

# All Bad News

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First thing: Austin's head feels like it's splitting open from the inside—the worst fucking hangover he's had in his young life. Second thing: sunlight. His eyes aren't even open and he knows it must be almost noon. And how many days this time? He thinks for a second, but the answer doesn't come to him. Where the hell are you, he wonders. An even better question. His eyes creep open. The sun is blinding. The woods. Somewhere.

Third thing: he's itching all over. Austin's arms and neck have been feasted on by mosquitoes in the night. It's fucking awful. He scratches his skin. Fourth thing: there's a terrible lump behind his right shoulder where his back came to rest on a root. Austin sits up. Pine needles stick to his bare arms. Fifth and sixth things: his backpack is missing, and he can't remember where the hell he could've lost it. There's also a red Solo cup filled with flat, lukewarm beer sitting at the foot of the large pine tree whose root tried to punch a hole through his shoulder in the night. That cup and the beer inside it, Austin tells himself, are officially your only possessions. He decides he'll need them both.

The last thing Austin can remember is Maryland. Somewhere in Maryland, after sneaking onto that bus at a highway rest stop. I-70 maybe. He can remember the heavenly smell of Burger King from the passengers as they got back on board. More comes back. Austin remembers trying to look casual, being drunk and still having a fifth of vodka and a baggie full of amphetamines in the backpack.

He had his wallet in there too. And now he's here, which could be anywhere. It looks like Western Massachusetts maybe, Upstate New York, or some shit-eating farm town in Virginia, but who the hell cares? A forest is a forest, right?

Austin hears the sound of tires on a roadway in the distance, so he gets up, careful not to spill the beer—probably the one damn thing that can help his pounding headache, if and only if he can somehow manage to keep a stale beer down on an empty stomach. Austin hopes he might find enough shade on the other side of the highway to sit for long enough to sip the beer and remember something—where the hell he is for one, and maybe even how the hell he got here.

He makes his way through the trees to a field, through another patch of trees and to the grassy swath that runs alongside the narrow highway. He sits in the shady grass without crossing. The road is two lanes, separated by yellow dashes with no signs in sight that could answer the question of location. Cars are few in both directions, but Austin decides it's safer to drink at least half the stale beer here, in case a car comes and he has to run across. Besides, it's cool here. The grass is soft.

Austin thinks there might be nothing worse to drink in the entire fucking world than a flat, watery, warm light beer. He thinks it's light beer, anyway. It's terrible regardless. But good enough. Better than nothing. He thinks about Maryland: When did you get off the bus? Which way was it heading? Why the hell should you even care? You're here now. The grass is soft, and the shade is cool. That's enough, right? There's still half a beer here.

He sips the beer for a while.

There seems to be something on the other side of the road. Isn't that the way of things, though? Always over there. People were made to move. That's all. Move.

Of course, there hasn't been a car for the whole time he's been sitting. But standing, thinking about crossing the highway, now cars come flying past. He tells himself to be patient, that there's no need to race across. From the height of the roadway, it looks like there might be a river across the way. There's space in the trees beyond the other side of the road, running as far as Austin can see, into the distance, parallel to the road. Water would be nice, he thinks – if it's not dirty, if it's not freezing cold – or even, the cold might help the headache too. Could soothe the mosquito bites.

There's no sound of cars, so he walks. Halfway across, tires scream.

"Shit!" Austin realizes the car's not going to stop. The car expands in his field of vision – an entire fucking universe the size and shape of a red Corvette. It swells, almost in slow motion, yet the tires seem to scream in real time. Austin's legs feel rooted to the ground in that frozen moment.

Somehow time, it slips, and Austin staggers back, and the car is stopped right where he was standing a half second ago.

"Fucking asshole!" Austin hears the driver shout. The car's windows are open. The driver blasts the horn.

Fuck that guy, Austin thinks. "Fuck you! You almost killed me."

"Get the fuck off the highway, you bum!"

It's already out of Austin's hand before he can even think about what he's doing. He sees the shape of the yellowish liquid change into this amorphous mass as it hurtles through the air on its way to the Corvette's windshield. The liquid hits the windshield, obscuring the faces of the two men in the car for a split second.

