helping him to shape his identity and thereby his selfhood.

The physical quest in *Memory*, the earning of money to buy a bus ticket to go to New York to learn about Paul Cole and so on, is nothing more than the physical manifestation of Cole's inner quest. The focus is entirely on the inner in the novel, and the external is only by-product. Whereas in *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe had both an inner quest and an external quest, and one was possible without the other (Marlowe can look for the truth regarding Lennox and Wade *without* searching for internal meaning and vice-versa), in *Memory* Westlake pushes noir one step closer to existentialist fiction and away from typical crime, so that there is no external quest at all. Any semblance to an external, physical quest is simply the internal quest in action.

It is this generic movement that sets noir closer to the modern fictions that deal primarily with existentialist themes (Paul Bowles, Jean Rhys) than to the typical hard-boiled novels of Spillane, Paul Cane or Richard Stark.

With no memory with which to cumulatively build a sense of identity, Cole will always be in the first early stage of becoming. If one becomes an identity through existing, and exists via acts, one must know or remember these same acts, or, as mentioned be reduced to atomized nothingness, to be but singular moments of existence in time. This is the reality in which Cole will forever exist. Like many a noir protagonist, Cole will always be that lone knight full of inner turmoil, who is ill-equipped to undertake the task at hand. Sartre ends *Existentialism is a Humanism* suggesting that ‘what man needs is to discover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from him self’ (53). Without a memory, without, finally any memory at all Paul Cole will never be able to do anything but discover himself, though these discoveries will be fleeting moments only. Similarly, nothing can save Cole from himself, but with no memory at all, he will never know.

#### THE LOST QUESTS IN *SHOOT THE WILD BIRDS*

MacIntyre notes that in many quest narratives there is the often-misguided assumption that ‘man is essentially *in via*. The end which he seeks is something which if gained can redeem all that was wrong with his life up to that point’ (193). In *Shoot the Wild Birds*, this is precisely the issue I wanted to portray in Samuel: his belief – rightly or wrongly – that there is something, some thought or knowledge, that once found, will provide a sense of reason for the existentialist chaos and meaninglessness he has

come across in his life. Rather than creating some form of meaning, rather than creating a purpose to his life, Samuel has been idly waiting for life's meaning to become apparent to him. If life lived properly is, as MacIntyre suggests, essentially a quest, Samuel has not been living 'properly'. Thus far Samuel's quest has essentially been one of waiting for his supposed Object to come to him, or one of his waiting to stumble upon his Object: there has no quest of genuine import, no quest that might give his life a sense of existentialist meaning. In a fashion, this waiting of Samuel's has left him nearly quest-less. If, as Camus suggests, humans are intrinsically and fundamentally imbued with the need to seek a meaning to life, Samuel has been rejecting this part of his humanity, or this part of his selfhood. As such this questlessness of Samuel's has resulted in a life of ennui, despair, and alienation. Therefore, my aim was to have Samuel end his questlessness, to undertake a quest, to seek and create meaning and purpose.

To start, Samuel is very much an apathetic observer in his own life. From his relationship with April, to his semi-estranged daughter, to society at large, Samuel hides alone in the night, and waits for life to impose itself upon him. As I write early on in the novel:

There was something solitary and private to the night, to the sight of her sitting outside, alone, that made him think the night was hers and that he shouldn't be there, and he walked quickly into his cabin.

She walked toward him. He heard her steps and this time the sound of ice clattering in the glass. When she stopped walking he heard her laugh, under her breath.

"Is that you?" she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good.” She came closer. (15)

The above interaction is typical of Samuel’s hesitation to act and to connect. He watches the world, he watches April and elsewhere, his young daughter, but he doesn’t act. My aim for the first segment of the novel – ending with April’s death – was to depict that Samuel is living in, as Sartre calls it ‘Quietism’ or the belief that ‘Others can do what I cannot do’ (*Humanism* 36), rather than as one who ‘exists only in action’ (ibid 37). At the start of the novel – and for much of Samuel’s forty-odds years – he lets life come to him, lets life overwhelm him with little thought as to his freedom to choose, to exist, existentially speaking. Sartre writes:

Man is nothing other than his own projects. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his action, nothing more than his life. (37)

By this principle, Samuel is not living much at all. He has no projects, and no actions of any worth to begin with, which might give his life a semblance of purpose. While Camus suggests that one create a meaning in what one might call ‘the everyday’ or in work or actions, my aim was to show that Samuel, in driving his taxi and in watching the world rather than taking part in it, was doing much the opposite. Samuel does not imbue his actions or his life with any meaning or purpose, he does not find any joy in his version of pushing a boulder uphill. This is an attempt to show that Samuel is, as Sartre suggests ‘responsible for his own passion’ and that he will not ‘find refuge in some given sign that will guide him on earth’ (ibid 29). Hence, I hoped to show that

in effect the first existentialist quest for Samuel is to become aware of what might be called his existentialist responsibility.

