

Folk/Americana

By

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Thesis

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APOLOGIA

Reading is always more important than writing.

-Roberto Bolano

There was no defining moment that made me decide that I'd always be writing. The truth is, I cannot recall a time that I did not want to write—although I certainly haven't been doing so all my life. Rather, I'd thought I'd wait—when I was younger, a teenager, I was afraid to put anything down in words. I didn't want to ruin my stories with poor writing, sub-par prose. Instead, I kept them in my head for weeks, mulling them about, learning about the characters as I paced back and forth or tossed a baseball to myself. I've forgotten all these stories, of course, and now, I can't even remember when I first had the courage to actually write anything down. I do, however, remember the first time I truly fell for a book.

This happened when my grandmother told me to read Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. I was fifteen years old and a typical idiot-kid, more interested in watching movies or playing the guitar than listening to my parents, let alone their parents. My Dominican grandmother, though, she got my attention, "Theo," she said—except she never pronounced the digraph, *th*, and so it came out *Teo*. "Teo, you should read this book. There are fish that fall from the sky, and characters that always wear baseball hats. Like you."

She was right. I did always wear baseball hats. I took note of what she said, but I did not read the book that year. I only did when I turned sixteen and my grandfather told me to read it, too. "Theo," he said, in his weighty Russian accent. "Your... grandmother...gave...me... this book...to read. You should...read...it too." The book was, once again, *Kafka on the Shore*. My grandmother and grandfather had been divorced for a quarter century by that point, but

apparently shared books. I understood very little about their relationship and still understand very little about very many things. Nevertheless, the double recommendation was something I could not ignore.

Reading *Kafka on the Shore* made me want to read more—more in so many ways, but not more of anything. There was a difference. Murakami piqued in me an interest in foreign literature.

For the longest time, I read anything that felt different and foreign from what I thought was American work—the yellowed paperback copies of *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and *Of Mice and Men* I received in high school. In Murakami, I found his appropriation of Americanisms to be fresh and new. He took my favorite Jazz musicians and melded them with The Beatles; he wrote about baseball and talking frogs and lonely men. Murakami wrote about everything I loved and felt, but from a city that was thousands of miles away, in a geographical and cultural context that I'd never experienced. I learned what the expression, “Mono no Aware,” meant. This is a Japanese term for a common element in their art: the beauty of ephemeral things, an expression that doesn't make one think such beauty is immortal, but that a thing's brief existence is beautiful *because* of its finitude. This made life easier. Less grand, perhaps, certainly a little sadder—but it changed me to think what was sad could also be lovely.

So I borrowed my grandmother's books: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who showed me that magic was not mutually exclusive from reality; Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar, who first encouraged me to think about the way stories could be told outside of a recognizable form. I raided my grandfather's library, too: Pushkin through Pasternak. He told me I was related to Tolstoy, although sometimes I would lie and tell others it was Dostoevsky who married my great-grandfather's aunt. I liked Dostoevsky more. His stories were less about rich people and

more about philosophy, heady spaces—and yet they still had all the melodrama and conflict to keep the plot exciting and my reading compulsive.

I read Camus and Kazuo Ishiguro—who gave me that similar sense of *Mono no Aware* as Haruki Murakami. With Ishiguro, though, I discovered what could be expressed in English language idiom. Samuel Beckett did the same for me, and Iris Murdoch revealed the fact that one could write a funny story that was entirely philosophically driven as well.

I was addicted to these works, intrigued by the way different cultures had vastly different kinds of narratives. Before this period, I'd only chosen to read the kind of American writing that I imagine the literary community would by-and-large scoff at.

Before I turned fifteen, I'd read practically every Stephen King book and so have enough authority to say his prose is as graceful as an MTA bus and his stories often suffer in one way or another from familiar characters and previously explored plots, predictable turns and twists. But in the midst of all the junk he wrote, there was a lot I loved. *The Stand* is still possibly the most fun I've ever had with a thousand pages, and makes me want to write a book just as gargantuan and exciting. *The Dark Tower* series was a high point in my reading life as well. While reading book one through seven of King's magnum opus, I regimented myself into a strict three-hour-a-day reading routine. I'd get an hour in before school and two more hours right after. I would get through a hundred pages a day this way, and so even though the series was over four thousand pages, I was able to read it all in less than two months. His lines are clunky, but when I think about the kind of book I'd love to write, I imagine something epic quite like my favorite works by Stephen King—although I hope to be better. I always want to be better.

There were others, too, that I read in bulk before my move towards foreign literature. One summer, I got every Dan Brown book, starting with *The Da Vinci Code*. I liked the excitement of

the thriller genre, but as I progressed through his oeuvre, I began to read him only to prove that every one of his books followed the exact same format. They did. It was always the old man who turned out to be the surprise villain. Side characters would continuously perish at the same point of the story. The protagonist and the only legitimate female character story would inevitably couple at the exact same time of crisis.

With Dan Brown I learned that a writer should always be changing. That confusing style with formula was a trap. Reinvention is what makes writing exciting for everyone and is also the only way to improve. I read other, non-American authors who did the Dan Brown thing, too—writers whom I devoured just as rapidly in my early teens. Ian Fleming and the James Bond books, for instance—I read every single one of them (largely for the steamier scenes). These also taught me how even extremity and excitement could become familiar.

My foreign literature phase lasted largely until I was in college. Really, it lasted until I happened across David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. I say, "happened across," meaning that quite literally. I was walking through a bookstore and saw its cover of clouds, its big, lime green letters. Thinking back, I'm not sure why I bought it—on a whim, for sure, maybe to use it as a doorstop. It is quite large after all. Nevertheless, I read it and that changed everything.

David Foster Wallace was the first American author that made me *want* to think about American letters—to really grapple with the fact that if I was going to be a writer, I had to deal with the fact that I am an American. His story was a gargantuan as one of Stephen King's, as epic, but also felt like a kind of P90X of the mind. It took me a year of reading *Infinite Jest* off and on to finally finish—and when I was, I knew that I'd have to face my own American identity and deal with that in writing, too.

This led me to other American authors as well—ones I should have surely read long before, and with much greater attention. Kurt Vonnegut was one of them. He still has a special place in my piles of books as one of the few authors who makes me simultaneously laugh and consider life. This is what I want to do in my own work, too. I read Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, finding their use of words and sentences themselves to be something I had not paid much attention to before. DeLillo's *Underworld*, I claim, is both the longest prose poem and the greatest American novel of the past quarter century. He wrote his first draft with each paragraph on a separate page. This, he said, helped him better focus on each paragraph as an artistic unit and visualize what it would look like to the reader.

I've never tried writing a story with each paragraph on a separate page, but I have tried many different approaches. Like Ishiguro, I've written things first in longhand, using my nearly unintelligible handwritten draft to force myself to reconsider every single word as I typed it out. I've tried simply typing my drafts as well, the way Haruki Murakami does. We both use Apple computers. If I do this, I tend to revise and rewrite as I write (which does drag the entire process exorbitantly so), but it also allows the narrative to live in more than just a linear way.

Regardless of how I write, though, I always listen to music as I work. Nothing with words, unless it's choral music. Classical music and jazz are what I typically put on—Mahler and Miles Davis. I can't listen to music with words as I write for the same reason I will never be able to write in a coffee shop or any sort of space where other human beings are interacting. This is because I am a born eavesdropper. I will listen to every word anyone says.

When I can't write at all, when no ideas are coming, I go to the movies. Not just because I've learned so much about plot, narrative and imagery from people like the Coen Brothers or Andrei Tarkovsky, but also because it is the dialectical experience of the theater that has always

fascinated me. We go to the movies in an effort to engage in a sort of social interaction—to be beside another human being, even if it is a stranger, and yet the entire thing is set up so that no one actually speaks, or engages with one another. More so than anything else, relational dialectics—the way a person can simultaneously want to be others and also want to be alone—is what I find myself thinking most about and what I find myself most often dealing with in my writing.

For the most part, what I've written so far have been short stories—and most with relational dialectics at their heart. Short stories are not what I want to be doing, though, and are not what you are about to read.

The more stories I wrote, the longer and longer they became—from 5,000 to 10,000 to 15,000 words. And now, here is my longest work so far. *FOLK/AMERICANA*. This is a novella born from my two most recent interests (besides relational dialectics, which will always be at the core of my stories, as such is at the core of our lives).

First, is my concern with what Erving Goffman talks about in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He says, “to the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others.” Goffman’s ideas on the ways in which we perform in life, for others and for ourselves, the way such can twist our own identities and realities into something that we might not even believe in, is really the backbone of this project. I’ve always been obsessed with representation—the ways we present and represent ourselves. In this project, I wanted to explore the shallowness and depth of identity, using characters in metaphorical (and sometimes literal) masks that have confused their costumes with

reality, whose fictive lives have become actualized, although still fictionalized (by me). This story is about communication and how difficult such is when we aren't sure who we are.

The other impetus for this story is my own obsession with entertainment. Not just the varieties of form, but the various ways and reasons people seek out such entertainments: for catharsis, to forget, to escape—but also to engage. When is it a waste of time and when is it an effort to expand the self?

In this project there are all kinds of entertainment—music, television, food. But also philosophy and sociology. The characters fluctuate between apathy and action, all while trying to discover whether their story actually means anything at all.

In this work, I hope to entertain and to provoke. Here you will find characters that are desperately lonely, even when in the company of others. Mystery, philosophy and romance are all tied up together. There are slapstick routines side by side with meditation and reflection, death and life. The critic, James Wood, invented the term “hysterical realism” as a pejorative, but I am working in that genre to show how absurd life can be and where the meaning is in the midst of all the confusion. This is what I hope I've accomplished, and I hope that you will find something worth remembering here, too.

I want my reader to have fun, to get lost in the work, but not to escape.

Writing, Hemingway once said, at its best, is a lonely life. This is pretty true. But reading is always more important than writing—and while reading, you can never be alone. You are always with the author. And so even though I spent so many hours at my desk, writing (or, more accurately, agonizing), I knew that it was for something. That even though I was alone, much like how my protagonist in this story feels, I was also not alone. I was with you. I am now.

LEAVING LOS ANGELES

“I’m going to find you,” Ron said into the lens of the camera. The audience would know he meant Duane Saunders—it didn’t matter if he said it or not. What mattered to me and to the camera was that they didn’t know what Ron would do next with the raw meat that he held in his hand.

This was how every episode was supposed to end: poolside, under western-colored clouds. Red, salmon and ochre. Ron grilling for his “wife” in his prefab mansion. She, Cammie, semi-supine in a lounge chair off to the side of the frame. And me, filming it all from a prone position a yard away. But I was actually curious this time. I wondered what he would do next, too, with the filet he squeezed in his gargantuan hand, turning it to pulp. I got a close up of the juicy blood as it ran down his apron and into the tiled grooves of the poolside patio. It crawled to the pool in a thin stream that bloomed pink in the chlorinated water.

And then I racked the shot back to Ron and his giant, shaking face, his bared teeth.

He took the meat (now at a completely pulverized state) and spread it across his brow and cheeks like tribal paint. Little pills of raw beef caught in his blond eyelashes and handlebar mustache. So this was what he would do. A stain bloomed over the B sewn into his apron. The B from: I LIKE BIG BUNS. The apron wasn’t Ron’s choice, though—Gunter, our producer, had always picked what Ron and Camille would wear.

“I’m going to find you,” he said again. “And I’m going to fuck you until you love me.”

Pulling back the shot, I got the Californian smog that hung like a filmy curtain overhead. That afterimage light, a sort of dirty gloss. Gunter could have had this amplified in editing, if we still had an editing crew.

And that was it, I decided. The take was over. I placed the camera on the ground, laying the boom mic inches away from the puddle of wasted beef. But this wasn't the end for Ron. He spun around and grabbed the stainless steel grill by its side. It was a Weber Genesis S-330, so not small. He lifted it a foot into the air. For a moment, his biceps strained like basketballs about to burst, and then he heaved it into the pool.

A second later and a pillar of steam rose into the air. The smell of quickly boiling water. The grill had been on, and I wondered if the propane tank could explode and kill the three of us: Ron, Cammie, me.

Should I have been filming this? Probably. But then, probably not. Gunter was always on edge now about things going overboard in the wrong way. Things that could, perhaps, be construed as violent or criminal. Really, anything that we could get sued for. I ordered a pizza instead.

“Ron,” I said.

A beat passed before he turned, face still smeared with steak. “Tom,” he said.

“Since clearly there isn't going to be steak, I ordered a pizza.

“What kind?” Ron licked a piece of beef from his mustache.

“Anchovies.”

“You're kidding.”

“I'm kidding.”

“Hey, Camille.” Ron did another about-face toward the lounge chair.

His wife was blond, too, and beautiful in a standoffish way. She was in her early thirties, twenty years younger than Ron and exponentially more intelligent—but when Gunter first brought her in, he'd told her to not talk *too* much. Of course, she could talk, but not with

references to her advanced degrees in continental philosophy, or her ongoing enrollment in a PhD program at USC. Her character on the show: a stay-at-home wife.

“We’ll need a new grill.” Ron said.

“What makes you say that?” She rolled her eyes underneath her platinum bangs. She didn’t much care for having to talk to Ron outside of filming.

“It’s in the pool now.”

She put her hands on her hips. No nail polish. She never wore any, actually. When shooting in the home (the only scenes Cammie was ever in) I always liked to smuggle her fingers in somehow. If Gunter had noticed, he never said anything.

“Duane,” Ron said, shaking his head, “I have to do something.”

Ron took off his apron and tossed it to the ground. His bare chest looked like the breast of an ox. Not bad for a man in his mid fifties.

“I think I might have to go,” he said as Camille toed the bloody chunks of meat in the direction of the pool where they would get sucked up in the filter, and then discarded by the pool boy. She shook her head and sauntered back to her lounge chair, picking up a book she’d kept underneath. *The Brothers Karamazov*. The camera was off. There was no need to act.

Later, when the pizza arrived (sausage), Ron and I took our slices out on the lawn by the side of his mid-century moderne style mini-mansion. The house he’d bought at the height of his fame, maybe three years before. I’d worked with Gunter to find one that would work well to shoot in. A house, I mean—one with plenty of natural lighting and space for dolly shots. Before that, he’d been in a tired ranch out in Santa Clarita. What was perhaps more appropriate for a middle-aged bounty hunter with a tattoo of the Virgin Mary on his inner thigh and a mullet attempting to make up for the hair that was thinning on his crown. But now, we sat with out

backs against the stucco wall, slices in hand, the unraveling lights of Santa Monica below spooling gold in the ending afternoon.

“Are you serious about this?” I asked through a mouthful of pizza.

“I’m going to crush his skull like he tried to do to her.” He was talking about Marissa. Marissa, whom Duane Saunders had assaulted and left unconscious. Marissa who Ron used to be romantically involved with before Gunter essentially forced them apart.

“No. You’re going to fuck him until he falls in love,” I corrected.

“Crushing skulls—it’s a part of that.”

“Crushing hearts too.”

“This isn’t about the show, you know,” Ron said.

“Gunter is going to be pissed.”

Gunter would be pissed—for a while, at least. This wasn’t the first time that Ron had done something spontaneous, off script, without consulting anyone beforehand. The moments I was always ready for, whether they were great or disastrous. One time, eating lunch in the van as we drove to get some drug dealer who’d skipped bail, he’d gotten so frustrated with how shitty his White Castle burgers were, that he took his entire Crave Case and threw each one, individually, out the window. And I shot it all. I was even able to get close-ups of angry pedestrians as they dodged the flying sandwiches. We went to In-n-Out after.

But this could be different, I thought. This could be a beginning. Cars hugged the nearby bend in Sunset Boulevard, their lights splintering what was now night, despite the hint of red under violet that still lingered out west. The end of the day. But this was a beginning.

It was on all the shows about shows the day after it aired. In the studio out in Inglewood, we watched them play across several separate screens. Ron and I sat on office chairs, a bowl of popcorn between us. Gunter, bald-headed as an infant, stood in nothing but baby-white briefs, his pale, mid-sixties paunch hanging over the elastic band. He called this his thinking outfit.

“Ron Da Zont,” a lady wearing a leopard-print blouse from the Enterzainment Network began, “star of the struggling *Ron: Bail Bonds and Bounty Hunting* made bold statements yesterday that may be just what his show and the DEF network need.”

“Fuck,” Gunter said over the voices of talking heads. As the producer of *Ron: Bail Bonds and Bounty Hunting*, he felt he had the authority to speak over what he referred to as the “*lazier networks*—” what he meant as lesser in his pseudo Southern/Florida drawl: an affectation of the persona he’d begun to develop back in the 80s, when he first broke onto the scene as a producer. “It’s still football season. Playoffs and we’re fucked with a Monday night slot. What do people expect?” He waved his arms and his too loose briefs slipped a little, allowing a brief peek of scrotum. He didn’t bother adjusting, so I just kept my eyes on the screen. “Not that I’m saying this goat shit is acceptable,” Gunter went on.

“—when Ron decided that he alone would take down Duane Saunders,” the newscaster continued, “also known as Mr. Rager, following his escape from the authorities last Sunday.” A headshot of Duane popped next to the leopard-print lady. He was bald and, despite being in his mid-thirties, quite baby-faced. Although his head was the size and girth of a gorilla’s. “As you know, Duane Saunders has been on the lam since the alleged beating of his now ex-girlfriend, Marissa Glouck.”