He hears the doors open. Click. Click.

They look like a couple of angry rednecks. They're wearing tank tops – the passenger's is white, the driver's is black. They're both wearing gold chains too and camouflage hats on sideways – redneck homeboys. They're going to fucking kill you, Austin tells himself.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't see you guys."

"You poured shit all over my fucking car."

"It was just a beer, man. I'm sorry. I was startled."

"You poured beer on my car, you vagrant piece of shit?"

The driver's face looks like a grenade with the pin pulled.

"I'm sorry, man."

The driver shuts his door and starts walking toward Austin. The passenger's eyes are cold – slick and lifeless.

"Let's dust this fucking bum, Ace," the driver says.

The dark-haired one, the passenger, he goes for something in the back seat. Austin doesn't want to know what it is. Run, Austin tells himself, heading for the woods. Fucking run!

A few frantic strides. He hears the crack of a shotgun discharge, and a blast of wind rushes past Austin's left ear. He hurtles down the embankment and dives into the trees.

He hears the second shot. It sounds like cannon fire.

Buckshot spatters through the leaves, spitting through branches and bark. The chick-chick of the shotgun being cocked precedes another blast, and Austin stuffs his head into the dirt and leaves, hoping to get down low enough. There's gotta be another shot coming, he thinks, and he's down low, crouched at the bottom of the highway embankment. He's deciding if it's worth it to run and give the shooter a sound to aim at? Austin can't really see him up on the roadway, just the grass through the leaves. The two assholes are talking to each other, but Austin can't hear what they're saying. Stay here, Austin thinks, they're not following. Suddenly he's aware of every sound. There's no headache. His mind is sharp. There's another set of tires humming toward them and a chickadee singing in the pine tree at the edge of the clearing. Austin imagines the bird can see everything from its lofty vantage point. The approaching truck slows.

"What're you boys shooting at?" the driver of the pickup asks.

"Turkey," the driver of the Corvette says. "There was a whole flock of 'em down the side of the road there."

"You boys hunting turkeys?"

"That your damn business, old man?" the driver says.

Time to move, Austin thinks. He gets up as quietly as he can, sneaking for the first few steps, then he runs. Farther down the hill, into the woods, thirty yards from the road now he ducks behind a tree big enough to hide him. The pickup truck is pulling away.

Austin can hear the Corvette pulling to the side of the road. The dark-haired passenger with the shotgun walks down the embankment toward the edge of the woods.

Boots crunch leaves where Austin was just hiding. Better run, Austin thinks, if that asshole gets any closer you're fucked.

The second Austin moves, he hears the next blast. It obscures every other sound in the world for a split second. The wind rushes past his ears as he flees. Austin is all out, blasting through the undergrowth. Twenty more yards and he's out of the trees to a clearing. He charges into a little grove of saplings by the side of the river. He ducks down in the undergrowth, trying not to move, or even breathe. Austin can't hear anything now. He can't hear the shooter. Five seconds of silence. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds.

In the distance the Corvette growls, a car door shuts, and the car drives off. Austin kneels with his hands and fingers digging into a muddy mess of twigs and brown earth and pine needles. He crawls his way from the sapling grove, careful to step out slowly. He moves without making a sound, worried about whether the shooter actually got into the car. He could still be out there, Austin thinks, waiting for you to come out from your hiding place. Wait. Wait longer – two minutes. Can you time two minutes by mosquito bites? Is three enough? Fucking psychopaths. Over a beer – half a fucking beer! Not even.

Austin doesn't see any blood on his clothes, and he doesn't feel like he's been hit, but you never know. So much adrenaline. He's never felt so much adrenaline. He runs his trembling hands over his head, and when he gets to his left ear, Austin feels moisture sticking to his fingertips – something more than the sweat that's starting to flow from every pore in his skin. He realizes a piece of buckshot must have caught his ear. There isn't much blood, but it's starting to

sting. The headache's starting to creep up again. With his fingertips, he can feel a little ding in the top of his earlobe where the buckshot hit. A little piece. Austin doubts if anyone will ever notice that there's a piece gone. He's lost that piece of his ear, half a beer, and that solo cup to those assholes. He realizes he was wrong about the beer being his last possession. He still has his shirt, his jeans, his underwear, his one pair of socks, and his shoes. These are your last true possessions, he thinks — things that shouldn't be taken for granted.