Following the understanding that existence precedes essence, Samuel has spent decades doing very little, minimizing his existence and therefore not building much of an essence. Rather, Samuel is wallowing in his own sorrows (stemming from his father's suicide and his malformed relationships, especially with his daughter).

He went inside and took out the record, put it on and waited to hear her voice. He closed his eyes. His chest hurt, like there was something long and heavy that had become tangled up inside of him and he thought about Willa, thought about seeing her and the tangle inside of him tightened. The sounds of happy, steady bells came from the record player and he sat down on the floor and felt old and heavy and hot, far too hot. (54)

My aim here was to show Samuel existing in a state of numb anxiety. The intension is that the records Samuel listens to illustrate his attempt to avoid the more important issues in his life, in this case his daughter Willa, and the resultant internal conflict of anxiety filtered through Samuel as sorrow. As Kierkegaard writes:

Anxiety is the vehicle by which the subject appropriates sorrow and assimilates it. Anxiety is the motive power by which sorrow penetrates a person's heart. But the movement is not swift like that of an arrow; it is consecutive; it is not once and for all, but it is continually becoming. As a passionately erotic glance craves its object, so anxiety looks cravingly upon sorrow. (*Either/Or* 145)

And so Samuel lives in a fairly constant state of Kirkegaardian anxiety. In both *Either/Or* and in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard discusses anxiety in depth and one of his views suggests that this sense of anxiety can and perhaps should act as a doorway of sorts – that this anxiety comes from facing or becoming aware of the existential freedom of choice. He writes: ‘anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility’ (*Anxiety* 61). Consequently, when one confronts chaos or the random ambiguity of life, one also becomes aware of their freedom in how to exist. For Samuel, when he is faced with the freedom to choose, the freedom to define his own existence, his response has been to minimize the value and potential of the choice, which has led to him living a life by and large in a semi-permanent state of anesthetized anxiety.

Samuel lives with his malaise, only dimly aware that there is something, some inner grail, that needs obtaining. In a sense *Shoot the Wild Birds* is an inversion of the quest relationship found in *Memory*. While in *Memory*, all physicality, all action was spurred on by the pursuit of inner Objects, I have tried to create Samuel as a formerly static character dimly existing in the meaningless world until the action and events of the external world force him to act. This catalyst comes with April’s death. Samuel’s disbelief that she might kill herself spurs Samuel into action. As Samuel starts to act, as he starts to create his existence through being, Samuel is, as a by-product, compelled to begin his inner-quest for, what I would call existential relief, which is the relief found once acting upon one’s freedom to choose and exist in the world as it is.

While April's suicide is a catalyst for Samuel, or in Campbell's terms a 'call to action', though it comes a lot later in the narrative than these usually are, it is a somewhat false grail object he is seeking. The truth regarding April's suicide is of no genuine import to Samuel and how he will choose to live his life going forward. This quest places Samuel in what Gravit refers to as 'a state of inauthentic existence ... a state of tranquillized absorption in the world. What should be an authentic self-projecting individual is here estranged from real selfhood and exists as a segment of the crowd' (25). For Samuel, this 'crowd' is April and the world she both brings with her and leaves behind. I attempted to depict this with the encounter Samuel has, toward the end of the novel, with April's boyfriend:

When he opened his mouth to laugh, no sound came out. His body shook slightly and he looked at Samuel. Cigarette smoke drifted from his nose and then shot out quickly and hung between them, somehow too thick to fade away with the wind.

"Not much, is it?" he said.

"What?" Samuel asked.

"This place. This place here, this Hummingbird."

"I guess."

"You guess." He shook his head at Samuel. "You been here a long time?"

"Sure."

"You were about to say *I guess*, weren't you?"

"I don't know."

“Yeah.” He grinned, wide, his teeth suddenly too big for his mouth.

“Yeah, you were.” He held out the bottle again, half shook it for Samuel.