On another screen, Ken doll-like men talked about whether this was just a stunt or a radical turn for the show.

“I mean, it’s been the same thing for years now, right?” the first Ken-doll asked. “Some creep skips bail. Ron talks to one of his countless ex-con friends and finally goes and busts down the shithead’s door.”

“A drug den. An old apartment building. Not that they look any different.” Second Ken nodded his agreement.

“There was the one episode where he found the dude in a bathroom stall. At the public library of all places.”

I recalled this one: I’d set up a dolly (back when we had the money to use a dolly) and we rolled through the library, like the kid in *The Shining* on that tricycle, all the way up to the moment Ron kicked in the bathroom door.

“That’s right,” the Ken doll continued. “He was reading the collected stories of Richard Yates, wasn’t he?”

They both nodded.

“It’s strange.” Gunter turned off all the televisions and shook his own balding head. “No one is talking about the meat. I thought the meat was great.”

“He deserves worse, that taint.” Ron stood and paced around the mostly empty room. We each had a desk in the studio. Gunter’s was the largest; with framed blow-ups of all the things he’d been a part of producing. Ron’s was entirely opposite—small and cluttered. It’d been his childhood desk, still painted a baby blue and topped with an assortment of books and magazines, things like an outdated copy of *Get Big, Stay Big* (this was no longer a problem for Ron) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being Giant*. But also some poems that he’d clearly printed off the internet and stapled to the desk itself. One of Adrienne Rich’s *Twenty-One Love Poems* and an old one of Jack Gilbert’s. And a picture, too: Ron as a child, just as blond although with more

hair that waved and tossed in the wind. The sea breeze from where he was on the coast. I'd asked him where it was taken once although I knew he'd say Carrabelle, the tiny town on the Florida panhandle that he'd grown up in.

And then there was my desk—empty, aside from some warranty slips and a vintage vinyl player that I'd bought when I was still a student. On its turntable was a Ted Burroughs record I hardly listened to anymore. The one Caroline had given me in college. She was the first person who showed me how much fuller music sounded on vinyl, rather than CD.

“You know,” Gunter said, “Mike Tyson said that first.”

“Called Duane a taint? That's news to no one.” Of course he knew what Gunter meant about the fucking and loving. Ron had been a boxer before becoming a bounty hunter, which was before Gunter found him and turned him into a television star.

“It doesn't matter.” Gunter stood and pulled on his pants. “No one remembers who says what, or what someone says. Not when we spend half our day listening for our names to be called, and the other half being so *bombarded* with shit that doesn't stick...but does leave a bad stench.”

“You know this could be good,” I said. I actually believed what I was saying—not just hoping to get out of LA. I'd always hated and loved the city at the same time, though the amount of crap going on was making it easier and easier to despise. Our new studio was certainly not an upgrade. We'd been on Santa Monica Boulevard before losing so much money that we had to move to this cubbyhole. Gunter had to lay off pretty much everyone except for me. We still edited out of house but with all the shit the show had been through in the past year—all the lawsuits we paid out, our rapidly plummeting ratings—we had little to zero other funds for staff. This was how I became chief (and only) camera operator as well as DP.

“Our show is supposed to be smarter. Sort of. Sort of artier,” Gunter said. He pulled at the stubble still left on his head. He’d tried hair plugs but they didn’t take. I’d once asked if I could shoot a short film with him standing in the middle of Rodeo drive, where we’d wait for a strong wind to lift all the little blonde wisps out of his scalp like a child’s dandelion. He’d told me no.

“At least a little bit,” Gunter continued, still scratching his lily-white cranium. “My chance to sell something *besides* sex. That’s why I brought in Tom over here, you goddamn *auteur*.” I looked up from a handful of popcorn. “And you too, you big ugly chicken. But that got squashed a year ago even more so than the Da Zont family’s last filet *mignon*. Not that I’m blaming you, *Ron*. But it is your fault. This shit. Is this going to turn out better? What are you going to do, follow this maniac all the way to fuck knows Mexico?”

Ron stopped pacing and faced the man who ultimately decided what would happen. Or at least where the money would go. Ron would do what he wanted regardless, and for once, I sort of respected that. “That chode would never go to Mexico. He’s a goddamn racist.”

“So where is he?”

Duane Saunders. Mr. Rager. I’d never met him but I’d heard Ron talk of him as if he were a Nazi war criminal who’d gone unpunished. He was the worst boxer fighting today—and by worst I mean most brutal, most beastly. He almost always went for the head. It was an interesting strategy, I’ll admit. He’d wait entire rounds just to get one or two or three jabs in quick succession to the cheek, followed by a tough hook to the temple. At first everyone thought he was trying to just get KOs. Then people realized he wanted to kill his opponent. Not that this stopped the networks and advertisers from raining money on him to perform his act.

And it was an act, peculiar in many ways. He wore these tight, brightly colored, Brazilian sungas. And the noises—he was known for the noises. Not barks or grunts or anything like that. But these strange, gargling sounds. A series of glottal stops. Chicken squawks and goose honks. He'd make them the whole match until the inevitable strike to the head.

Now, almost two weeks had passed since he'd beaten Marissa Glouck, Ron's ex girlfriend, Saunders' current... ex now, I suppose. He left her unconscious and in critical condition at the Hotel Shangri La in Santa Monica. She was recovering now, but that provided no solace. Duane Saunders hit a bellboy on his way out, too, although none of the news stations really lingered on that. I guess it wasn't as news worthy.

"I will find him—" Ron started.

"And fuck him," I added, finishing the last of the popcorn.

"—with or without your help, Gunter. You know this is more important."

"More important for the *authorities*, maybe." Gunter readjusted his pants. "I can't blow all my money on this. You know my other projects have been, sort of...going limp." His other work—his genre since the eighties was pornography. Gunter produced such staples as *Pulp Friction*, *The Sperminator 1* through *3*, and *The Gigantic Gatsby*. But *Ron, Bail Bonds* had been his baby. Our show was his only real foray into somewhat more mainstream programming, and now the internet, with the Bang Bros and shittily shot homemade films, was killing his original industry—where all our original funding came from. People didn't care who or what they watched so long as it was free.

"Gunter," Ron said, "you can go fuck yourself with something hard and sandpapery."

"Sure. I will. And I won't be producing this."

“I didn’t expect you to.” Ron stood and crossed his arms, spread his legs in the pose displayed on most of the promotional posters. Years ago, I’d mentioned ideas for posters showing Ron at a desk, a book in hand, or holding a Yorickish skull. Ron had liked the idea but Gunter vetoed those.

A minute passed. Gunter looked at his watch. Ron at Gunter.

“I’ll have to check with the network.” Gunter walked toward the door. “And even if you do go, we’re cutting down. Tom, okay? One van. Understand? No more than three weeks.”

“Three weeks?”

“This shits not going be relevant in three weeks. The world turns, Ron. I’m sorry, but unless it’s about getting paid, things are forgotten rather fast.”

The network, it turned out, thought it was a wonderful idea.

The next day, we went to a hospital by Hazard Park. The sky was clear as we stood outside. When I had been a student, I’d done a film where I’d kept the cam on a dolly that was no more than half a foot off the ground. With the upward angle, every shot was about 90% sky. The script was something about religion and god and where was he or she and why didn’t this unisex being reveal its existence more often and preferably with donuts in hand—something altogether studentish. I’d done this same sort of shot with Ron a number of times, liking the way it made him look like some sort of Nordic deity. But I wasn’t filming now. I just watched the sky, same as Ron, our heads turned up like baby birds waiting for a worm. But waiting for nothing, really. Answers, maybe. The search for Duane Saunders had started, but we were already procrastinating.

Ron held a bouquet of flowers in the crook of his elephantine arms and I had a steadicam attached to my chest. Not my favorite thing to use, but our armory of video recorders was dwindling. Many had been destroyed throughout the making of the show, but even more had been sold. Not that I minded too much—this limited supply. When Caroline and I'd been working on the Ted Burroughs documentary back in my early twenties, all I had was one Super 8 Canon XL. Now I had this whole rig attached to my body. I was wearing a dress, too, to disguise the camera and make it look like I was a pregnant woman. Ron lent me a wig—one of his old ones—that helped me pass as a blond lady.

“Are you ready?” Ron asked.

“No. Let's hang out outside longer.” I fiddled with the hem of my dress. “The breeze is just delightful.”

Ron shrugged the way he always did—with his whole body and face.

“Ron...” I shook my head. Sarcasm was lost on him. “The question is, are you ready?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don't know. You used to love this woman. She isn't in good shape, and maybe she doesn't even want to see you right now—let alone be covertly filmed by a man pretended to be a pregnant lady.”

“I still do love her,” Ron said, stoically. “And I know—I know maybe she doesn't feel the same about me but... Ron's always ready.”

“Don't speak like that,” I said.

“It's hard sometimes. I try not to be a downer.”

“I mean about yourself in the third person.”

“How do I look?” Ron asked, switching gears. He was wearing what he always wore. Bermuda shorts and boots. A flamboyantly patterned Hawaiian shirt with the sleeves purposefully ripped off—because otherwise his arms wouldn’t have been able to fit through. But he’d combed what hair he still had (he stopped using the wings long ago) and brushed his mustache.

“Looking good,” I said.

“Feeling good, too. But what about the buttons?” He played with the topmost circle, letting it come loose and expose more oak-colored chest that went nicely in contrast with the colorful surfboards that floated on the collar.

“Like that,” I said. “Are you ready to go in?”

“I guess.”

So we entered the hospital and asked where we could find Marissa Glouck.

The disguise worked because no one questioned my identity as woman in her third trimester and everyone was too busy with things that actually mattered to really pay much attention to Ron—the pseudo-celebrity in their mix. The front desk gave us the floor and room and number but when we reached Marissa’s door, Ron asked again how he looked, thumbing the top button into its slot once more. I told him to just take it off if he felt that unsure.

“Okay,” Ron said but instead of removing the shirt, he finally opened the door.

Ron went in first and I followed, his back occupying most of the medium shot until he stood before the hospital bed. Window light flared on the lens and when things settled into focus, I had a shot of Ron at the foot of the hospital bed. I’d been wondering what would happen when we finally spoke to her. She probably didn’t want to see Ron, not after he left her (well, Gunter had sort of driven them apart...), and considering her current state, I wouldn’t blame her for

wanting to avoid everyone. It didn't help things that what we were doing was also clearly illegal. This was the shows M.O. by that point.

None of that mattered, though. Marissa was asleep. Not unconscious, but peacefully sleeping. She had bruising on her face, and stitches in several places, but she was alive. Still, I felt bile in my stomach. What fucking creeps we were. Not that this stopped me from climbing atop a chair, hoisting my fake pregnant belly to direct the camera and get a better view.

Ron was about to touch her hair when he stopped himself. "She looks like she's dreaming," he said. "She looks like she's dreaming about the sun, or clouds or a lake maybe. She loved Lake Tahoe and the way it would reflect the sun and the clouds." Ron walked around and hunkered down next to her, trying to be poetic. "We went once, when we were still...you know. That trip, she told me she thought death was when the lake never froze over and snow never fell. Death was when the moon stood still and you were waiting for the sun. Or maybe the other way around...I think she was quoting Shakespeare or something."

I pointed my belly at Ron as he closed his eyes either in deep thought about life and death or because he was trying to keep from tearing up. He stayed like that and I got my shot. Marissa and Ron had been together for years, back when he was a boxer. It was through her that Ron first met Gunter—she was in porn, her nom de plume being Fanny Deep. What was it like, I wondered, to have two identities? To be a real person, full of life and love, wants and thoughts—but also an image only see on dimmed laptop screens by men huddled around a handful of tissues, an actress constantly playing the same role. I went once to a shoot with Gunter and asked a male actor if it was hard to get an erection with a camera zoomed in on his balls. He said it was harder to get an erection when there wasn't. I wondered why Marissa, a seemingly intelligent young woman, continued to date a series of meatheads—Ron, Duane and god knows who else.

Would she ever find herself interested in a man like me? When was the last time I'd gotten in fight for someone?

Ron found some letters and papers on the bedside table and was going through them

“Marissa,” he said. “I’m looking for clues.”

“Ron.”

“I’m going to kill him.” Ron stood straight and looked me in the eye as he thumbed the button of his shirt till it came undone and his chest bared itself that much more. “But I need to find him first.”

When Ron had been a boxer, Duane Saunders had yet to arrive on the scene. Things had been simpler then, less was for show. No one cared what guttural noises you made, or how many bananas might be stuffed into your shorts. It wasn’t an act, like Duane made it out to be. Not that it was an art, by any means. Not that this was either.

Ron didn’t say anything as he searched through the pile of notes—get well soon cards from friends and family. After a few minutes he looked up at me, where I still stood on the chair. In his hand he was holding a card.

“Who is it from?” I asked.

“The Adult Network.” Ron’s face grew grave and solemn, the way Nordic faces can become—shadows spreading from his brow, eyes slanted down. “It’s talking about Duane, apologizing...and a man named Zed Hart.”

I hefted my belly and zoomed in on the text. Zed Hart, it said, was Duane’s boxing trainer. The address read: Arizona.

“Arizona,” Ron said. “Arid-zone-a.”

We left the hospital not long after, as covertly as we came in. Ron looked back only once as we left Marissa behind. He muttered something about how he would do this for her. We were going to Arizona. I just looked forward to getting out of Los Angeles.

The last time I'd been out of the state was three years before. We were in Mexico—Baja California, actually, so it wasn't much different, just a little hotter and more lawless. This was the night that Ron and I first met Camille. It was at a party in the CFO of the DEF network's mansion. The place was practically a palace, with vermilion terra cotta tiles, and statues of long dead Greeks. An infinity pool gradated into the ocean like a disappearing galaxy where the stars were the little heads of drunken men and women. And the Pacific, a nighttime blue as evening set and the sun bedded into the waves and spread a residue of warm colors like honey along the horizon.

I was drinking Wild Turkey out on one of the many balconies when Ron teetered over with a handful of shrimp.

“Sea cricket?” Ron asked, eyes glazed. Drugs? Booze? Both, probably.

Ron took the wad of decapod crustacean and stuffed it into his mouth. The tails stuck out until he bit down and they fluttered away like pink confetti.

“You've been to things like this before, I assume.”

“Not like this.” I took a sip of bourbon. We'd known each other just over a year by this point. Ron was referring to the fact that the party was actually for the CFO's son. It was his Bar Mitzvah and practically everyone in the world of the DEF network had been invited, whether the kid wanted them there or not. And yes, I had been to a number of bar/bat mitzvahs throughout my life, but not since I was fifteen years old, well over a decade earlier. And in New York, the

suburb where I grew up, the extravagance of this glittering place was a far cry from anything I'd seen before.

"Yeah." Ron finished the shrimp. "Seems a little much, right?"

"They're usually themed."

"What was your theme?"

"I didn't have one. But I think the theme here is money."

"The woman who jumped out of the cake did throw dollar bills into the air." Ron reached out and took a sip from my drink.

"Nice view though," I said as I rested my elbows on the balustrade.

"You're right. Her breasts. Very nice."

The sun continued to crash into the Pacific. Music still echoed from the main party area; another balcony that was a few stories below. A DJ, probably, using switches and buttons to bring a thunderous bass to a roar. A man and woman stumbled onto the balcony, unaware that we were already there.

It wasn't long until a mid-hair plug phase Gunter stumbled up to us.

"Well, well," Gunter said. Well, sounding like *weale*, the way writers from Shakespeare's day would write wealth. "Ron and Tom, sitting on a... balcony."

His gin breath extended a meter from his mouth.

"I've got someone who wants you," he said and led us back to the main party. This wasn't out of the ordinary—the show was doing spectacularly well since the episode out in Joshua Tree. People were asking to see Ron left and right

So we sauntered through throngs of men and women leaning all over each other, practically spilling drinks into the deep v's of cleavage and snorting coke off of any available

and reflective surface. The woman who had popped out of the cake wore a sash that said *Mazel Tov* as she strutted around, turning the eyes of shmeckles everywhere. The pretense of a bar mitzvah seemed a little beside the point. The kid was probably in the mansion undoubtedly grand basement playing video games

Eventually the crowd parted and there, standing before all three of us, was the one person at the party who didn't seem to be up to her eyeballs in drugs or drink. This was Camille, in a tasteful, yet not *too* nunnish peasant dress.

She smiled when Gunter shoved Ron forward.

"Um," he sputtered, "I'm Ron." He used both hands to straighten out his mustache.

"No. I know who you are already." She didn't blink.

I didn't understand what she meant by *no*, but I tried to introduce myself all the same. She had zero interest in me, though, so I just sort of hovered around under the guise of looking for another drink.

"I know who you're father is."

"No way—" Ron, taken aback, straightened up— "Dad must have passed before you even hit puberty. Unless you...flowered early, that, uh, is."

Too confident. And too much coke, probably.

"No, I don't mean personally." She smiled politely, like she was talking to a little boy. "I'm familiar with his work, I mean."

"Oh." Ron took a step back. At the time, all I knew was that his father had been an academic—a philosopher and contemporary of Heidegger. Although unlike Heidegger, Da Zont the Elder never fell into goose-stepping line and so had to leave Europe circa 1935.