Austin walks through another grove of sparse undergrowth and finds himself atop the riverbank, looking through several bushes to the water beneath. It's the blackest water he's ever set eyes on. In it, there isn't a hint of movement. Not a ripple, nor a wave, nor a visible current of any kind. Not to the eye. It's as dark a black as Austin can ever recall seeing, as though a wound has opened in the crust of the Earth and its blood is this thick, liquid black. He's seen waters: brown rivers washing silt across farmland; clear streams pulling a winter's worth of mountain meltwater to green prairies below; the dark blue of the ocean in winter; and the pure blue of the Gulf as bright and brilliant as the sky on a clear spring day. This black, though, has a look about it, as though you could dip your fingers or your feet only inches into it and watch them disappear before your very eyes. God, Austin thinks, it'd be so nice to swim.

He weaves his way along the riverbank, looking for a path to the water. He swears the river doesn't want him near. Bushes block every approach each time he gets to the top of the riverbank, or else there are thick reeds or short

slopes too steep to descend. It seems to get darker now, the water. There's no way in.

He moves back toward the road instead, figuring it'll be a quicker walk than cutting through this gnarled watershed. There's the thought, of course, that those assholes in the Corvette could come back. But would they? Would that old man in the truck have called the police? Would those assholes care if he did? You have to wonder about a person who could kill a man over a spilt beer. But he could be miles from any town, and cutting a path through weeds and bushes is no way to travel. Back to the highway it is.

Austin watches the road ahead, and every now and then, he turns around to be sure. The color red sends him shooting for cover twice. Once an ambulance, whose lettering is too far away to read. Another time, it's a red pickup that sets him scrambling.

He can't get the thought of the water out of his head — of sticking his fingers and his feet into that blackness, of losing more things. Austin sees this image in his mind, like a hallucination or a dream of some kind: he sees his body leaning over that black riverbank, looking down into a reflection of himself that he remembers. He's naked. He's lost the clothes from his back now and he's smiling into the water. He's lost every last one of his possessions, his wallet, his identity, his clothes, that piece of his ear. He sees himself smiling into that black water and he knows he's going to lose those teeth soon enough. Eventually, he'll step forward, put his legs and fingers and hands and arms into that stagnant black water, and the water will swallow everything whole.

A growl rolls atop a wave of sound like the hush of tires. It grows louder. His headache, the blackness, the awful pain of hunger, the question of when he last ate something, anything—all of these things are crowding out something else. Austin wonders if he's forgotten something. He turns and sees red.

He sees the muzzle flare, the cloud of smoke, and he hears the shot all at the same time. His feet move without thought. Those fuckers! One second, maybe two. Fifty feet and closing. Austin dives down the embankment. Tires squeal.

The red Corvette screams past, overshooting its mark. It's enough of an opening to gain some distance—to get back to the trees. The squealing of the tires stops, and the Corvette reverses to the point in the trees where Austin ducked into the woods. Ace and the driver remain in the car, and Austin is certain they can't see him hiding in the bushes at the foot of the embankment.

"We're going to hit you, fucker!" the driver shouts. "You've got nothing. No fucking chance."

Isn't that enough for them? That someone would even bother to take that. That nothing. But you do have your clothes and most of your ears and your teeth, Austin tells himself, and you have a few moments of painless peace, while the adrenaline courses through your blood again.

The adrenaline soothes every pain, from headache to hunger to the stinging of that fractured earlobe. They have given Austin that much, and a reason to stick to the bushes for good.

The Corvette growls into the distance, shrinking into a small red spot on a green horizon before it vanishes altogether.