His movements were all too sharp, like there was only broken glass under his skin. “Go on.” (252)

The man’s silent laugh and elsewhere the description of his moving ‘as though he had glass under his skin’, are, like his contempt for both Samuel and the Hummingbird itself, attempts to show the conflict between April and her world and the existence Samuel is creating as he grows closer to Willa. While Samuel’s curiosity April is prompted by the residual after-effects of his father’s actions, April’s death and the world that she was a part of are very much a part of the ‘world’, rather than any part of an authentic self for Samuel.

While at first Samuel’s search for the truth and meaning regarding April’s death serve as his Object, the more he acts, and the more *self* he creates, the more he becomes aware of his true, inner Object, which for Samuel is to exist in a manner that accepts its freedom and responsibility to his authentic self and to his daughter Willa. Only then will he obtain his Object of existential relief. For Samuel, these two inner and outer Objects go hand in hand.

MacIntyre offers a rather existentialist take on Aristotle’s quest for purpose in life saying ‘*telos* is not something to be achieved at some future point, but in the way our whole life is constructed’ (175). It is this notion that I wanted to examine and have Samuel grapple with in a fairly subconscious manner: Samuel must attempt to relieve or at least come to some understanding of his lifelong anxiety, and this can only be accomplished through his acceptance of an existentialist freedom. Samuel’s existential relief is an Object that will be obtained moment by moment, action by



action, so that, not unlike Marlowe, Samuel's Object will be obtained so long as he remains questing.

## NEVER-ENDING STORIES

It is the purpose of the quest – the grail or object – that gives noir its particular and defining quality. It is this very purpose that, I find, sets noir apart from hard-boiled fiction and most other 'crime' subgenres. As seen in *Memory* (and in the novels of Thompson, Goodis and MacDonald discussed in the other chapters), and as I attempted to portray in *Shoot the Wild Birds*, this very defining quality makes an actual crime redundant to noir. The noir quest returns the object to the themes central to pre-Malory romance-quests or most hard-boiled fiction, so that the fundamental focus is on the psychic interior of the characters. As noir departs from hard-boiled the narrative focus is less on the external action plot and more on the internal psyche of the characters.

In the noir fiction that influenced *Shoot the Wild Birds* the most, these deeply internal grails and psychic quests are at their core the very same issues that so concerned existentialist thought. These noir, existentialist quests pursue such personal and interior grails as identity, selfhood, meaning and purpose to the extent that any crime, and any physical or socially oriented grail, may well become a moot point. The noir grail is one and the same as the existentialist grail, as understood by thinkers associated with existentialism spanning Kierkegaard to Camus: the noir grail is identity or selfhood in a manner that shows kinship with Kierkegaard's concept. Elsewhere the noir grail is relief from chaos and the oh so human pursuit of meaning and purpose as considered by Camus.

Marlowe's actions in *The Long Goodbye* were influential in my own work in their demonstration of the innate preoccupation and need humans have for meaning and reason. In fact much of Marlowe's private musings can be seen as an engagement with Camus' idea of searching for how to live when confronted with the arbitrary meaninglessness of the world and existence itself. While the existentialist quest is less to search for meaning than to create meaning, Marlowe and other noir protagonists in fact create their life's meaning by searching for the very same meaning. In questing for meaning and purpose, they are creating meaning and purpose.

The importance of this *creation via quest* also comes to the fore in the quest for identity and selfhood. While the example of Paul Cole in *Memory* is so extreme it is almost a bleak parody, the novel, and the other fractured psyches found in most noir, fully embodies the existentialist claim that humans are their actions, and their actions accumulate to a self. Not unlike Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain or the many protagonists of David Goodis, the noir protagonist often loses their selfhood, their sense of identity, and so attempts to repair their damaged psyche. It is in this very questing to do so that thus they create a self.

It was this connection between the quest for meaning and the quest for self that I attempted to grapple with in *Shoot the Wild Birds*. The aim was to examine how a character would exist in the world without any quest, without adhering to the innate inner drive to search for purpose and meaning. For Samuel his absence of quest equals and results in a loss of self. Through the course of the novel Samuel's inner need for purpose and self begin to take root, starting with his external quest for the truth regarding April's death, and morphing, internally to a more existential quest. Samuel is, at the start, not questing for meaning or purpose; therefore he is not taking actions that may accumulate to a self. Both meaning/purpose and gaining a sense of

self-identity are lost in an oversaturated atmosphere of limbo. My hope is that by the end of the novel Samuel has, subconsciously, come to terms with the need to create a self through creating an endless quest to create meaning. In creating a quest, he creates purpose, which creates a self.