"I've read all of his works." Clearly, Camille was ahead of us.

“But they aren’t even words,” Ron replied, “in English.”

“No, they aren’t. I read them first in their German translation and then again in their original form after I learned Swedish.” She batted her eyelashes—not so much in flirtation with Ron, but rather as if in admiration of her own accomplishments.

“Listen.” Gunter pulled Ron and I aside. Why I was included, I’ll never know. “This woman, I’ve talked with her, and she’s agreed... She’ll play your wife.”

“What?” We both said.

“Ron.” Gunter’s eyes bulged from his pink face. “Look at her. She’s gorgeous—and she’s smart. Smart enough to pretend to not be so smart. She’ll play the part. And she’s willing to work practically for free. Well, monetarily.”

“Sounds...” Ron took my drink again and knocked it back. He and Marissa had broken up recently and hadn’t been acting like himself ever since—eating entire bags of Mint Milanos, watching Tom Hanks/Sandra Bullock films non-stop. He’d even decreased his daily workout routine by a hundred reps (not that this was so much). “Sounds fair, I guess?” He said. “Sounds fair.”

We all turned to face the woman who would become Ron’s new wife and she regarded us, too, with a look like we were dogs covered in dirt.

We were supposed to shoot one last scene in LA before leaving to see what Zed Hart knew about Duane. Gunter did some research and said he had a training facility out by Bullhead City. But first, he told me, shoot a scene with Camille. Show her getting angry, jealous, upset and worried about Ron. This would make the audience worried too.

“Throw a mug at him,” I asked her. The three of us were in the Da Zont Kitchen, just after getting back from the hospital.

Camille picked up a mug from the stainless-steel sink and threw it at him. Ron let it hit him and bounce off a pectoral.

“Christ,” Ron replied. “I’m leaving on a trip.”

“Where were you today? Where are you going?” She knew the answer to both these questions. We’d gone back to the studio to consult with Gunter for a bit—or at least for me to—so it was afternoon now. Blue sky and sun steamed in through the glass doors of the kitchen. Again, in the Da Zont’s absurd, art box house.

“It’s a part of the show?” Ron said, confused. Maybe he thought she was actually angry.

Over the viewfinder of the camera, I passed a warning glance on to Ron.

“I mean.” he shifted on his feet. “This is what’s right. You know. I can stop a bad man, Cammie.”

“And what makes him a bad man?” Camille’s forehead crinkled with concentration. She may not have had much experience acting, but she was good.

This time I eyeballed Camille and mouthed, *ex-girlfriend*, to encourage a little more emotion.

She started actually cleaning some of the dishes in the sink, but she did manage to say, “because he’s with your ex-girlfriend?”

“Camille.”

Gunter, I mouthed towards her. Gunter had never actually appeared on the show, but his name was often thrown about as a sort of scapegoat. Like, when Ron did something especially stupid, she’d fret about how Gunter was putting Ron in danger. Stuff like that.

“And now you’re turning this into your stupid show with stupid Gunter.”

Gunter, I mouthed again, shaking my head. She was going down the wrong path.

“He’s gay, you know.”

“Since when?” Ron slapped the marble counter top.

“And this fucking asshole.” She nodded at me now. At the camera. At the audience.

“Tom.”

“What’s wrong with Tom?”

“Um,” I said from behind the camera, moving away from Camille, who was actually starting to look pissed off.

Without warning, she grabbed the camera by its side and tried to yank it from my hands. This didn’t really do anything but provide a close up of her lovely, hairless wrists.

“You’re such a creep!” she yelled slamming her fists on the granite countertop as well.

“You never talk about anything real!”

“That’s not true, honey,” Ron chimed in, trying to put a hand on her arm. “He’s just... a deep thinker.”

“Are you saying I’m not?” Perhaps this was getting out of hand.

Ron quickly shook his head.

“Are you saying you think that I, that I don’t think?” She had to try and hide the flicker of a smile. She was impressed by her own acting ability.

“No, no. I think you think all the time.” Ron, on the other hand, floundered, his eyes wide, his forehead beginning to bead with sweat—as if any of this actually meant anything. But maybe to him it actually did. Sometimes, I think he thought this was all real. “I think you think a lot,” Ron said. “I just think that you might be wrong about Tom.”

“Do you think I think?” Camille said to me, now.

“Sure,” I said setting the camera down and set to wide shot so that I could be a character too. “I think you do.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

Ron and I shook our heads in unison. We didn’t usually break the fourth wall so much, but maybe this was good—either a disaster or spectacular.

“It’s hard,” she said, “to know which one of your selves you want to be.”

“Maybe if we leave for a while,” I started, “that will be a good thing. A nice break.”

“And you’re really going to do this? You’re really going along with him?”

We both nodded.

“This is what’s right,” Ron said. “Justice.”

“You always talk like you’re a superhero, but you’re just some guy on TV. Like the man who sells the slap chop, except you’re not an appliance.”

“Some guy on TV?” Ron asked. Images of the grill being lifted off its feet and tossed into the pool came to mind. But Ron didn’t do anything like that. He just turned around and left.

I said something to the effect that I should go, too. And so I did. I found Ron back in the van. The one van we’d have for what was to come. And so I got in, turned the keys in the ignition, and backed down the driveway, past the topiary bushes—geometric shapes, curves and angles that added up to abstract expressions of what a bush should not be.

This was what was needed, a real impetus to leave. Not that we did. Not right away. We went to my apartment since we weren’t going to leave till the morning and there wasn’t money to spend on a hotel that night. Not in *Ron: Bail Bonds*’ budget.

“Nice name,” he said when we pulled underneath the dingbat I lived in. Bright purple letters flared across the front: *CASA MUCHO*. El Segundo was a far cry from where Ron lived, but it was an affordable area and the smell of salted air reminded me of where I grew up on Long Island. Ron said he didn’t mind. He had moved through many a dingbat himself before Gunter found him and handed him a modicum of success and fame.

The apartment was sparse, furnished with only a few freestanding chairs and no television. I did have a record player, though, and a sizable collection of albums. We got take out Chinese and Ron put on a Buffalo Springfield LP. We ate and drank canned Guinness until switching to Jameson.

“Ah, Camille,” Ron said, opening a carton of food. “She seemed pretty angry, didn’t she?”

“Man,” I said. Ron just didn’t get it. “The trip will do you good. Get you out of the house, clear the skull. Who knows, we might even be out of California for a while.”

“You want me to leave or stay?”

“Stay, Ron. I meant when we get out of the house tomorrow, when we leave town. Gunter said we have to three weeks. It’s been a day since he said that. Two weeks and 6 days.”

“But wait,” Ron stood, lo mien hanging from his lips. The green bottle still in his hand. “It’s almost February. It’s going to be February.”

“So what?” I said, taking the bottle from him.

“There are fewer days. A week is no longer a week.”

“A week is always a week.”

“But the leap year. Our leap year. Our cheap fear.”

“Take a glass of water,” I said, before tilting my head back and letting the weight of the booze press down upon my skull.

“Don’t you mean *drink*?” Ron grabbed the bottle from me and helped himself to some more. “I’m going to go call Gunter,” he said and sashayed out of the room

After cleaning some of the mess we’d made, I switched Springfield out for my favorite Canadian, a Neil Young record from the mid-seventies. *On the Beach*. The cover was of a lone woman and a yellow umbrella near the sea. An ocean, not unlike ours, although I still felt ties to the tides out east, to the Atlantic.

Outside, I found Ron had finished the phone call. He was sitting on the balcony.

“Bullhead,” he said.

“Huh?” I was still listening for the music inside—I must have put the needle down wrong because it was already on to “Ambulance Blues.” The last track.

“Zed Hart. Duane’s trainer. Gunter said his facility is in Bullhead.”

“Right. Arizona.”

“The desert,” he said closing his eyes.

It was almost night now, the sky a burnt orange out west and deep purple to the east—what was next? Open land and piles of sand. But ahead of us, was north. My balcony faced the airport and we watch a plane lift off into the air and an endless roar filled us as jet streams tumbled black across the view.

OUTSIDE BULLHEAD CITY—BULLHEAD CITY—LAUGHLIN—BULLHEAD CITY—
THE OTHER SIDE OF OUTSIDE BULLHEAD CITY

Deserts have served many roles in history. Two such examples: where dictators and two-bit abductors dump the bodies of those they've wiped from history, and where religions have been born. We were in the desert, now, making our way to Bullhead City to find Zed Hart. The van bounced along as we drove off road and through the Mojave National Preserve, past joshuas and low, sad-looking shrubs. This was our idea of a short cut: to drive through the cacti and sage plants, spots of dusty green in the stretch of sand and dirt; the Clima Dome where lava was only a little bit underground; and a ghost town called Kelso.

“Spooky,” Ron said as we slowed down outside the abandoned strip. He had been driving, but wanted a minute to stretch his legs. Likely he just wanted to see something old. To see proof, maybe, of things that could die and yet still stand.

There wasn't much to it, though—just a few boarded-up buildings. We found some defunct railroad tracks that Ron wanted to walk along. He had to have his morning walk, he said, and to be fair, he normally did spend seventy-five percent of his mornings in the personal gym area of his gleaming glass box house.

“I like to walk,” he said. “It helps me think.”

What he needed to think about, I wasn't sure. Camille would sometimes ask him questions: What do you think of relational dialectics and the “writer's dilemma?” How about the hermeneutic process of empathy and how such ideas could be co-opted to dissolve the issue and contradiction of other minds? When he had no answer, she'd ask if he might, perhaps, know what his father would have said.

As we plodded along the track, I contemplated going back for the camera. Instead, I took the opportunity to ask about his hometown.

“I had a pet rabbit growing up,” Ron said. “And every morning I’d take the King out for a walk.”

“The King?” I put one foot in front of the other, balancing along the rail as Ron walked right on the ties.

“My bunny. The King. His full name was Elvis Da Zont.”

“You took him for walks?”

“Yeah. Exercise.”

“On, like, a leash?”

“Don’t be stupid, Tom. He was a rabbit. He’d just follow me around. He knew not to go far.”

I shook my head and Ron went on with his story. This wasn’t exactly what I was hoping to hear about, but whatever. We continued on under the blooming clouds. They were lenticulars, floating like UFOs. Something from a different world, entirely. If there were anything I’d have actually liked to film, it would be those clouds.

Ron would take the King out for walks along the beach in Carrabelle—the tiny town of little more than one thousand. I’d been there before when filming the Ted Burroughs documentary—my first work—although I doubted Ron knew this.

“The King and I,” Ron went on. “We had so many good times. Would watch the sun rise, the little turtles try and scuffle home to the water. He was so well behaved, even when I took him out on the little catamaran we had to go fishing. It was my father’s catamaran, but he was never around to use it. And then one day, we walked into the marsh. I forget the name of the place. We

were walking along the wetland when this fucking heron came and snatched Elvis. Picked up my boy in her fucking beak and flew to the middle of the stream. Sat on this log and just stuck its bird-head in the water.”

“Jesus, I didn’t know herons liked rabbit. What’d you do?”

“Couldn’t do anything. Alligators in the water. But this fucking heron just stood there in the middle of the stream and held Elvis underwater for god-fucking-shit knows how long.”

Ron wasn’t really walking anymore, but stomping down on the railroad ties. His voice shook and the weaker wood buckled under his booted feet.

“And I just watched until the bird lifted its head and I saw for sure.”

This was probably the most we ever talked about our lives (what lives we had) outside of the show. I wanted to tell him about my time in Carrabelle, too, but this didn’t feel like the appropriate moment.

“That night, I snuck out of the house with my father’s shotgun and started fucking shit up.” He stopped walking now. “I tried to hit some seagulls but they were too fast. It was hard to see in twilight. And I wasn’t *actually* going to fuck with an alligator. I went to the water’s edge, though, and stood there waiting for dolphins to come. Or sharks. Or whatever. I was ready to blow away anything that came by, but nothing did. Except a couple jellyfish. They exploded in bursts of purplish mist.”

“Did you find a heron?” I hoped he had, but he hadn’t.

“*The* heron. It’s still out there.”

We were far away from the town now. A scorpion skirted around my sneaker. Yardangs pushed up the earth around us like giant’s knuckles. We turned around without having to discuss

it and made our silent way back to the van. I wanted to know more about Carrabelle, but didn't want to push. I didn't want Ron to start asking questions back.

In the van again, on a road that wasn't really a road, Ron took us through an arroyo and blurted out that Ron wasn't his real name.

"I know," I said. I did know. Of course I did. Gunter had given me a brief biography of Ron before bringing me onto the team. It was mostly about how Ron had been a boxer until he put an opponent into a coma and quit and how he'd been a deadbeat bail bondsman earning little to no money or respect until he brought in a high profile murderer who had very nearly managed to commandeer a small submersible vessel in order to escape to Mexico. Gunter thought I'd think Ron was a madman without some sort of context. To be honest, his report didn't do much to help assuage this opinion, but the fact that Ron was from Carrabelle was what had me hooked. That and the fact that I needed money to pay off student loans.

"I picked the name for the show," he said now.

"My name isn't Tom, you know." I rolled up the window so that the little pebbles and dust that floated off the arroyo walls didn't get inside the car.

"It isn't?"

"Just kidding. It is."

"Wait, what?" Ron looked at me and almost missed a bend. He just nearly managed to swerve and avoid scrapping the entire side of the van on the ochre wall that stretched high above us.

"Well, Thomas, technically. Never mind."

"My name was Esbjörn," Ron said.

"You do look like an Esbjörn."

He had nothing else to say, as if this exchange of names covered more than any conversation should. We didn't talk for the rest of the ride to Bullhead City and just listened *Shotgun Willie* on CD. It was one of Ron's favorites and one of mine too.

"It was...I don't know." On the phone with Caroline, I was alone in the room Ron and I were sharing at the motel, Arizona's finest Econolodge.

"Sad?" she asked.

"Strange." I'd just told her the story about Elvis. Ever since I moved out west, I'd only really kept in touch with Caroline. We'd made the Ted Burroughs documentary together, back in college. I hadn't seen her since then, but I still called her regularly, telling her stories about Ron and Gunter. She would tell me about the work she was doing: directing theater now, some very well received off-Broadway performances.

"No, Tom. It's sad. Sad like Erik and Christine. Angel or father, friend or phantom."

"I thought you didn't like musicals."

"Some aren't such a drag."

I could hear her smile. "This place is, though." I got up to see Route 66 outside the window and the range of beaten earth beyond. This was Bullhead City, the washed-out remains of the runoff from Nevada—the state border and all the clubs and casinos just a few miles north on the other side of the Colorado River.

"More so than the City of Angels?"

"You should write a screenplay," I said. "You could come out here."

"You always used to hate it. Out West. Do you know how many times I've listened to you complain about it out there?"

I imagined Caroline in her apartment in the Lower East Side, across the street from Tompkins Square. Caroline at the window, snow falling like little pieces of paper, the pages of unknown books. February could be so different across the world. She'd have the guitar on a stand in her bedroom, the one I told her to keep. Not on display for all her friends and boyfriends to see, but for her only. Ted Burroughs's old instrument—but it wouldn't just remind her of the folk legend we followed all the way from New York to Florida—to Carrabelle. It would remind her of me. Not that I knew any of these things to be true. All I knew was that she lived on Avenue C in an apartment that had an elevator. I hadn't been back to New York in years.

"Always complaining," she said again, likely rolling her eyes in amusement.

"Yeah, about the earthquakes." I sat on the bed, a queen-sized umber with a half faded paisley pattern. It was the most color in the room. There was no artwork or adornment on any of the walls aside from a mirror on one wall that reflected the beige wall opposite. Of course there was a television in the room, but it was maybe ten years old.

"And sleaze," Caroline said, "The way people go to indie screenings or book readings dressed as if they had all gotten some sort of memo. Cardigans and moccasins, please."

"I complained about forest fires, too." Here, though, in Bullhead, there wasn't anything that could even burn. No trees, no green, only blanched earth and this bare motel room.

"When was the last time you went outside for an hour without a camera, Tom?"

Ten years ago, we'd gone to Bear Mountain, New York together. We'd taken a day trip from Sarah Lawrence up to those outer edges of the Catskills. That wasn't the last time, but it was the one I thought about most often. I'd told her I was afraid of bears that day. The fact that they could climb trees. They'll only climb the tree, she told me, if you run up the tree.

This memory was interrupted when Ron burst through the door.

“Boom, motherfucker.” Ron was making explosion gestures with his hands. “Our first lead.”

“What was that?” Caroline said. I pictured her brow furrowing.

“Ron,” I answered.

“How can I help you?” Ron said. He wasn’t alone though. Another man bounced in behind him.

“Ron,” I said. “I’m on the phone—leave me alone. And who is that guy?”

“I was out, you know, getting *comfortable* with the city...” Ron’s fingers still shook even though they were no longer making little explosions signs in the air.

I knew what he meant by getting comfortable, which was why I hadn’t gone with him, and why I wasn’t surprised that he was now high off his tits.

“...And my new friend over here,” Ron waved at the man who was now sitting on the paisley bed. “Knows where we can find one Señor Zed Hart.”

The man was in his late thirties. He wore dungarees and a camo turtleneck. Thick-framed glasses with a light peach tint obscured the bits of his face not shaded by his black beret.

“Nice to meet you, Tom!” he said, waving. His voice was too loud and sing-songish for the cramped motel room. His tongue flicked out irregularly and without reason. “My name is Tom, too! But...why don’t we call me *Mot*. You know. Instead of Tom. You were Tom first.” He smiled. Yellow, waxy teeth.

“Was I?” I asked.

“I’m going to guess—” Caroline said, agitation in her voice—“that you have to go.”

“Shit, fuck.” I had almost forgotten that the phone was still to my ear. I hesitated instead of apologizing and she said she had to go anyways before hanging up.

“Who you on the phone with?” Ron asked. “Pal?”

“Camille,” I lied without thinking. “She called to check in on you. She wants you to call her back.”

“Really?”

“What about calling Fanny Deep?” Tom—Mot asked. Who was this asshole?

“Marissa,” Ron said. “Her name is Marissa.”

“*Marissa*.” Mot’s smile grew wider. “She really makes you believe you’re there. You know. In the *videos*. I would know.”

“Right, Right,” Ron said. “I’m sure you have... knife-like abilities for analysis.”

“Ron, who is this?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, man. He’s a private investigator.”

“Privates investigator.” Mot nodded.

I was pissed about the phone thing, but I will admit, I was interested in this new character too—perplexed and wary, but willing to at least get out the camera.

“Whoa ho there, muchacho!” Mot raised his hands as if he were being held up. “Ronaldo, you didn’t say I’d *be* on the show!” He chuckled, though.

“We will never be forgotten,” Ron said, before turning towards the camera. “So this, my friends at home, is my friend here. His name is—”

Mot frantically shook his head. What were they both on?

“—Not important. What matters is that he knows everyone in this town. Knows everyone. He knows Zed.”

“Ah, Zed,” Mot said. “Zed, Zed, the friendly deadhead.”

I had Mot to the right of the frame and Ron on the left. He wore another Hawaiian shirt (this one patterned with flamingos that wore Hawaiian shirts that were in turn patterned with flamingoes that wore Hawaiian shirts, etc. etc.)

“So Zed’s a fan of the Grateful Dead?” Ron said, pounding his chest.

“Well, not so much.” Mot’s eyes widened behind the peach-tinted glasses. He stared into my lens and so I stared into his. “I mean he actually worships the dead. Or he used to, at least. He told me he was once a part of a satanic cult, or, uh, something like that. I think it was just a phase.”

No one spoke for too long so I pivoted the shot a bit, reversed their positions, shooting them both in silhouette against the desert light that seeped in from the window.

“What do you worship, Ron?” Mot put his hands together, as if he were offering something.

“Justice,” Ron said. “And trouble. And sometimes Jesus Christ.”

Gunter would probably edit that out.

“When do you worship Mr. Christ, Ronald?” Mot held out his palms as if asking for more than just an answer.

“Easter, mostly. And sometimes Christmas.”

“And what about you?” Mot turned to me, now, although it would seem as if he were turning to the audience on TV.

I had no answer—only the slight memory of a miniature Torah encased in glass with little knobs on the side to scroll through. I’d kept it on my desk throughout college. Caroline had found it once when we were making our doc and asked if I took such things seriously. I said no, and she asked if I took anything seriously. Back then, I did.

“What about you?” I asked.

“Me?” Mot took off his beret—the head underneath: a bulb of closely cropped fuzz. “The absurdity.”

“Of what?” Ron looked ready to kneel down and pray to this man. “What? Mut? Mot?”

“Of our desire,” Mot went on. “To know everything. To read the talking knots of Incan dead.”

“Talking-naughts?” I asked wondering if these were the thoughts of a murderer—if he’d suddenly turn and pull a knife on us, or maybe a grenade and blow us all to smithereens on TV. Not that we were ever actually live. And of course the camera would probably not survive, but who’s to say.

“Knots.” Mot stood and pretzeled his arms. “Strings tied together and strung up in the wind. Quipus, they’re called. The Incans wrote with ropes. But it’s wrong of us to say they used words. These weren’t words. They were just ropes. That was enough.”

Most of this would get edited out.

“Let me show you,” Mot said.

“I’ve already seen,” Ron said.

“Let’s see things together.”

They both turned to me, to the camera, their eyes glassy and streaked with colors like compact discs.

“Turn it off,” Ron whispered. Since when did Ron have any input in the filming process? Still, I switched off the camera.

“Here.” Mot reached into the beret that he had tossed onto the bed. He removed a mini-baggie and tossed it to me. Inside was a single black pill. “Take and open your eyes as well.”

“This is going to help us find Zed?” I asked. Shouldn’t Ron be the one caring more about staying on task?

“Tom.” Ron had been tapping on his temples with his index finger but stopped now. “You don’t have to take it. But it’s just for some fun. For tonight. To celebrate getting the fuck out of LA.”

The fact that I’d experienced a modicum of concern over the show worried me and this was an easy solution: I dry swallowed the pill, hearing the click of my throat as it went down.

“Come, muchachos,” Mot said. “I’ll drive.” He raised his arms as if in in worship and Ron did too. I didn’t feel anything, though, except for the dry heat of the room.

I’m not entirely sure of what happened next although I do remember eating a mess of fish tacos before ending up in a nightclub. The place was filled violet light, drum beats and sweating bodies bumping against each other. Time had disappeared, replaced by go-go dancers swinging in and out of sight. There was a dance floor and clouds of dry ice mist. Someone played a trumpet, or smoked a trumpet shaped bong. A human of indistinguishable gender in a skeleton suit waved his or her arms like sea grass underwater. Young women twirled blue and green glow sticks in and around themselves. We weren’t in Bullhead anymore, although I didn’t know where exactly we’d gone or where my camera was. Nor did I know why I, for a moment, floated over everyone, all the little heads arranged like carrot tops in a garden. The music slowed to a dull wail. The DJ, with her well-conditioned hair, waved hello. And then I was on the ground again, soberish, standing next to Mot and asking where in god’s name were we.

“What do you mean?” Mot yelled over the din. Strings of light swirled around his head and into his ears. There was a bar along one wall while every other side of the room was covered

in neon lights. Ron stood a few yards away in the middle of the dance floor, his eyes glazed over. Men and women tried to dance, or at least brush themselves, against his bulk.

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” I asked.

“What are we?” Mot bopped his head to the music as he flung his limbs around in a sort of spastic dance.

The answer? “Actors,” I said. “Performers. Performances.”

“No, no. You asked me: *what are we?*”

“Oh.” Had I? I’d meant where. The lights, the thudding bass, it was too much. LA clubs were bad but here the crowd alternated between teens and the elderly. One woman had to be in her seventies. Good for her, I guess, but I felt alone in this place. I Everyone was only pretending to be happy, I figured, and were really just waiting to go home.

“I need to go,” I said.

“Go *where?*” Mot smiled and his teeth glowed white.

My camera. This needed to be filmed. The Technicolor lives clashing against each other. Men and women who would never see one another again, pushing bodies against each other for the night. I looked for an exit without any clue as to where my camera actually was when I noticed that the floor was sand. Little grains swirled and molded into tiny animals. Rats, mice and even kittens ran around in concentric circles. Maybe I wasn’t so sober. I followed the red letters *EXIT* that floated off in the distance until I finally found the door. I pushed into the night air and for a brief instant everything existed at once: the ridiculous bass exploding out into this cool, desert night, all that empty noise. And then that moment closed with the doors and all that was left was the dirty orange of the streetlight. Only the thinnest muffled thumps of dance could

still be heard, but the smell of booze and fried food floated from somewhere down the street. If I had the camera to catch this all, then maybe it could mean something.

I walked until the orange light was behind me and I was leaning over something, a black rushing sound in front of me. The song of a swarm of animals about to swallow me. This was bat county, Ron had said earlier that night. But what would come next if I let go of whatever I was holding on to? Would I find the absurdity that Mot claimed to worship? I could hear something. No longer the wings of flying rats rustling toward doom or grace or the dub and rave music but Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 9. I'd listened to the Romantic era composers since I was a kid—especially the Jewish ones. I'd thought about studying music comp in college before settling on film. Music, though, was how I met Caroline. Through our mutual appreciation of Ted Burroughs, more specifically, although Caroline did love men like Shostakovich and Gyorgi Ligetti (she believed his atonal stuff to be much truer to life than pretty things like Beethoven or Bach). But Mahler. I'd loved his music way before I got into rock or folk or Americana. Now, my body was slouching towards the music, ready to let go—when someone grabbed my shoulder.

“You don't want to go into the Colorado.” The music in my head stopped.

Mot was behind me, his eyes wide and wild, like he alone knew what the river meant.

“The Colorado River?” I was leaning against a low rail, all that separated me from the river below.

Mot took his beret off and swatted at my face. “Snap out of it, friend-o.”

“Where is everyone?” I asked—everyone meaning Ron. But Zed, too, and Duane. Camille. Gunter. Caroline.

“Everyone's trying,” Mot said, nonsensical as ever.

“No. I mean, where’s Ron.”

“Oh. Right. Ronaldo. That beautiful man.”

“Yeah,” I said. Ron wasn’t great on his own, despite his size and strength. “Where’d he go?”

But Mot just smiled. “Let’s rescue him.”

He turned and hustled down the street. Literally. He did the “hustle,” and danced his way around the corner. I followed him to a fenced parking lot where he unlocked the door to a pickup truck. This must have been how we had gotten to wherever we were.

“You’re going to want this,” Mot said. He tossed me a bag. My camera case. How had he known?

I was unzipping the thing and taking out my more portable camera when Mot leaped from the bed of the truck back onto the ground. He held a very large gun in his hand.

“Just in case.” Mot laughed and tucked the pistol into his belt.

I didn’t know what to say and so just followed Mot back to the club. I got a tracking shot of his camouflaged back and black beret as he pushed his way through the line and past the bouncer into the building.

Inside, the lights were still spiraling in and out in tandem with glitching beats of music, but they were different. Artificial. They shined from behind plastic lenses. No talking knots anymore. Now the club was only filled with smoke and reflections.

“Ronaldo!” Mot yelled but the room was so loud that it was if he had not spoken at all. We pushed through the crowd that was as tightly packed as chickens at a “free-range” farm. Mot took the gun out from his waistband and began waving it around. The crowd rippled away from us like a parting sea. Maybe someone would call the police, I thought, or at least the bouncer

would come and do something. It crossed my mind that someone could mistake my handcam for a gun as well, but no one reacted all that strongly, aside from moving out of Mot's way. Their faces didn't even show concern, only mild discomfort—as if this sort of thing happened and was merely an annoyance, not a major threat—until finally Ron appeared from the receding masses. He stood with his hands folded in front of his chest and for a brief moment I had both men in the frame. Mot with his gun actually pointed at Ron, and Ron in a pose of prayer underneath the swirling lights and eddying clouds of dry ice. I swish-panned around the room before returning to this same frame. I still wondered what I would do if someone reacted to the man waving the pistol around with anything other than bovine movement. Would I say something? Call out his real name, what was my name, as well?

Nothing happened, though. Mot got Ron's attention, and together again, we made our way through the crowd back to the lot where we climbed into Mot's truck. Mot and Ron climbed into the front and I claimed a spot in the bed. It was warm and I figured I'd be able to get some shots of the city as we peeled away and into the night.

We crossed a small concrete bridge over the Colorado River and passed signs for Bullhead City. We'd been in Laughlin, apparently. Where the casinos and nightclubs clearly were. But why? I really couldn't remember. Something about the Incan knots Mot had mentioned. But what about Zed? Duane? Everything that was supposed to do with Marissa?. But I just closed my eyes and tried to recall the Mahler.

When I woke up the world around me was white, burning and a little wet. Sweat. Salt in my eyes, crusted over. Fading into focus, the bright light mellowed into an orange sun. We were in

the desert on the beaten brown side of the road. Creosote bushes unfurled for miles and miles and only the briefest flash of a city was in the distance. Bullhead? Laughlin? How far had we come?

I climbed out of the truck-bed. Ron and Mot were crouched over a small fire pit. The smells of charred flesh and metallic waste floated around.

“Morning!” Mot said without even turning around.

“Tom.” Ron stood and pointed to the pit. An animal shaped hunk of roasted meat was skewered over the fire. “Want some?”

“What is it?”

“Well...Mot was driving. And we hit an armadillo.”

“An armadillo?” I rubbed my eyes as if this would be the world away, and we would be back in LA. But did I really want to be back there? Had last night been a small success? And where was my camera now?

“I felt bad for it,” Ron said. “And hate to waste.”

I found the recorder in the truck, side by side with the gun that was now loose in the driver-side cup holder. I quietly set things up: camera perched on the hood so that the fire pit took center screen. I joined the shot as they picked at the meat. Couldn't armadillos transmit leprosy? I imagined Ron and Mot sitting there, hands falling off, faces drooping as their skin peeled away and their eyeballs turned to stone.

“Not so bad,” Mot said, “is it?”

“A little gamey.” Ron held what had once been an armadillo paw. “But I like the crunchy bits.”

“Stop eating that,” I said to Ron. “What was that about last night?”

“Don’t worry.” Ron waved it off and popped the paw into his mouth. “Like I said, Mot here is a private detective. He’s going to help us find Zed. And then we’ll make that dope lead us to Duane.”

“It’s funny you say that,” Mot said. “Zed loves dope.”

“How do you know so much about Zed?” I asked. “You’ve heard of Duane Saunders, too, I’m assuming?”

“I told you.” Ron stood and stretched. “He’s a private detective.” Shirtless, Ron was only wearing tight board shorts and his standard boots. He’d wrapped a bandana around his head and chin like a bonnet—or the sort of cloth they’d use two hundred years ago to keep a dead man’s mouth from falling open and collecting worms.

“Of course, I’ve heard of Mr. Rager,” Mot said. “Not that I watch much boxing. I don’t use pay-per-view, but of course I watch your show. That’s how, how I recognized Ronaldo.”

“Ron.” I slapped the armadillo haunch out of his hands. “Where did you meet this guy?”

“I told you. Or did I? I was looking for...stuff, and came across our friend Mot.”

“His name is Tom.”

“He’s a *private investigator*. Stop worrying.”

“Actually—” Mot pushed the sun colored shades up the bridge of his nose. “I said I was a *privates investigator*.” He shrugged. “I take pictures of people’s junk. And videos. And then post them online.”

He had a site, he said. Zoomtube. Thousands of people visited it every day.

“And it’s like...” Ron grabbed at his crotch and shook it a little. “Full on.”

“No, no. Not typically. A bulge in the pants. Or an up-skirt. I try to take photographs of people who don’t know I’m taking photographs of them.” He went on about the sense of

mystery. How one gets a harder hard-on when one can't actually see the whole thing. The imagined can be more erotic. Ephemerality excites us. Without scarcity, he said, we would turn into flabby blobs. Or just blobs.

I would have liked to get a close up of his face and nothing else. The way his tongue flicked out and licked the corners of his chops, scooping up the leftover specks of armadillo meat. How his eyebrows peaked into a perfect tent over his insectile shades. I'd keep it there for an entire minute as he talked and in the finished product the words would fall away and it would only be a scene of his moving face.

I wanted to get that shot but didn't. I was busy quietly making my way back to the truck where I reached in and got the gun. When I came back, I pointed the big thing at Mot.

"Tom?" Ron's eyes went wide.

"Ron."

Mot looked at me and tensed up, like he was about to bolt. I flicked the catch, feeling like a professional, and shot a bullet into the fire pit. Mot sat still.

"Ron, get with the program," I said. "He's been lying. He's not a goddamn anything."

Ron scratched his bonnet in thought. "How do you know so much about Zed then? Wait..."

Mot flinched, but before I could even think to do anything Ron leapt at him and tackled him to the ground. He tried to squirm away but Ron ripped the armadillo tail off the spit and shoved it into Mot's throat.

"You fucking liar!" he yelled.

The glasses fell off Mot's face and his eyes bulged—the tail of the armadillo hung out of his mouth, lolling around like an elongated tongue.

“Who the fuck do you think you are fucking with, you fucking lizard!” Ron screamed.

This was like Ron in the old days of the show—ready and screaming and tackling people to the ground. He should have played football instead of getting caught up in all this television mess. I still held the gun, but was less tense, calmer now that Ron and I were on the same page and sober. I mean, Mot did admit to not being who he said he was—although really, he hadn’t been hiding a thing, had he?

Ron stood and put his boot on Mot’s throat.

“Let him talk,” I said.

“Armishtilllll,” Mot tried to speak.

Ron moved his foot from throat to chest to allow Mot to slurp down the rest of the tail.

“I’ll still take you,” he stuttered. “I’ll still take you. To Zed.”

“And you know him how?” I asked.

I exchanged the gun for the camera and hunkered down to get an upshot of Ron as he applied pressure to Mot’s ribcage. From this vantage I had a view of the sky, too. An eagle floated overhead. Or maybe a vulture. I zoomed in. A vulture indeed.

“I sell him drugs! I sold drugs to you, too! A ‘privates investigator’ is who I am. Is—” Mot burped and spit up a little armadillo. “Is what I love, my passion, but not what I do to live, to pay my rent and utilities.”

“If you lie to me again,” Ron said, “I’ll crucify you here in this god-forsaken desert.”