## CONCLUSION

### SHOOTING WILD BIRDS

“It was the influence of Raymond Chandler and John D. MacDonald. I wanted to tell one of those simple tales that has a great deal of narrative urgency, propelled by characters who, once you’ve met them, you know it’s going to be a godawful mess.”

Jim Harrison, interviewed in *The Paris Review*

My novel, *Shoot the Wild Birds*, was born in part out of frustration. I irritate quickly, both as a reader and as a writer. Too often I find a sameness, an over-familiarity, in the fiction I read, whether crime fiction or literary fiction, or at least fiction marketed, sold and reviewed according to such categories. Similar stories use similar characters so full of quirkiness that they merge into one being to examine the same cultural themes. One such example is the precocious youngster, often with an unusual name, from low-income backgrounds, with criminal fathers (ie Turtle and Loo from Gabriel Talent’s *My Absolute Darling* (2017) and the eponymous protagonist in Hannah Tinti’s *Twelve Lives of Samuel Hawley* (2017), and Easter from Wiley Cash’s *This Long Road to Mercy* (2014)), that all explore different forms of fatherly abuse and/or

neglect as well as class struggles to name but two recurrent themes. Some authors repeat themselves too often and other times formula and overused traits bleed over into much literary fiction, particularly in what is often called ‘literary crime’. Here I point to novels by Ron Rash, Hannah Tinti, Gabriel Talent, that are, at their narrative core, crime novels focusing on murder, murderers, robbers, meth dealers, or in short, crime and criminals. These are novels that purport to place higher emphasis on prose style and character psychology than a typical ‘formula’ crime novel which in turn will elevate them from crime novels to literary novels if done well enough. It is seldom done well enough, though this is subjective. This raises the question of whether academia has moved beyond such strict generic dividing lines, and similarly, if creative writers have done so as well. This argument is put forth by Janice Allan et al, who note that one (of several) problems with distinctions between ‘crime fiction’ and ‘literary fiction’ is that ‘this approach has ignored the extent to which crime stories engage with complex philosophical and/or political ideas’ (*Routledge Companion* 5). While it is precisely the philosophical ideas in select crime fiction that I explored, Allan et al do seem more concerned with how critics and scholars examine and respond to texts, rather than if and how they are written as crime fiction or otherwise. These issues raise another question that could bear further scrutiny from a writer’s perspective: Is there a difference between crime novels that have no typical criminal element and so-called literary fiction that relies so heavily upon crime fiction tropes and that moves so strongly toward ‘crime fiction’? This is a question that has in some way influenced most of my writing.

One of my biggest influences came to me when I started reading Jim Thompson and soon moved on to other American ‘pulp’ fiction writers like David Goodis, Charles

Willeford, Dashiell Hammett, James M Cain, - the bleaker the better – and then passed from there to more contemporary writers like Robert B Parker and James Lee Burke. Before I began writing I often read more crime fiction than capital L literature, however it was the novels and stories of Steinbeck and Fitzgerald and Conrad always stayed with me longer. When I started to try to write, I found I had more in common with, or was *trying* to have more in common with, Steinbeck. It was always Steinbeck. *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* in particular. I reread them too often and they went into me and came out in my writing as hash. But *Tortilla Flat* and the crime novels I was reading both had common threads – a certain Arthurian influence; the grail quests, as well as a strong dose of existentialist themes; the existentialist sadness of despair, isolated heroes, the ever-present chaos and meaninglessness. Similarly, the was, as per the Harrison quote above, that narrative urgency supplied by characters at the top end of a tailspin.

However, soon genre-fatigue had set in as a reader and it worked its way into my writing as well. And there was a duality to my problem; while I did not want to repeat what I had tired of reading, I also had an inclination and a certain external pressure to write what had worked for others before me. Ray Bradbury states the feelings clearly: “The problem for any writer in any field is being circumscribed by what has gone before or what is being printed that very day in books and magazines” (*Zen* 14). As a young writer I did not want to write in a way that perpetuated the staleness of certain generic elements, but at the same time being a newer writer I was often learning by emulating. Perhaps it was the ingrained and merged influence of the combination of a specific era of pulp fiction and the broader ‘serious’ literature I had read that led me into my own way of writing stories. Stories that perhaps had more in common with crime novels in terms of character and theme (not to mention literary

aspiration), yet had little to no narrative focus on any criminal element. Bradbury goes on to discuss his own evolution toward what he sees as a self-specific and unscientific form of science fiction in similar terms: “You don’t know what you’re doing, and suddenly, it’s done. You don’t set out to reform a certain kind of writing. It evolves out of your own life and night scares. Suddenly you look around and see you have done something almost fresh” (14). Bradbury’s use of the word ‘almost’ is key here.