Mot nodded. Of course he’d take us to Zed. That’s what he’d planned to do all along, he said. Of course. They made their way back to the truck (the briefest question about where our van might be crossed my mind) but I stayed a moment longer. Still hunkered down, I racked the

shot back to the vulture overhead and watched it fly in circles. Watched it watch me. My lens. Myself, and all the people who would watch on television for whatever reason or another.

IN THE HEART OF ZED HART'S DOMAIN

Ron made a loop of leash from his belt, mine and Mot's to go around Mot's neck. Imagine that. Being tethered to a 250-pound Nordic bounty hunter by your own accessory. The man did take us to Zed's training facilities, though. The place was a sort of compound, an accumulation of adobe-style buildings—although clearly with modern touches. We found a pair of binoculars in the bed of the truck (presumably used for Mot's private investigations). Ron took them to scope out the place while I used a telephoto lens to see the sliding chromium doors and half dozen satellite dishes on each luxury hut.

Mot was tied to the truck like a dog (hands bound fishing line we'd found in the bed of his truck) while Ron and I lay prone against a yardang, surveying the complex and its long shadows from our spot a mile or two away. The sun was turning plum and sinking below the distant mesas and buttes, gradating the sky with bands of darkening light when Ron asked, "Is it—dusk? Or dawn?"

"Dusk," I said. "Dusk comes before night."

"No—" Ron put down the binoculars. "I mean attack. Does one attack at dawn, or dusk?"

"Oh. Dawn."

"But why dawn? That's when the sun comes out. We'll be seen."

"Ron, we can attack—wait, we're not attacking anything. Why are you saying attacking?"

"I'm not, I was just..."

"We're going to talk to him. To Zed." I turned to Ron, still holding the telephoto lens to my eye. I got a great view of some pores and a patch of orange skin.

“But in case...well, I just thought we should follow tradition. So maybe we should go at dawn. What do you think?”

I hated the way the night vision lens made everything look militant. Going at dawn and keeping with tradition was fine by me.

“Too bad we ate all the armadillo.” Ron rolled down the yardang to where the truck was parked, hidden in sight from anyone at the compound who might be watching. “Right, Mot?”

Mot mumbled something through the handkerchief that was wedged into his mouth. It was the one Ron had used as a bonnet earlier in the day. I came down from the yardang too, noticing how our pants sagged without belts on. The cameras were off now. Batteries were low on the handcam and I didn’t feel like setting up the tripod for a bigger rig. The steadicam gig was back in Bullhead with the van. Neither of us was concerned over the missing van, although there was quite a bit of footage in the backseat and I was sure Gunter would crucify us if we didn’t get it back to the studio.

“Maybe I’ll give Cammie a call,” Ron said. I let him figure out for himself that there was likely zero service in the Sonoran desert.

“No bars,” he said, a minute later. “Fuck-atat.” (He pronounced AT&T like it was one word.) “And the thing is dead now—do you believe that? Apparently no service doesn’t mean the phone lasts longer. Nothing to do and it decides to up and die....” Ron tossed the cell phone over his shoulder and into the truck. “You know, she probably doesn’t even care.”

“Of *course* she doesn’t care.” We both sat on the hatch of the truck, watching the sky lose its last bit of ghost light.

“Why do you have to say it like that?”

“What do you mean, have to?”

“She did marry me. You know.” Ron flicked some dirt off the fiberglass.

But she hadn't. What she'd signed was not a marriage license but a contract up for biannual renewal. Whether that meant every two years or twice a year, I didn't know, but Camille had continued to play Ron's wife on the show for three years, and Ron never really picked up on this.

“Ron,” I said, unsure of how far to push things. “Have you ever had sex?”

“Well, yeah.” He rolled his big blue eyes.

“With your ‘wife,’ specifically?” That was how far, I decided.

“Well...”

“Well. That answers it.”

“Okay, no. But sex isn't all there is.”

“No.” I got up to stretch my legs. Mot was wide-eyed, a yard away, still gagged and silent. “But it says something when after three years you could still technically get an annulment in the Catholic Church. Do you know what an annulment is?”

“Shut up, Tom.”

“It's like it never happened. Erasure.”

“Intercourse,” he said in a booming, preachy voice, “does not solidify a relationship.”

“No, I know. But like love without sex is as crazy as sex without love.” The image of Caroline's hair framing her oval face fizzled fast in my mind. The way she'd scratch the half-heart birthmark on her neck. We'd never even held hands.

“I care for her.”

“I know you do. But she doesn't care about you, Ron. Not in the way you think she ought to. I'm trying... I don't know.”

“There was once.” Ron scratched at the bridge of his nose. “One time she said she was worried about me. The episode where I was going after the guy who’d holed up with that hostage out on Santa Monica Pier. She said she was worried about me.”

“Yeah, because that’s what she’s supposed to say.” Was this too much? “Because she’s acting.”

He pushed me first against the truck and then into the sand. “She’s not an actress. She went to school—like Marissa did, too. They both went to school, see? I like smart women. Smart women like me.”

“Okay, Ron,” I said. There was dirt on the seat of my pants as I stood and hitched them up against the cooling desert air. “Forget it.”

“Do you want trouble?” He towered over me, his muscles swelling, an inch-thick vein cleaving a line in his forehead.

“No, Ron. Sorry, okay?”

“Camille is a master.”

“You mean she has a masters.”

“That’s right,” Ron said, softening a little. “Motherfucker,” he added, reaching out his hand and picking me up.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was.

“Fine.” Ron sat back down in the bed of the truck. He was silent for a long while as he swatted at passing fireflies. “My father and mother, they were never affectionate. They were European, and my father was always at the University, but they loved each other. You would never have known it, but after my mother got sick, my father couldn’t do it. She was gone and he couldn’t live without her. Like, literally. I remember one of the last things he said to me—or at

least one of the last things I remember him saying to me, that he was one, but also two, and without my ma he was nothing. He wasn't anything anymore. I know Camille doesn't care about me the way a wife is supposed to. But I still care about her."

And I believe he really did.

"I'm so fucking hungry is all."

Mot squirmed some more from his spot tied to the truck, mumbled something.

"Huh?" Ron took ripped the wet handkerchief from Mot's mouth.

"There's food." Mot spat the words out along with a wad of saliva that he'd evidently been unable to do anything about the past hour or two. "In the glove compartment. Please, amigo, I'm hungry too."

Ron went around and came back with a handful of granola bars.

"This is what you call food?"

"You have chewy bars," I said taking one, "and yet you stopped to eat an armadillo?"

Ron ate three at once, spitting out bits of foil.

"Please," Mot said again. "Just one. And maybe my beret too?"

"First." Ron wagged a granola bar in front of Mot's eyes. "Tell us all you know about Zed. Tell us something useful."

"Well. He likes drugs."

"Obviously," I said. "How long have you sold to him?"

"Maybe the past few months. Since he got here. That complex, it's fairly new."

"Doesn't sound so complex," Ron said.

“No.” Mot nodded past the yardang. “The *complex*, it’s new. It was built just before Zed came. I remember hearing about it and thinking that it could be my chance. Zoomtube’s prime opportunity.”

“How do we get in?” Ron asked.

“The front door, of course.”

Ron slapped him across the face and Mot fell to the ground. When he got back up, there was an imprint of his face in the sand.

“I’ve only ever used the front door! But you’ll want that building—that’s where Zed’s room is. The big fist-shaped building.”

“And?” Ron kicked around some desert rocks with his boots till he found a decent-sized one. Like a seasoned soccer player, he toed it up and caught it in his hand.

“And, well, I don’t know. There is a sort of greenhouse attached that one could foreseeably use to get in as well.”

Ron nodded and threw the rock—aiming for the stars that floated overhead like paper lanterns, floating away.

“Where are you from, shithead?” Ron peeled him another bar and shoved it into Mot’s mouth.

“Cloroardo.” Mot swallowed. “Colorado. Colorado Springs.”

“Hmpf. Lot of weirdoes come from Colorado Springs. Where’d you get the gun?”

“I sell drugs. It’s somewhat necessary.”

“When did you first meet Zed?” I asked.

“When he came out here, like I was saying. I don’t know, man. I like television. It’s, like, my goal to one day have my own show. Zoomtube TV, man.”

It was full night now, but the sky, a mosaic of stars with a wedge of pale white moon, provided enough light to see each others' face.

"I've been doing it for a long time, you know." Mot frowned, like his feelings were hurt by our lack of reaction to Zoomtube TV. "I have it down to a science."

"Ron," I said, "can we gag him again?"

"My site gets over five thousand hits a day," Mot said. "More people see my stuff than Fanny Deep's."

Ron stuffed the cloth back into Mot's mouth.

It was quiet out there in that endlessly stretching desert. Zed's adobe complex wasn't far, but it was hidden behind the yardang, of course—out of sight—and what can't be seen is only arguably there after all. Caroline explained William James to me back when we were in college, taking some course together. American philosophy. We were in one of the converted Tudor home dormitories, her room dimly lit by paper lanterns and the early spring light of mulled and clouded skies. Rainlight, she said. The glow that skirted around the edges of her oriel window. It is rainlight, she said, only because I say it is.

Ron turned to talk to me. "Have you ever—I mean, it's alright if you have, but have you ever seen Marissa?"

"Well, of course. Last week, right?"

"I mean as Fanny. Fanny Deep." He coughed the name out. "In your sort of private context, I mean."

"No." This was mostly true. "Besides in the studio." (Back when they'd still been together, which was also back when we were in the bigger studio, Fanny Deep material was the default screensaver for every monitor or screen of any sort. Gunter had everything programmed

that way. It was his method of driving Ron insane, to split Ron and Marissa apart. Gunter wanted to separate his new and future work from his porno beginnings. He never wanted Marissa there, which was in part why he was so intent to find someone to play Ron's wife.

"I don't like thinking about it."

"About what?"

"Other people seeing her. Seeing her in that way, not the way I did. Do. Which was a good way." He lay down on the bed of the truck then, his legs dangling off, face to the stars.

He fell asleep like that and after I checked one last time on Mot to be sure that he was secure, I climbed into the front seat. I felt safer up there. Not because the gun was a foot away, but because the camera was. I fell asleep, too.

Ron shook me awake and pulled me to the top of the yardang. Out east: the adobe complex and beyond that the first pink light of day stretching like a hand's heart line along the horizon. Half asleep (and still pulling up my pants) I shuffled to the truck for the camera and then stumbled back up the sandy outcrop. I wanted this shot. The dawn light moving across the desert scape, a visible line with one side golden and the other shade. And Ron's face—he was up there, too. I got a close up. He'd been up for a while already, I guessed. A fresh, dark bandana was wrapped around his balding head. He had black grease on his cheekbones.

He looked into the camera and a chill ran down my back. This was real for him. And for all I knew, it would be real for me, too. Zed Hart. We knew nothing about him besides that he bought drugs from Mot and that he was connected to Duane, one of the most dangerous boxers in the country.

Ron slid down the yardang and took up the pistol from the front seat of the truck along with a pillbox from the glove compartment. Mot's stash. He pulled the cloth out of Mot's mouth and asked him if there were any downers. Mot nodded and showed Ron which ones were, as Ron shoved them down Mot's throat. Ron untied him and said if there was any funny business he would lose his scalp. That the pills were to keep him calm. He flicked one more down Mot's throat for good measure. Morally wrong as it was, this needed to be filmed.

That peculiar sensation of anticipation, like iron filings pulled to a magnet, filled me as we walked across the morning desert. I couldn't remember the last time filming made me pay attention—maybe it hadn't been since the Ted Burroughs work with Caroline. But this: the three of us, Ron in the middle with a staggering Mot at his side, and me behind, the camera tracking their backs through a washed out desert fog. This was good. We made our way to the glass side of the building. *The greenhouse*, Mot whispered. Ron walked along the length of glass, running his hand along the wall, tapping, as if testing the strength. Greenery pressed up against the surface so it was hard to tell what was really beyond, but I was less worried about how we'd actually get in, than about how it would look breaking in through a greenhouse versus walking in through the front door. I mean the kind of shot that I could get before inevitably being surrounded and apprehended by a number of thick-muscled sparring partners. Or Zed himself, maybe, who in my mind was as gargantuan as three Ron's and as mean as Duane Saunders.

I was adjusting the aperture to let in more light when Ron said something.

“What?” I whispered, glancing at Mot's slackening face. By the time I looked up again Ron had the gun out and fired three bullets into the glass wall, shattering the silence and splintering the surface into a thousand little shards. Thank god I let in more light, otherwise I might have missed this.

Ron knocked away some shards from the man-sized hole he had shot through the glass and walked in, dragging Mot behind him. I was last into the room, this space where green leaves cascaded from every corner and flower petals floated around like dust in the air. There was no chaotic response of guards and goons rushing into the floral room, though, and it was clear why: music boomed at an insanely high volume. The sound of a church organ and choir rebounded off everything, loud enough to drown out any gunshot. These 80sish bass twangs echoed all around us and then came Leonard Cohen's sad timbre, his monotone poetry. "Hallelujah," from *Various Positions* was playing throughout the green room and the entire house, we found, as we made our way past the tendrils of stems and leaves and potted trees, through an archway and into a grand vestibule. Marble floors and skylights letting in thick yellow wedges of early morning light created a sort of ancient Greek vibe, like the set for a staging of *Julius Caesar*. I hung back for a mid-range shot of Ron walking through sun touched dust, the pistol still in his hands and extended in front of him in a palm-supported grip, the way police officers hold handguns. Mot still looked like he was about to fall over. Whatever he'd been forced to take had worked rending Mot a genuine lamb.

We followed Leonard Cohen's booming words (*Well there was a time when you let me know, what's really going on below, but now you never show it to me, do ya?*) to a half opened door. New noises now. Muffled grunts and wet slapping. The obvious sound effects of copulation.

Except we didn't find a sex scene when Ron nudged the door open with the tip of the barrel. Instead, there was a naked man hunched over with a glass of water in one hand and his penis in the other. The tip of which was in the glass, actually, as he masturbated. A woman wearing jeans and a Dodgers jersey sat on a bed opposite.

She looked oddly familiar and bored, even with our armed intrusion. She noticed us first, though, and glanced over. The man took the intrusion less calmly, pulling his schmuck from his personal pool of penis water and chucking the glass at Ron. It missed by about four yards although a bit of water did leave a trail of sadness on the shag carpeting. Ron's response was to fire a bullet into the stereo system, quickly killing Leonard Cohen's voice.

"Fuck!" the man shouted. "Fuck! Fuck!" He stamped his feet down for each fuck. "What is this—who are you?" Recognition pulled his face taut. "The bounty hunter guy? And Mot?! You're on their side now? I thought we were cool—I know you must be upset about the show getting cancelled but I thought we were cool!"

Whatever show he was talking, Mot was rather unresponsive about it. Then again, there were a number of downers in his system.

"Everything, why does every goddamn thing have to go wrong!" The man kept yelling. "Jesus H. Christ!"

"What does the H stand for?" Ron asked, cool as a hothouse cucumber.

"Henry!" The man shouted. He turned toward a dresser along another wall, but Ron told him if he moved he'd be moving with a bullet hole in his butt cheek.

"Same goes for you, Missy." Ron addressed the woman before turning back to the man. "Is that your name, shit for brains?"

"Shit for brains?" The man looked confused and let out another yelping fuck.

"No, Henry. Is Henry your name?"

"Henry? My name..." He finally focused on the barrel of the gun that was aiming right where his pearly white teeth were.

"Your name," Ron said.

“Zedekiah. Wait, please don’t kill me—are you from the network?”

“The network?” Ron’s tilted his head like a golden retriever might.

“Zedekiah what?” I asked from behind the camera.

“Zedekiah Hart. Why are you three here?”

Zed was less impressive-looking than I’d expected. He was handsome in a manicured way with neatly coiffed hair and lean muscle, but was nowhere near boxing-trainer size.

“Three?” Ron asked. We’d both forgotten about Mot. “Right. Ahem. The name’s Ron Da Zont. Bail bondsman and bounty hunting, although you seem to know that, and you know Mot already, too.”

“Mot?” Zed said.

“Right, I guess his name is Tom,” Ron said, as Mot sank to the carpet and rolled around before bumping into the bed. “He probably just likes the way it feels,” Ron went on. “Don’t worry about the camera. You have enough to worry about yourself, my friend, for you have found trouble.”

“Everything is fucking trouble with you people. This isn’t my fault. I didn’t do shit!” He looked at the woman on the bed. “Is she in trouble, too?”

“Nope,” Ron said.

“Why not?” Zed scratched at his crotch as his penis shrank down to chicken-nugget size.

“Because she isn’t you—Zed Hart. She isn’t Duane Saunders’s trainer.”

Zed laughed a hysterical laugh—a laugh that came along with a few tears and an elongated wheeze.

The woman spoke up now. “My name is Petra Shostashovic. I am unarmed, as is he. Clearly.” She had an implacable foreign accent that fluctuated between hard consonants and fluid vowels. She still looked strangely familiar.

“Is there anyone else here?” Ron asked. “You better be honest if you don’t want trouble too.”

“No,” Petra said. “It is just he and I. He is an imbecile and not worth harming much.”

“Babe!” Zed yelled. “You, too? Everyone on this goddamn brown earth thinks I’m, I don’t know, a goddamn moron?”

“Yes, honey. Everyone does. That was the job description, after all.”

“Enough!” Ron said. “Where is Duane Saunders?”

“Duane Saunders.” Zed thumped his forehead with the fist that had previously held his penis. “Duane Saunders, Duane Saunders, Duane Saunders. Fuck him. Fuck you, and, and, the network, too. Rock this shit. I mean, fuck this. I don’t have a goddamn clue where he is.”

“That’s the wrong answer,” Ron said as he approached Zed, holding the gun to Zed’s head, the spot between his two jiggling eyeballs.

Mot sighed, like that was the most he could express, and I wondered at what point Ron would stop. At what point was this illegal and at what point should I stop filming. I’d recorded Ron apprehending folks a thousand times, but never had he held a gun to anyone’s head.

“Keep him quiet,” Ron said. “Tom, I’m going to need some time alone here with Mr. Zed Hart.”

“Fuck,” Zed added. “I hate that name. That’s just what they wanted me to go by. I told—I told you, it’s Zedekiah. It means the lord is righteous.” Zed began to tremble. “It means God’s justice. Please, man, I’ll give you the money back. You don’t need to kill me.”

“Tom, take the woman out.”

Her eyebrows shot up. She was still sitting on the bed, but had been staring out the window, at the desert and emptiness that surrounded everything.

“Outside,” Ron corrected himself. “Zedekiah and I need to talk for a while. Keep Mot quiet. Wait until I come out.”

“Okay,” I said, without thinking. Everything was automatic. I wasn’t even aware of what I was filming anymore. Part of me, a deep gut part, considered the possibility that Ron would actually kill Zed if he didn’t say where Duane was. But what was this nonsense about the network?

“Any sign of anyone else coming and you yell, okay? Give them Mot if you have to.”

What if we started calling Mot by his real name? Then Ron would have said: Sacrifice Tom. I imagined us on a limestone hill, the Golgotha at dusk. A red sky over our three crosses. Ron surrounded by us Toms.

“Tom?” Ron again.

I turned off the camera and dragged Mot out of the room. Petra Shostashovic followed.

“Here,” she said, except it sounded more like *ear* when she spoke. “We can sit in the foyer.”

The foyer was a sort of side area to the vestibule: a large alcove filled with desert light and views of sand and denim-blue sky from the wall-length windows. There was a couch where Petra took a seat and crossed her legs. There were a few love seats, too. One for me. One for Mot.

“He really doesn’t know anything. Will your large friend hurt him?” Petra asked, without inflecting much emotion. Her eyes were gray. They’d look nice in a still shot.

I shook my head. “Not really. Ron’s not...one to hurt people. He’s trying to find Duane, you know. To help someone. If you know anything, you ought to tell me,” I said, trying to play good cop to Ron’s crazed cop.

“The network doesn’t want to help people.”

“The net?...” Mot started to speak from his spot on his seat before he nodded off again. “Zoomtube,” he muttered in semi-catatonic state, “Adult entertainment...”

“You.” I said, finally recognizing. “We’ve met before.”

“I’ve met many people. I hardly remember them all.”

It had been one of the times I’d been on Gunter’s set, in a house in the San Fernando Valley where they pulled the shades closed. She was one of the actresses.

She now picked at a scab on her elbow.

“Ron is trying to do something good. To help Marissa Glouck. You know her, don’t you?”

Her face sharpened. “I’ve never even met Mr. Saunders and Zedekiah is too stupid to think of anyone besides himself and me occasionally.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“And why is that? This is all a sham, after all.”

“What happened to her isn’t a sham.”

“No. Of course not.” The scab flicked off and a touch of blood bubbled on her skin.

“What is Marissa to your large muscled friend?”

“They used to be together.”

Petra nodded, slowly. “Did he love her? Does he still? She was an exceptional woman—is. Although obviously bad taste in men.”

I shook my head, although I wasn't sure if I understood myself. "He doesn't love her the way, you know, someone loves...someone. That sounds stupid. I mean to say he cares."

"You sound like you don't know much."

I laughed and then stopped myself. I was supposed to be serious. "Neither does Ron. But he's...he doesn't know who he really is."

"No one does. Nor do we know Mr. Saunders. He's never even come here. Everything was over before it even began."

I shook my head and thumbed the lens of the camera. "Why are *you* here?"

"Because Zedekiah, idiot that he is, I love him."

"That guy?" I asked.

She uncrossed her legs and recrossed them the other way. "My brothers say the same thing. The same way."

"Does he often jack off into a glass while staring at you?"

She shrugged. "I don't have to do anything. He's happy, I'm happy with it. Everyone else looks at me, already, so why shouldn't he?"

Right, I thought. The porn. I wondered how it felt to feel so many men's gaze on you—that lack of empathy and anything besides the basest emotions that go hand in hand with porn-viewing. There are all sorts of reasons to join the industry, just as there are all sorts of reasons to go into politics, finance or academics. But how did this make her feel? I wanted to ask her, but I didn't. Instead I asked her where she was from.

"Lviv." She rolled her eyes as she spoke. "Ukraine. But my brothers are Italian, you see. I was adopted by a family in Rome. They were very poor but loved children and already had five

sons. They wanted a daughter. Wanted to change my name to Mary, too, but it was too late.” She smiled. “I was Petra. Woman of stone. And you?”

“Tom,” I said. “Man of...very little. Film, I guess. Art. At least when I was younger, art.”

“You were an artist?”

“No. I thought I was.” Outside, a coyote stood at the glass. It looked from me to Petra to Mot before prancing away. No one else noticed it. “I wanted to make films. Documentaries...I saw them as creative ways to get at—I don’t know—something true.”

She laughed. “Documentaries are not too different than what I do now. Both pretend to be true... Where were you born?” she asked.

“New York. But the suburbs. I’ve never been to Ukraine,” I said, trying to dissuade any further questions about myself. There wasn’t much to say, and really, why was I saying anything? Still, I went on, happy to be speaking to someone who seemed somewhat normal. “I’ve never been to Italy, either.”

“There are better places than both.” She gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I haven’t been to Ukraine since I was born. But Italy just last year for a shoot. Pompeii.”

“You were able to, uh, film in the ruins?”

“No, no,” she said. “This was for a magazine. A fancy Italian one. The kind Berlusconi would keep next to his gold-plated toilet seat.”

“I see.”

“Anyways,” she went on, “Pompeii is a place.”

“I’m sure,” I said.

She told me how they spent three days there waiting for the clouds to clear. How she would walk around for hours under this heavy gray sky, through the ruined homes and markets.

Fallen stones. There were all these paintings still on the walls of the town streets, she told me. Mosaics of men and women fucking. And all she could think about was how, when that mountain broke and what looked like snow fell first, and then great flaming boulders, the sky must have turned every color of red. The people, Pompeiians, ran through the streets and passed these images of love and fucking and none of it mattered because they would be buried, taken and preserved—their walking shadows. The gray human shapes, the stone people that were still there.

I nodded. The casts. I'd seen shows on the Discovery Channel about it.

“Many of them tried to sail across the bay of Naples. The heat would have made them burst.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I suddenly asked.

“Because you say you are an artist. This is about art.”

I had nothing to say.

“Don't you see?” she asked.

And I did. I closed my eyes the fire and rain and the James Taylor song filled my mind. When Mount Vesuvius erupted, some, of course, wouldn't run, but would accept their fate. In the temple, or maybe at home, they'd look from their glassless windows as what they must have thought was a god's rage swept dust through the streets. I thought about the best angle to get the mountain; a wide aperture and 65mm film to gather all that raw air and feeling in extreme long shot. Shaky cam was for amateurs. If I were filming this, the finished product would oscillate between this long take and quick, extreme close ups of faces and eyes. And Caroline's. All of a sudden she was there, too, although my imagination wanted her far away. I didn't mind if I became a stone person, but not her. And so I dropped the camera and ran, yelled her name and

became as much a part of the infinite chaos as everyone else—that collection of lives turning in every direction until one minute, one final long breath and all life was frozen in stone. Why would the sky be red and angry then? With no one to see it or to be afraid of hell, the clouds would wash away and reveal a blue sky that was nowhere before and nothing then but endless.

Then the bedroom door opened and I was brought back to reality as Ron burst out. Zedekiah, I saw, was beside him. He looked out of breath and the vein in his temple was about to burst, but there were no signs of physical harm.

“Zed?” Petra stood and walked toward the man she loved. She gave Ron a cautionary glance, but he nodded.

“Come on,” Ron said to me. His face had fallen, lines in his cheeks and brow deeper than they’d been before.

Mot stood as if he was the one Ron summoned before falling forward and landing face first on the marble floor.

“What?” I looked from Ron’s hunched shoulders to Zed and Petra embracing. “What about Duane? Unless you know where to go next, we don’t *have* anywhere to go next.”

“He doesn’t know.”

“He *has* to know.” Despite what Petra had said, we needed something. As soon as we walked into that room and saw Zed beating off into the glass of water, I had my suspicions that all was not what we’d hoped for, but this was all we’d been going on for days.

“He doesn’t,” Ron insisted. “He knows as much as you and I. Fuck, he *is* you and I.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Four-pence and seven years ago!” Mot piped in.

Ron sat on the couch, where Petra had been before. He gazed out the wall-length window at the dry earth and the dots of cacti along the way. The sky was hardening with darker clouds, only slight cracks of blue sky visible in between “We’ll just—start over. Find something new.”

We wouldn’t, though, or so I thought. Gunter would kill the whole thing. We already lost the van and we could hardly continue commandeering Mot’s pickup. We had, essentially, kidnapped Mot as well.

Outside, the gray clouds continue to swell and coagulate like a stone ruin in the sky. Low clouds moved fast like smoke. Thinking about the last few days, I knew it didn’t seem like we were really trying to find Duane—not with the club stuff and wasting time listening to Mot speak—but I had hoped that Ron was serious. That he wanted to find Duane and that we would find Duane. That something would happen, something not entirely staged. Maybe the show would still flop and we’d all be out of a jump, but Ron would have *done* something. It didn’t matter if it really mattered to anyone else. I wanted him to try. And now he was giving up?

Zed looked like he was about to cry and Petra cradled his head in her arms, a sign of affection even as she rolled her eyes at his stuttering hiccups and gasps. You’d think Ron had *actually* done something to him. But then, I thought, maybe he had? Maybe Ron had peeled off Zed’s fingernails, one by one, holding his lips shut so he couldn’t even scream and then, once they were gone, once he was sure the man would speak the truth, found that Zed Hart really did have no clue what was going on in the world.

Who were these people? This man living in this pueblo compound? This intelligent woman who loved him? Zed seemed to have a modicum of success—what was wrong with him, besides the obvious? How could he who had everything I didn’t, still be so confused?

I didn't know. And neither did Ron. He harrumphed in agitation as we walked outside the compound and into the humid air. The sky was dark now, the clouds were practically black, and the sand and desert dunes lost all sense of color too—like they had been blanched in a pot of boiling water and all that was left was the ghost of earth.

Mot listlessly shuffled as we piled into the truck. For a while no one spoke (well, Mot couldn't speak seeing as he was in the bed, bouncing around as we drove along the desert road). Ron put on *Highway 61 Revisited* and I didn't ask where we were going. Instead, I asked again about what happened. What had Zed said?

Ron didn't answer my question, but he looked at me and said, "I'm not giving up."

He must have really felt something for Marissa Glouck. This was admirable in itself, that he was still capable of feeling things. Maybe she hadn't loved him, but he had truly only ever wanted her. Maybe somewhere in his secret heart he knew that the marriage to Camille was a sham, aware of the acting behind it all. That his feelings for her weren't real. If he really never had gotten over Marissa then what would he care if he were in a sexless, loveless marriage?

The CD must have been scratched because it skipped around—from "Like a Rolling Stone" straight to the last track, "Desolation Row."

Ron's brow furrowed as he spoke. "Zed isn't real."

"Isn't real?" I repeated.

"He's not a boxing trainer. I don't think Duane actually has one." Ron slalomed between cacti.

"What do you mean?"

"It makes sense. If he did, you'd think the guy would keep Duane from acting like such an animal in the ring."

“What do you mean he isn’t Duane’s trainer?”

“Zedekiah Hart is an actor.” Ron flipped on the wipers seconds before rain began to fall. Heavy drops splashed from the clouds. I took the camera out from my pack and shot for a few minutes: the bumping view as the car jolted up and down, the slow drops, sporadic and uneven, the golden line of yellow under the clouds and along the horizon. Ron went on to say: “He was hired by the A.E.N. to *play* his trainer.”

Ron explained that the Adult Entertainment Network was making their own reality show. A sort of equivalent to *Ron: Bail Bonds and Bounty Hunting*—their version of the DEF networks former glory-show. Duane was to be the star, and Zed was to play the trainer. He got the job through his connections with Petra and Marissa, in turn, and moved to Arizona, where, Mot had become his drug dealer. But shit hit the fan when Duane attacked Marissa and went on the lam. Zed knew he was losing his job, that the entire production was collapsing, and yet had holed up at the fake compound they were going to use for shooting. It was the best gig he’d ever had: sitting around, getting high, and being paid to live in a million-dollar home in the middle of the desert. I was still filming, though I didn’t know how this would ever be translated into a narrative—into a watchable program. The story was too far away from what it could possibly mean.

When I asked Ron what he thought we should do now, he turned off the wipers and let the rain gather on the windshield, melting the colors outside like an abstract painting. Gold and gray and the occasional green of a passing cactus dripped down the frame; the world was washing itself away.

“Call Gunter, I guess.” In the rearview mirror his eyes turned down.

I thought about what I might tell Caroline: that Zed was just a character, just like Ron and I were. Maybe she'd tell me to come home. To come back to her. To work on a documentary again. But did she really even wanted to hear from me? Was I just a perfunctory phone call, an obligatory old friend?

We drove for maybe an hour until the rain stopped. We were still off-road and soon found ourselves driving under rock archways. The red stones stretched like arms or petrified ocean waves. A state trooper found us and screamed for a while about how we were desecrating a national park, how he should take us in and have us prosecuted but I think he saw how weary we both looked. Maybe he would have still, if he'd noticed Mot sodden and practically unconscious in the bed of the truck, but he didn't (Mot had wrapped himself in a blanket and somehow fallen asleep) and the trooper just pointed us towards U.S. Route 95. Ron went North and soon we were in the outskirts of Las Vegas. It's a sad place that surrounds America's capital of sin, filled with beaten-down homes and stone lawns. The strip was no better, even though still packed with roving masses of people. Men and women wearing suits and dresses of the most outrageous colors. Even their kids pranced in the puddles.

Ron found a place to park and we left the car and began walking across puddles that reflected the neon lights around us. They were all less glamorous in the rainlight. Ron woke Mot and told him to come, too. There was a diner on the corner, with a phone that Ron asked to use. I ordered three coffees.

"How are you?" I asked Mot.

He shook his head. "What happened? Why are we in Las Vegas?"

I stared hard at him. "Zed is a nobody. More so than you. He's an actor who barely even knew Duane, let alone ever trained him."

“An absurd fellow indeed.” Mot nodded his head.

“*You’re* an absurd fellow,” I said—how stupid the words tasted in my mouth. How childish. “I don’t even know what you want.”

Mot’s eyes widened and he waved his arms about like an interpretive dancer. “Why are you doing what you’re doing? Similar reasons, I bet. Hey, can I have my truck back?”

“We can’t just turn you loose. I don’t think. At least not yet.” I smelled some fresh pie that was behind the counter, realizing it’d been a while since we last ate, those fish tacos out in Bullhead.

“I told you what I want. I told you out in the desert. I wasn’t trying to hide nothing. I want Zoomtube to be a success. I want to be famous.”

“You want to be famous?”

“I want to be like Ron,” Mot said. “I want to be on TV.”

But he already was like us in more ways than I wanted to count. The waitress brought us our coffee in plastic mugs and I thought about what might come next. We had no leads. We’d lost our van, a lot of footage and time. Ron was on the phone with Gunter, his face sagging as he listened to whatever our producer was saying. Gunter was probably telling him to come home, that we were done, that the show was being canned. Ron would probably lose his license and become a bouncer at some nightclub. But what’s so bad about that? And what would happen to me? Who would I be? Not a cameraman or a director of photography. I could go back to New York, but I had nothing there; I’d rejected my history and moved out West, a place which would, in turn, quickly abandon me. I wasn’t prepared for anything.

Ron, still holding the phone, stretched its wire until he was standing at the counter between Mot and me.

“Excuse me,” he said to the waitress.

The waitress came over. “Can I help you?”

“The remote. For the TV—” He pointed to the old screen behind the counter. “Can you turn it on? Please? The news.”

She nodded and flicked on the screen, adjusting it to a national broadcast. Something about snows out East and terrorists even farther away—a French cartoonist’s office that had been attacked. Tragedies were still going on around the world even as we tried, half-assed as it may seem, to hold at least one person accountable. Or that’s what I told myself Ron was doing, not that it would help Marissa all that much. If anyone, we were doing this for Ron, although he didn’t see it that way. There was something about the president and immigration law; how in Haiti a power line fell and electrocuted forty people celebrating something on a float. It’s heartbreaking, really. I’ve always hated the news. The truth is something I’ve only wanted to deal with on my own terms. That’s partly why I tried documentary-making, and largely why I signed up for a vacuous staged thing like *Ron: Bail Bonds*. That and money. Maybe Gunter had seen it in me; I’d thought he’d seen talent, but maybe it was that I was not equipped to handle reality. Funny how the show, like so many others, was labeled “reality television.”