My early short stories existed in some limbo between crime and character-driven literary fiction. Was I doing something new or original or fresh? No, not at all. But it was new for me, it was something I was excited by and when I did it well it was something I was happy with.

Of the twenty-five or so short stories I have published over the last ten years, only three are full-fledged crime stories, or stories that are centred around the commission of a crime. When I deal with crime or criminals they are at the periphery of the story. In my short story, *A Loneliness to the Thought*, published in one of the leading crime magazines (*Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*), a young boy tries to navigate through his own solitude during one hot summer, while his mother begins to date someone who may come to be involved in a murder. The story is about the boy, Auggie, who is just old enough to be spending his summer wandering the streets alone, and his various confrontations with the unsheltered, adult, and in many ways meaningless world. The mother’s suitor is emphatically *not* the focus of the story, and in fact his only purpose was to provide a little relief from the boy’s solitude and also an end-point. Crime story or not, this was the limbo that I was happy to work in. Likewise, it was this space that I wanted to explore in writing *Shoot the Wild Birds*.

As I said, this liminal space I was writing in was nothing new and nothing fresh. I had already come across it in Jim Thompson’s *The Alcoholics* (1953), Charles

Willeford's *Pick Up* (1955), in the work of David Goodis and elsewhere. They were not simply genre-bending crime novels, there were other, unifying, traits that held them together, commonalities that propelled the narrative urgency. I found these novels to be first rate studies of despair, alienation, and meaning and meaninglessness, and often enough there was no crime, no mystery, no criminal to be found.

In this world of noir fiction, the major unifying themes that found their way into my own work were the various components that are found in existentialist fiction and thought. I was influenced more by the existential themes and questions raised in much of noir fiction than I was by any crime, or character or formula. I responded to the sense of isolation and alienation found in David Goodis's novels, the way the empty midnight streets of Philadelphia drew out a character's anguished sense of solitude. My thoughts lingered on the angst and despair that were so ingrained into Westlake and Chandler's worlds and characters, and on the quest for meaning and reason and understanding (rather than for people or objects) that Chandler and John D MacDonald wrote about. While I don't necessarily identify as, or aspire to be, a noir writer, the overwhelming existentialist concern found in noir seems undeniable.

It was these existentialist concerns I repeatedly found in noir that I wanted to explore in both this exegesis and *Shoot the Wild Birds*. Despite the scholarly back and forth, or the difficulties in defining or classifying noir, I find that the treatment of - and relationship of - existentialist themes does indeed distinguish noir from other forms of crime fiction.

Fictional characters are often illustrated by their relationships (Hall, *Fiction*), and in noir fiction most, if not all, characters are virtually suffused in misshapen, fractured relationships. It is these damaged and inadequate relationships that so



strongly draw out the sense of alienation. While the mode of alienation may change from character to character, novel to novel, the strongest or most prominent mode in fiction is indeed the alienation of Self from Society. This is a view shared by Colin Wilson (1956), Eric Josephson (1962), and Warren TenHouten (2016), and spans over sixty years of criticism and study. That said, in my own view the more creatively compelling – and perhaps existentialist-leaning – mode is the alienation of Self from Self. This misrelation of self from self draws alienation close to Kierkegaard's concept of despair, wherein 'the self is a relation that relates itself to itself' (*Sickness* 43). Here despair is one of the products of a particular mode of alienation; the distorted version of the relation. It is this particular shape of alienation and its various affects that I most wanted to explore in my novel. Time and again noir characters endure and existence laden with multiple modes of alienation and in *Shoot the Wild Birds*, Samuel is no exception. He lives in a state of self-denial, his relationships with others are tenuous at best and, at an almost primal level, the landscape is at times too overwhelming for Samuel to exist in a harmonious manner.

While alienation defines the many relationships of noir, anxiety and despair are the most prominent and defining characteristics to the noir protagonists' inner psyche. Noir protagonists do not simply exist in a world marked by anxiety and despair, they themselves embody anxiety and despair. In my view anxiety and despair are *the* hallmarks of the noir character. In many a noir novel there is a growing disconnect between the mind and body, or thoughts and actions, of the characters. Often this comes across as simply the psychotic psychosis of the transgressor-protagonist (this is almost always found in the 'transgressor' novels of Patricia Highsmith and Jim Thompson). However, as I discussed in regards to David Goodis, this mind/body disconnect is a manifestation of the despair that stems from the loss of

one's self. Just as the noir world and its happenings are defined by meaninglessness, chaos and absurdity, anxiety (being the result of personal freedom's confrontation with meaninglessness) becomes the noir protagonist's mode of being in the world. In fact, this very confrontation with chaos was the starting point for *Shoot the Wild Birds*. The simple reality of the aural invasion by the birds reminds Samuel of the fact that, here, reality is likewise meaningless. The image of Samuel alone, with the crying birds breaking the night, was the seed image of Samuel's confrontation with chaos or meaninglessness and the introduction to both anxiety and Samuel, as one and the same.