I was about to ask Ron what he was expecting so see, or if he just wanted everyone to feel more depressed when he asked the waitress to change to the Entertainment news channel and suddenly he was watching himself. An image of Ron hovered in the corner of the screen as a few clips from the show played: Ron shattering doors, waving a giant desert eagle around, Ron handcuffing folks and saying, *Trouble is already here*. A newscaster in a lizard-skin suit explained what was going on as the images switched to a headshot of Camille with the caption MISSING underneath. Ron’s mouth fell open.

She'd been missing for two days, the newscaster said. The pool boy was the first to notify the police.

"It is possible," the newscaster said in her most dramatic voice, "that this was the work of Duane Saunders, the fugitive Camille's television husband vowed to catch. The house was in notable disarray and a safe in the basement was left open and empty. Could he be seeking revenge against bounty hunter, Ron Da Zont's, proposed revenge?"

"Ron," I said, "a safe?"

But he just shushed me.

The newscaster went on to say that the only evidence as of now was that an airplane ticket to Tallahassee, Florida had been purchased for her with an unknown account. The station switched to another news story and Ron returned to the phone. Mot shifted in his seat, and I had nothing to say although I was still wondering about the safe.

"I'm going," Ron said into the mouthpiece. "It's not about the show."

He was silent for a long while after that.

"It doesn't matter. I know that, Gunter—I know she isn't. But I can help her. If this is at all my fault, and even if it isn't, I *have* to help her—I know, I know. I'll ask him." Ron looked over at me. "It's up to him. Oh, and the van is in Arizona by the way. Okay, okay, calm down, Gunter. Bullhead City... I'm sure it's fine and I'm sure you can find it. Yes, we have a truck. Some guy we abducted. Can you book us a flight? I don't know, maybe kill him and dump his body in the desert? Just kidding. Okay—okay, thanks Gunter. I appreciate it. Gotta go now. Talk to you soon."

Ron handed the phone back to the waitress and politely thanked her, putting down a twenty-dollar bill as well.

“Ron?” I asked.

He put his head in his giant hands and squeezed his face, turning his skin red. “I had some of my folks’ old things in there. In the safe.”

“Why would Duane take her to Florida?” I asked but I already knew the answer.

“My parents. That’s where they moved after coming over from Germany. That’s where I was born and raised.” He let go of his face and his eyes were red with a web of veins. “He’s trying to torture me. To make me feel like a child. Maybe we could make a trade with Mot?”

“Hey,” Mot spoke up now, his voice surprisingly soft and sincere. “I’m sorry Ronaldo. I am. I don’t know Duane, but he sounds like a real motherfucker. If there’s something I can do...you know. Let me know.”

I shook my head. “What’re we going to do?”

Ron squared his shoulders and said, “Gunter booked us the next available flights to Florida. I—I understand if you can’t come.”

“Hey.” I stood. Everyone in the diner had their eyes on us now, on this scene. But this wasn’t an act for us. Maybe life’s a stage but that doesn’t make it less precious. “I’m going with you.”

Mot stood up, too. “And I will too!”

Ron shook his head and cleared all sign of resignation from his face. “Good,” he said. “Good. Gunter is booking our flight. He said we should take Mot along anyways, since, well, we did sort of kidnap him. Might as well go all the way.”

“Might as well,” Mot repeated.

We all nodded and that was that. We left the diner to muddled applause and drove to McCarran International Airport. The clouds were half gone now but it was late in the day and the

sun was setting, turning the desert ground a reflective salmon as we slalomed around puddles and automobiles on our way. The clouds were splashed with all sorts of desert colors over the rich blue. When we got to the airport, I asked Mot what he wanted to do about his truck and he said it wasn't technically his anyways. He was fine with never seeing it again.

I'd never been to McCarran before and so wasn't expecting slot machines at the terminal, but there were. We had some time to kill and Mot said he'd play for luck. Of course, he lost several times in a row. Ron didn't speak, but seethed. I got him a Diet Coke, which did nothing to calm him down. In about an hour our gate opened and the man at the kiosk told us to form a line. That was it. That was how we left Las Vegas. Not to thunderous applause, but to the sound of an electronic ding as our boarding passes confirmed who we were, flashing our names on a screen: Ron, Tom, and Tom.

FINALE BY TALLAHASSEE

Our story had stopped making sense. Logical progression had eroded like sea cliffs over eons. Our very existence seemed more like that of cartoon characters than living things. In the years before, I'd oftentimes seen Ron in this way: a living caricature of absurd muscle, a sensitive yet powerful man with single-minded focus. How did he live? How confusing it must be to feel like both a living thing and the amalgamation of what everyone thinks of you. But this was exactly how I felt then, too, even though the cameras were off, even though no one was watching or listening. I wasn't going to film anymore. This was no longer about the show—I didn't need Ron to tell me. It would piss off Gunter, and I'd most certainly be on the outs in LA, unable to find a job with the DEF network again, but the show was already a wreck. I always said that we needed a script. We never could do anything properly.

We were flying to the Florida Panhandle to find Duane and Camille, but why would he kidnap her and take her there in the first place—*how* he could have done so? But for Ron there was a reason: Duane or the world or something even more powerful was trying to remind him of the past—not that Ron had some great, dark past—but because there was a sick cyclicity to it. This was where his parents died, where he was born, where he'd left. Maybe Ron was meant to go there now, too, now that his story was almost over. Ron said he felt like nothing, like a nobody, and that Duane was doing all this by taking him home—showing him how nothing changes, how brutality is nature. Marissa, the reason we were doing any of this in the first place, was alive and maybe awake—she surely knew about what we were doing—but we played no role in her life. We'd gotten so sidetracked by this point that the meaning of our trip itself was in danger of disappearing altogether, Ron said, in a minute of lucidity. He would sometimes have

these moments when he wasn't stuffing three hotdogs into his mouth at one time, or telling others that they'd found trouble with a man in a brightly patterned short-sleeve button-up.

We touched down in Tallahassee Regional Airport—a place different from the glittering artificiality that danced in Las Vegas in every way. There were no slot machines in the terminal, no tropical-themed cocktail bars. Only unflattering overhead lights and outdated carpets. Souvenir shops that sold panhandle-shaped ashtrays.

Mot immediately went to one of the airport's old shops and bought a t-shirt that said in bold, iron-on letters: THEY FOUND ME IN TALLAHASSEE. The irony of it didn't seem to strike him or Ron as offensive.

“Say, Ron,” Mot spoke up. “I didn't know you came from an *academic* family?”

“My father,” he said. “He was very highly regarded...in, uh, something.”

Maybe there'd been a time that Ron could explain his father's philosophical work but it was understandably hard for him to relay this after being pummeled in the head so many times throughout his boxing days (bounty hunting wasn't much better in terms of head injuries). He wasn't *unintelligent*, but his father had been a genius. Ron wasn't even clear on *why* he and his mother had left Germany: something about the Cold War (although sometimes he got it confused with other wars, so who's to say?).

“And so, Duane,” Mot went on, “wait, wait, what?” He started spinning in circles, glaring at all who walked passed him. We were still in the airport, nearly at the taxi line. TSA agents began to peek around the corners at him and so I grabbed him by the shoulders and asked what was wrong.

“My shades,” he said. “Where'd they go?”

“My god, Mot. You haven’t had them since Ron ripped them off your head and shoved an armadillo tail down your throat.”

“Ah—ah.” He composed himself and straightened his Tallahassee T-shirt. “That feels so long ago.”

It both did and didn’t. Had it been a week? Was it near the end of the month? Or only a day, a few? We’d talked about leaving Mot stranded in the desert maybe a dozen times, but now, suddenly, he was our pal? Our partner?

When we got in cab, the man up front asked where we were going. No one spoke for a minute before Ron said, “To the university.” On our way, we passed along the edge of mossy green swamps and canted dogwood trees. Alligators and mud and low, Floridian shrubs. The sun was smudged behind a haze. The mulled over landscape gave way to buildings, more paved roads and telephone polls; the stout fingers of mid-rise buildings in the distance when Ron told the guy to take us to a motel instead—one close to the university. It’d be dark soon.

We arrived at the Semi-Hole Inn not long after. Checked in. There wasn’t much to the room: a faded CRT TV, two lumpy mattresses. Mold in the bathroom. Mot was hungry and so he left to walk around the town, to find food while Ron called Gunter to tell him our exact address—and cover expenses. After a few minutes, he hung up the phone and collapsed into one of the beds. A few minutes later, great snores arose from his slumbering body. Mot came back a while later with pizza and I had a couple of slices with him. He tried to get the room’s stereo/alarm clock to work. We found a radio station that played nothing but Willie Nelson. Mot went to the bathroom and came back with a little plastic bag of pills, asking me if I wanted something. I only shook my head. This must have been why finding the pizza took such a long time.

“Don’t worry, muchacho,” he said. “I’m only taking this to help me rest easy. You rest easy, too, phony boy.” He popped a pill and drifted off a moment later. He must have meant pony boy. Still, the reference was wrong. It was *stay gold* pony boy.

I stepped out into the evening. The sun was dropping below some far off palm trees and I wondered where the ocean was. South was the easy answer. To the east, points of light were blooming on the violet expanse. How did I end up here? We weren’t far from Carrabelle, the town where Ron was from, where Caroline and I found that Ted Burroughs, the subject of our documentary, had drowned himself. Back in the room, I called Caroline.

“Tom?” She sounded tired. Was it Friday? Had she had a long week? Or was it Monday?

“Caroline—hey!” What an idiot I was. “Guess where I am?”

“New York?” Maybe she did sound excited, or maybe I just imagined it, wanting her to be so. “Are you in the city, Tom?”

“No, no. I’m in Tallahassee.”

“What? How come?”

“It’s a long story,” I said, although I tried to explain some of it. How Ron’s wife had disappeared, how there were some clues that suggested she’d been taken by Duane himself to this Florida city. I guess the recent developments in our saga had yet to reach real news sources (if it ever would, if there are any) and so Caroline hadn’t heard anything about this. She didn’t watch Entertainment News but she told me to be safe. I asked her how she was.

“Well,” she said, “I got a contract. A contract to start work on another documentary. A follow-up to Ted Burroughs.”

My voice caught in my throat. “Really? That’s great, Caroline. Congratulations.”

“I wanted to tell you sooner, but I’m sure you’ve been busy. I’ve been busy too.”

She didn't ask me to join her, nor did she ask me how I felt about her making the sequel to our documentary. I had no right to argue though.

She told me about the project: how she would follow the lives of Ted Burroughs, and all the other major artists who came out of Blue Haven. How she was hoping to use the same impressionist style that we used, the same lack of foreground. I asked her who she was getting to shoot, who'd be the DP and she said some name that maybe I would have known if I actually paid attention to what used to matter to me—making something worth a damn.

“Are you still living in the Lower East Side?” I asked and tried to remember the last time I asked her about her life.

“No,” she said. “I've moved to Brooklyn.” She laughed and I wanted to always remember that sound. “Funny, you know? My old place was right next to Blue Haven. But the distance has helped, is helping me look at it differently. It's clearer, my imagination is clearer. And even in a documentary—what am I saying, of course you know this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the show. Ron and the DEF network. Reality TV. These things, they're all as fake as anything else. Like WWE.”

Or like porn, I almost said. We said goodbye not long after.

We looked for Camille for the next few days. Mot wanted to get a megaphone and drive throughout the Florida Panhandle, calling her name, but we didn't.

One of the mornings, we went to a, off-beat souvenir shop, not to look for Camille, but because Ron wanted to get a taxidermied heron. The shop was poorly lit. The early sunshine from the glass doors was the brightest thing in the wood-paneled one-room store. Ron was

looking through the dead bird section when a bulky, black-clad man wearing a balaclava burst into the store, a shotgun in his hand as he told everyone to get on the floor. When Ron refused, the man threatened to blow off his head. Ron’s reaction of indifference was unsurprising—what was, though, was when Mot snuck up behind the guy and started squawking in his ear. Mot almost got shot himself, but the robber was distracted enough for Ron to wrestle his arms to his side and then propel him through a glass encasement of alligator skulls. The robber sliced himself up on the teeth and glass. There was quite a bit of blood when the police came. They thought Ron was the perpetrator for a minute. The local news station showed up to report the incident and the bit was picked up nationally in a sort of comment on how awful and absurd our failing show was. I probably wouldn’t have even realized that small incident went national if it weren’t for what happened later. But first, Camille.

We trucked over to the campus where Ron’s father had worked for years after first coming to America. Mot was off “canvassing” college students, claiming to be looking for Camille-related clues, while Ron and I walked through the red brick buildings. I asked him what he knew about his father—if there was something on the campus connected to him that could be what Duane wanted.

“Well,” he said. We were on a sidewalk, underneath a giant magnolia tree that would bloom soon—white petals were just beginning to crown in their buds. “See that building?” He pointed to the vermillion side of another structure, just like all the rest except it was topped with a white marble cupola. “That’s Da Zont Hall.”

“Da Zont? Like Ron Da Zont?”

“No. Wim Da Zont—my father’s name.”

“Right. Wim. Father of Esbjorn.”

“That’s right. He was a big deal here, I guess.”

“You guess? Ron, is there a building named after you? Anywhere?”

“Not yet.” He shrugged and reached up to grab one of the magnolia buds. He pulled it a few inches and let the branch snap back and sway in the already humid, Florida air.

“What’s in the building?”

“Classrooms, his old archives. I guess. Although technically after my folks passed away, I got the rights to all his stuff. I haven’t been here in a while.”

“Right,” I said and wondered if we were on the right track at all. What had been the evidence to suggest that Camille had been taken to Florida anyways? A ticket purchased with an unknown account? How’d Gunter even find that out?

Still, we’d come this far. We had to go to an administrative building first, to talk to a dead and get full access to the Da Zont building. The dean had a trim gray beard and wore a collared shirt that was open at the throat. He couldn’t believe Ron when told that this was Wim’s son.

“*You’re* the only living Da Zont?” the dean asked. We were in his office, a tastefully decorated room that exuded a sense of academic-chic.

“That is correct,” Ron said. The man had never heard of our show, but said that he would most certainly give us access.

“You know, though,” he said, “someone was here earlier this week and seems to have gotten access to the archives as well.”

We were on edge as we took our keys and passes and made our way back to Da Zont Hall. Who was in there—who’d gotten access before us? Ron looked ready for trouble as we sidled through the oak doors. The classrooms were all empty, though, the offices locked. It was

only when we went down to the basement, the archives that we found anyone else. That was how we found Camille.

She was in the basement. In an oak-accented room with plush blue velvet chairs. The walls were lined with books and cabinets and Camille was right there, in one of the chairs, reading through some hand-written notes.

Ron gasped and froze for a few moments longer than necessary before grabbing a nearby desk lamp and waving it around, shaking the stained glass shade, causing the light in the room to wobble and refract.

“Are you okay?” Ron said. “Where is he?!”

“Where is whom?” Camille looked up from the books in her lap. She was wearing glasses. I’d never seen her wear glasses before. To be honest, I’d only ever seen her after the make-up crew (when we still *had* a make-up crew) was done. She was more natural, now—her face not clouded with cover up that was applied for no reason other than to work better with the camera.

“Where is Duane?” I asked, somewhat confused myself.

Ron whipped around towards me and brandished the lamp but the shade flew off and nearly hit me in the chest. I only just got out of the way as the glass shade clunked against a bookshelf and dropped to the ground. It didn’t even shatter.

Camille closed the notebook and gently placed it aside. “What are you all doing here? I thought you were *looking* for Duane.”

“But—we... the news,” Ron said.

“What news?”

“Enterzainment Tonight.” Ron put the desk lamp back on the desk. Without the glass shade, the whole room was bright with stark light. “They said...it said you went missing. They suspected that Duane had, uh, kidnapped you. Taken you here, where my folks were from. A sort of revenge I guess. Pre-emptively so.”

Camille left her chair and touched Ron’s shoulder. “This was the deal,” she said. “This was in the contract. That I’d get access to your father’s work. I didn’t think I’d have to come to his archives, and with the DEF Network’s shooting schedule it was hard to find time to get down here anyways...”

Ron’s screwed his eyes shut and opened them again. “My father’s work?”

“USC paid for my flight, but the DEF network got me access to your father’s work. You signed the papers yourself. Ron, what are you doing?” she asked, but without hate or anger or anything other than serenity. “You’re making a show—right? Or not? Why’s Tom here if you aren’t?”

“We thought it best to leave the cameras,” I said. “This isn’t about the show. We actually thought, I don’t know—that you needed help.”

She frowned, losing patience, the resentment for our idiocy that she’d exhibited throughout the history of the show returning to her face.

“You aren’t helping anyone,” she said. “Someone was hurt, and hurt badly—someone you care about, Ron.”

He perked up at her reference to Marissa.

“Someone you should have been with—not me. But trying to get back at the man who hurt the woman you love is not helping anyone. Least of all yourself.”

“I don’t know,” Ron said. “I know, and I don’t know.”

“I’m not your wife,” she said.

“I know, and I don’t know,” he repeated.

Camille smiled now, slightly. “You sound like your father.”

“We hardly ever talked—I don’t know my father. He died after my mother did because he loved her so much. He couldn’t keep living. I don’t know my father.”

“But you do.”

“And I don’t.”

“The difference between knowing and not knowing is not so different.”

“You’re okay,” Ron said. “So you’re okay. You probably want to get back to whatever it is you’re doing. I have to go.” As he was looking around, his face showed the worry a child’s might when he was lost in the supermarket: like he didn’t know where we were, what he was doing, who he was.

Ron left, but I stayed behind with Camille for a moment. I asked her if she was going to come back and she said, eventually. It dawned on me that maybe Gunter prodded the show in this direction, planted evidence, thinking something dramatic would come of it. Too bad for him we hadn’t even been shooting. I asked Camille if this was in the contract Gunter had set up with her from the very beginning. It was, she said. Access to Wim Da Zont’s work was why she agreed to be on the show in the first place. She had spent all of her adult life studying his work, the Swedish defector, turned American philosopher.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“What is what?”

“I don’t know—his philosophy. What you’ve been looking for.”

She shook her head and didn't answer. "I've spent years working on this. It'd be impossible to just summarize it for you."

"Sure. I understand," I said, turning to go.

"Tom." She picked up the notes and sat back in the chair. "You can want something and not want the same thing at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the possibilities are endless."

I was half out the door when she told me that it isn't just me who feels like I'm pretending.

Nothing was resolved as I resurfaced. I wasn't a new man, this wasn't a new moment and we weren't even finished. Duane was still out there. I thought about finding Ron, but then thought—why? Did Ron need me? Or was it I who needed Ron?

I ran into him regardless. It was hard not to, considering the campus police that surrounded him and Mot. Well, Mot was actually being chased around the quad by security while Ron stood to the side, asking what had happened. I strolled over as they tackled Mot. He was yelling something about how he'd be famous one day, how he was a pioneer and a hero, trying to help people everywhere. He called Ron's name and mine, Camille's and Marissa Glouck's too.

"This is my way!" he shouted as he scrambled up a magnolia tree. The police surrounded the tree and started to shake it. "This is my way! My art! This is how I'll be remembered."

The police still shook the tree and Mot was still speaking as he fell like a piece of rotten fruit. Ron rushed over but I just stayed back and watched. This was the role I was always in,

wasn't it? With our strange quest to find Duane I'd hoped to play a better role—hoped to be a real character in the drama and not just the guy who pointed the camera and encouraged others to say stuff, to repeat themselves more clearly, with more inflection, with more *feeling*, as if what I was asking them to do didn't cloud all authenticity in feeling.

The sun was hot and a few passing students peered at the commotion of officers. One young kid (although really, how much younger was he than I?) took a cell phone from his pocket and took a video of it all, Ron included. It would probably end up on YouTube later that very day—YouTube, the chaperoned version of Mot's dream.

Mot was being dragged away when I called after him. "Mot!" I said. "Tom!" I shouted a moment later. This was who he was—Tom. He was Tom, too. He was me, the me that I could become. The me, maybe, that I would be soon.

Then, just like that, it was once again only Ron and I. The suddenness was unreal, but nothing was real anymore. Or everything was just *hyper*-real. Everything was ridiculous. I asked Ron what had happened.

He sighed and put his head in his hands for a moment before looking up again. "He was trying to get videos for Zoomtube—crotch shots of students passing by, stuff like that."

"While we were downstairs?"

"I guess."

"But," I started. Mot had seemed so willing to help—like he actually thought Camille was in danger and that he could make a difference. Hadn't we all, though? Mot and I—we really were no different.

We both had a bed at the motel now that Mot was gone. I was about to call Gunter to tell him we'd take a flight back to California the next day but he called us first. Ron was in the shower so I picked up.

“Are *you*...” Gunter started, his drawl more exaggerated than ever. “Holy shit. Your television is on, isn't it?”

“Why should it be?” I asked. It wasn't.

“You and Ron are goddamn tee-vee characters, you dolt.”

I turned on the TV. “Anything in particular good on?”

“My god, you're difficult. The *news*.”

“CNN?”

Gunter paused on the other end, struggling to control his breathing. “Tom, this is a real fucking emergency. You need to start shooting and warn Ron because he's coming.”

“He's in the shower,” I said as I switched to the Entertainment network. It was the woman who'd worn leopard print the first time—now in a pantsuit with feathers on the shoulders. She looked concerned; a practiced furrow creased her well-tanned brow.

“...And now we have good reason to believe they're both in the Florida Panhandle. But who will find whom first?”

The screen showed headshots of Ron and Duane, side-by-side, with a smaller one of me in the corner.

“Hey,” I said, “that's me.”

“You spherical bastard!” Gunter yelled.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’re a bastard anyway I look at you. Come on, Tom. You need to act fast. He doesn’t know where you are but, fuck, I’m from the South and know those po-dunk towns aren’t hard to sieve through.”

“It’s not a po-dunk town,” I said. I liked Tallahassee. I had history with the Panhandle. “Sorry, I don’t understand—Gunter, what’s going on?”

“What do you expect? The Enterzainment news to be thorough? To be accurate?”

“We found Camille,” I blurted out. “She was reading some of Ron’s father’s old notebooks at the local university. I’m sure you knew, sure of it. Duane Saunders never kidnapped her, never took her here.”

“No, but he’s there now.” Gunter’s voice was low.

“What do you mean?”

“He knows y’all went down there, and, well, who the fuck knows. It’s been on the real news, too, you know. Duane must have figured since you all thought he was there he’d go down and be there to get the jump on you.”

“But…” Duane was in Florida? Looking for us? I needed to tell Ron as soon as he was out of the shower. “But we know, now. So he can’t get the jump.”

“Well, it’s not like he’s hiding anything. The Enterzainment Network received an anonymous tip that he was going to Florida to find Ron. To kill him.”

“Jesus.” I sat on the bed and turned off the old CRT TV. The shades were drawn already, a low yellow glow coming through.

“Jesus can’t save you. Listen, Duane *wants* y’all to know. You need to do something.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am.”

“No, I mean—you expect us to kill him?”

“I expect Ron to.”

Was this the only thing Ron had left now? Marissa wasn't a part of his life, and now even his illusion of Camille was shattered.

“Either way, get your camera ready.”

I told him of course and he hung up.

I didn't tell Ron right after he got out of the shower, while he strutted around the room in his towel trying to find shorts and a clean Hawaiian shirt. He couldn't, though, they were all sweat-stained and scrunched into little balls, so he put on a puffer vest instead. I waited till we were out to eat at a seafood restaurant and he had a mouth full of cold, plastic scented crab cake to tell him that Duane had *actually* come to Florida to find him.

Ron stared at me. His mouth didn't drop open, his eyes didn't light up, but I could see his mind working. And his mouth, too, masticating.

It was a retro-themed restaurant parlor with red booths, the fake leather stretched to a point near bursting over the over-stuffed seats. The waiters and waitresses all wore tie-dye t-shirts that said things like *Groovy Baby*, and *Keep it Green*. The Grateful Dead was on an endless loop throughout the whole place.

“Okay” was all Ron said.

“Okay?” I repeated and told him everything Gunter had told me. I felt like I was telling him a story, it all felt so unbelievable, so ridiculous. This was a wanted man after all, someone who did something terrible to someone else, someone the police was supposed to be looking for—and now who was about to find him? A retired boxer and hack camera man.

“Yes, okay.” Ron finished his crab cake and drank from a bottle of Coke. “We’re going to have to get the jump on him.

I nodded and poked at my soft shell crab that was largely untouched.

“And Tom—” Ron reached out and grabbed my shoulder. “*We* don’t have to do this. You can go home if you want.”

I didn’t tell him that I didn’t have a home, that Casa Mucho back in California was hardly the place I wanted to be, that New York had abandoned me, or I had abandoned it—both, actually. Either way, I couldn’t go back there without turning back time. I told him that I was going to stay and he smiled and so did I.

“Thank you, Tom. Okay, then. We’ll have to get some guns and I bet you want a camera.”

“Forget the camera.”

“You’re right, everyone just uses their phone these days. It’ll make it feel more real.”

“This *is* real,” I said.

“I know it is. But it’s also not.”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking about something my dad told me when I was real little.” Ron plugged his finger into the now-empty bottle of Coke. “Thinking about it since we ran into Camille. He would write poems—short stories, you know? Philosophy, too, obviously, but I remember asking him once about the stories he wrote. They weren’t widely published, and I don’t remember my question exactly, but he said something like how he had to. That it made life better. That it was his way of fighting, while philosophy was only science. How he had to fight fiction with fiction.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Nothing isn’t *not* real because it all matters. It’s all there, even stories.” Ron looked to the window of the restaurant. It was dark outside except for the red taillights of disappearing cars, the orange glow of a street lamp and the haze underneath it.

The next day moved so fast it was hard to keep up the running narrative in my head. We woke up in the dingy motel, checked out, went to a diner and got some eggs and bacon. Ron asked the waitress for the number of a local travel agent and she said travel agents didn’t exist anymore, so he asked if she knew anyone who was renting their home for a vacation spot. She did, and gave Ron the number. He called and was lucky, I guess, to be able to rent the house immediately.

“Carrabelle,” he said after hanging up the phone.

I tried to hide my expression, how taken aback I was. Carrabelle, the tiny town just outside of Tallahassee along the gulf. I’d been there before, of course, making the Ted Burroughs documentary.

After breakfast, we walked to the nearest Wal-Mart (which was not far at all) and Ron bought a rifle. This was shockingly simple. He didn’t even have to show his license, or his bail bondsman documents. No one asked what he planned to shoot. The mulleted man behind the counter surely had other things on his mind. He didn’t look like the type to watch the Entertainment Network and really, why should he? Why should anyone when there were cities being burned throughout the world by their own citizens and corporations blowing apart the earth for gas and oil?

Ron and I got in a cab and he called the person we were renting the house from to see if it was ready. It was. It was a few hours away, Carrabelle. Where his parents were from. Where I’d been before.

Neither of us spoke as much as we had the past few days—the days we’d spent on the road. Not that we’d talked a tremendous amount while driving through the desert. Mostly, we’d just discussed music, the old folk and Americana albums we’d listened to together throughout the years producing the show. As different as Ron and I were in shape and size, in education and life experience, we both liked the same kind of music. Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne. Bob Dylan, of course, but Townes Van Zandt too, and our king, Neil Young. Now, though, it was like there was no music to listen to. Nothing to be said. And as we pulled up to that beach house just outside of Carrabelle, time itself folded over.

“You alright?” Ron asked as we climbed the worn wooden stairs to the beach bungalow. The owner had said there was a key hidden in a fake rock by the crab grass out front. Ron found it, and so we went in.

“Yeah,” I said. The inside was cluttered with kitschy beach-themed decorations: a statue of dolphins, a life preserver hanging on the stucco wall. Stuff preferable to an older demographic. The demographic Ron would have belonged to if he hadn’t spent his life doing recreational drugs and beating up people for a living. “Yes.”

But I wasn’t alright. I was and I wasn’t. This was near where Ted Burroughs had drowned himself. This was where Caroline and my documentary came to a close. I’d never talked to Ron about the work I’d done here before.

We walked out to the back porch, a deck that extended a little bit into the moon-white sand. The gulf waves lapped and shrugged.

“You know,” I started, not knowing what I wanted to say. “What do we really know? Like, about each other?”

Ron shrugged his giant shoulders. He was still holding the rifle. “My house, where I was when I was a boy wasn’t far from here but I heard they bulldozed it years ago to build McMansions.”

The sun hung along the western edge of the water. It was going down, turning the sky a light orange.

“You’re a good man,” Ron said. He went on to tell me that he didn’t need to know my history to know *me*.

“History...” Ron looked for words and wrote his name in the sand with the barrel of the rifle. He never finished his sentence.

We went inside and watched the sunset from the panoramic windows. I found a brochure listing local restaurants. There was a Chinese place nearby that would deliver.

As we waited for our Sesame Chicken and Beef with Broccoli to arrive Ron poked around the house, looking for weak spots and vantage points.

We were in the foyer when something started pounding on the door and I jumped but Ron spun on his heels and swung around the gun that had been slung along his back. He sidled over and checked through the peephole. Delivery man. We set up our food on the wooden table out back, a view of the Gulf unraveling before us in muted colors: lavender waves between deep blue lulls and a pale rose sky that made the shockingly white sand seem all the more alien. It was a fitting place for Ted Burroughs to have killed himself, I thought, and a fitting place for what was to come for us, too. The end to this story, one way or another.

We drank water from the tap, in glasses we found in the cupboard, and Ron fiddled with the kitchen radio until he found a station he liked. The song that first played was Neil Young. “Harvest Moon.”

“That’s when the moon is orange.” Ron said. He sat down and pulled the container of beef towards himself.

“Yeah,” I said, listening to Neil Young thumb brush his bass strings, an open D, the harmonics that sound like the dial tone to heaven. “The light and tilt of the Earth makes it look big.”

“It only happens once a year, you know. Always a day in September.”

“I didn’t know.”

“It’s when birds start their migration, too.”

“How do you know?”

“For a while, I’d always come back here. Whatever day it was going to appear in September. I’d buy a gun and camp out on the beach. I’d wait for a week for that heron to come back—the one that killed my Elvis—to fly over on his way to Mexico. I’d wait so I could blow it to hell. It never did, and I’d always throw the gun in the trash and head home. Wherever that was.”

I didn’t know what to say and so just ate the last few pieces of sesame chicken, the sweet smell mixing with MSG salt.

“I don’t like Los Angeles so much anymore.” Ron wasn’t eating anymore but faced the water, the low waves, the ending evening. “I don’t think I’ll go back there after this.”

The next day, I woke up to find that he had already brewed coffee and made a tremendous stack of pancakes. There’d been a box in the corner of the pantry, apparently. He was eating outside, the plate balanced on his knees and his ass in the sand. His gaze ran parallel with the water.

“Want some?” he asked.

“No thanks.” I wasn’t hungry. Coffee was enough.

I left Ron out there to finish his pancakes. Inside, I washed the cups and plates from the day before and watched him as he made a phone call. That comment he’d made the prior night: I don’t think I’ll go back there after this. Ron thought he was going to die.

“I called Enterzainment News,” he said. Ron walked into the bungalow, shutting the glass door behind him. “I told them where we are. I told them to broadcast the address. If you want to leave, you should.”

Ron unrolled some sheets he’d found in a linen closet and began taping them around the house, covering the sliding glass back door and all the windows.

“I won’t hold it against you, pal.” Ron forced a smile but I just shook my head.

“So you figure he’ll come here?” I asked.

“So I figure.”

“With company, you think?”

Ron shook his head and flipped a sofa, made it face the front door. “Does he seem like the kind of guy who has many friends?”

No, he did not. “You know,” I said, “you don’t have to do this either. The show doesn’t matter.”

“The show never mattered.”

I wanted to say that Marissa didn’t matter—but that was wrong. She did, of course. But this was for Ron. But what about the Ron that had existed before the DEF network came and made him into a caricature of himself? Would that Ron have done this?

“Yes,” he said, as though he was answering my question, reading my mind. “No—I mean, no. The show never mattered. And it shouldn’t matter for you either. You can do better things, my friend.”

I thought about calling Caroline, but what would I say to her? I was running out of things to talk about. I was running out of ways to run away. I’d made up my mind to call, though, just to tell her goodbye, when I turned towards Ron and he put his finger to his lips, motioned for me to come hide behind the couch with him. It was time for us to wait.

And so we waited. Hours passed in silence, nothing around to do but watch the light through the curtains grow in intensity. The quiet was nice. This was it, I thought. What would people think of *Ron: Bail Bonds and Bounty Hunting* in five years? Ten, twenty? Probably nothing at all, but that didn’t matter. The future didn’t matter, and neither did the past—at least not enough to take away the meaning of what we were doing now.

The meaning of this story. Not Ron’s, but mine. How I left California, the show, the DEF network. How I left it all. How I did something that mattered and saved the life of someone capable of doing good—Ron’s life. I wasn’t going to let him die, just like Sydney Carton didn’t let Darnay die in that Charles Dickens book. *A Tale of Two Cities*.

We waited. Maybe Ron thought Duane would burst through the door, but he didn’t. By late evening, when the light through the curtains was a heavy yellow, the doorbell rang. Clearly, Ron had not been expecting this as his eyes made that familiar bulge that meant he was confused. He thought he’d get the jump on Duane trying to get the jump on him. But now someone was at the door, ringing the bell like a perfect gentleman. Maybe it was the Chinese food delivery guy, back for a better tip, or a neighbor, even. Maybe the Entertainment Network was coming to

interview us, or the police was there. The possibilities were endless. Or it could be Duane, ready with his own weapon—ready to murder whoever he saw first.

I saw Ron struggle with what to do and he started to stand up but I didn't let him. On my way to the door, more so than ever before in my life, I was sure that this wasn't the end. That it may be the end, but that it also wasn't. That there'd be something afterward. Ted Burroughs had thought so, and for him, there had been our telling of his story. And there'd be the telling of mine, too. Ron would make it happen. So I did something. I opened the door.