Perhaps the single most influential aspect of noir that I wrestled with in writing *Shoot the Wild Birds* was the shift to interiority; most notably in shaping the inner quest for meaning. As noir moves away from hard-boiled fiction, the quests so often become quests for an inner object/grail. However, more than a simple shift from tangible object to inner object, noir protagonists often quest for the entangled existentialist principles of the creation of a self/identity and the seeking of purpose or meaning. It was this concept I tried to untangle in Samuel's narrative line; that by seeking purpose or meaning, he was in effect, creating a self. Of course, while I was unaware of it during the writing, looking back I see it is a clear inversion of Westlake's *Memory*, wherein Cole seeks a self and hence creates meaning and purpose in his life.

Academic interest in existentialism seems to have waned somewhat in recent years, perhaps recent decades. That said, I like to keep in mind that nearly a hundred years ran between Kierkegaard and Sartre. However, many of the themes found in existentialism do still find their way into contemporary critical and academic studies as well as much fiction, though in a more singular fashion. Here I point to the

scholarly work still being done on various ideas of alienation, from an existentialist angle and otherwise (ie Jaeggi and TenHouten). And in fiction the alienated hero is as pronounced as ever, from Lee Child's Reacher novels to the novels of Willy Vlautin, such as *Northline* (2008), in which sees the hero Allison Johnson a perpetual outsider in states of disconnect with herself and with those around her, in her home town and in her new found town as well. However, the existentialist positioning of, for example, a character's rising anxiety stemming from the confrontation of personal freedom and chaos, is distinctly less pronounced.

While the state and study of existentialism as a whole is perhaps thinning out, the same can not be said for noir fiction. Indeed, nowadays there seems to be a veritable cottage-industry of noir fiction that has taken over bookshelves and the discussions of crime subgenres. Hyphenates such as 'cyber noir', 'tartan noir', 'country noir', 'Scandi noir', 'domestic noir', 'outback noir', and more, populate the crime fiction world. However, there is the question as to whether this new profusion of noir is as heavily imbued with the existentialist tenets I explored in the previous chapters. One bastion of maintaining the existentialist principles within noir is James Sallis, who seems well aware of the externalist needs of noir. Existentialist despair, tormented quests for meaning, and incredibly chaotic worlds that induce anxiety are what set his novels apart and more often than not, give them their actual narrative arc (rather than something typical like a crime or a need to detect). This is emphatically displayed in his most recent novel *Sarah Jane* (2020), in which the eponymous hero searches for her place in the world, or her identity, throughout the novel, while the 'mystery' of the story regarding her missing police chief, is confined to no more than a few pages. The mentioning of Camus and/or his novel *The Outsider* in nearly all of

Sallis' novels in perhaps a tongue in cheek allusion to the author's awareness of the deep and fundamental ties between existentialism and noir.

However, a few authors like Sallis aside, it does seem to me that the importance of existentialist themes is, in fact, disappearing from noir at large, across its various subcategories (domestic, outback, etc). In fact, these subcategories seem more preoccupied with marrying location and crime/criminals than other thematic issues, as their genre titles suggest. However, the tenets of alienation and a certain amount of environmental meaninglessness/chaos do still linger, but the importance and positioning of these themes has changed. In Cash's *This Dark Road to Mercy*, Smith's *Desperation Road* (2017) (both country noir) and Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* (2015) (domestic noir) issues such as existentialist despair are gone, anxiety stems from more corporeal fears and simple not-knowing, and perhaps most importantly, the existentialist pursuit of purpose, meaning and identity are no longer central to character development or narrative arc.

This raises the question as to whether there can be noir without existentialism. As I explored throughout this exegesis, there are aspects more vital and intrinsic to noir than crime. While crime is of course part and parcel to much of noir fiction, noir is not reliant upon crime, noir fiction is not at all dependant on crime or criminals. If there can be noir without crime, the question remains, can there be noir without an existentialist situating of its themes?

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