This time, Austin sticks to the woods, avoiding patches of reeds where the riverside gets marshy and skirting around patches of poison ivy where the ground gets dry. He learns that if he moves fast enough, the mosquitoes don't bite, and, he figures there's a chance he might get to a town before getting shot to death. He starts to think about the night before again, figuring that he took a bunch of those amphetamines. Must have. And drank all that vodka, and more for sure. He hopes he's walking in the right direction. He can't even tell which way is downstream with the water so stagnant, but he figures that doesn't really matter. This was where it was all going to end up anyway. So now you're here, he tells himself.

It takes hours to get anywhere different. The sun isn't too bad in the trees, but in those stretches where the trees give way to the tall grasses and reeds—forget it. “So fucking thirsty,” he whispers. If only.

Austin figures it must be afternoon by now. The shape of a roof intrudes in the treeline, a black triangular beacon of—well, hope maybe, but it could belong to a bunch of crazy rednecks too. He cuts through the bushes to the edge of the yard. There's a stone wall, a rusty lawnmower being consumed by the unkept grass, and there's a garden hose attached to a water spigot outside a small garden. No one seems to be home. So he sits and waits. He watches. How long, though, he asks himself. How long a wait is long enough to be sure? And if they come home while you're

waiting? Then what? Thirst wins. So fucking thirsty. Go for it. Walk, don't run.

He makes those lonesome steps from the trees to the water spigot, looking around him with each movement forward. He sees no one. Austin picks up the hose and opens the faucet's handle. The water coming from the end of the hose is so clear and brilliant he can hardly imagine it's real. That taste, though. Water from the garden hose, like childhood. It's perfect. He runs his head under the clear stream, brushing his hair, his face, his hands clean. The water's so cold it takes his breath away at times. Austin tells himself, you will not die today.

From the lawn, he can see a dog through the sliding glass door. The little black mutt has worked his way behind the door's curtain and he stares at Austin—the intruder. The sound of the dog's bark is muffled by the double paned glass. It's a curious thing: once you cross that outer boundary it seems easy to think about exploring every inch of a place you know you shouldn't be—to see if there's something edible growing in the garden, to see if there isn't an open window or an unlocked door, to see how friendly the dog might be, and if there's food in the refrigerator. Take the water as a victory, Austin. Let the little guard dog give a final bark and keep his pride. These people have done enough for you. A garden hose can save a life.

As he progresses, Austin thinks a town must be near. He passes more houses, and soon, other houses encroach along the riverbank. Hunger is a concern now, but mostly, he's just happy the headache is gone and no one is trying to kill him.

Now there's a place—a, well—looks like the edge of a shopping center to Austin's eyes. It appears to be the back end of a Home Depot—lumber and bags of mulch, trash barrels, a garden hose. Keep walking? To where? Is there a plan here for rock bottom? Where does one go? You keep going until something presents itself. And if it doesn't? Keep going till it does. It's amazing how fast a town appears. Like somebody drew a line and said, nature here, town here. Cars and people, Home Depot. Parking lots and traffic. Beats mosquitoes, reeds, and poison ivy, though.

Austin has the thought that he might find out where the hell he is. A lot of the license plates are Jersey. Some Maryland, some PA. Almost everywhere, it never fails, he thinks. Home Depot, Walmart. Then after that, what else? McDonalds, KFC maybe. A mall. He wonders if anyone ever thinks their town is great because it's different—because they have something no one else has.

Shit. Red Corvette.

It's out on the main street, moving around the far corner of the Home Depot parking lot. Austin's not sure if they can see him. Is it the same one, he asks himself. Would they shoot you here in daylight? With all these people around? Do you want to find out? They're braking. Shit.

Austin rushes toward the group of buildings ahead of him. There's a Jiffy Lube that smells like new tires and old oil, there's a fence to hop, and around a corner, there's a restaurant at the edge of a small strip mall: Bembry's Chicken. It smells glorious.

There's a bell on the door, but no one seems to notice it ringing. It's got to be the weirdest looking restaurant he's ever seen. The dining area is too narrow and oddly beige

in the light of the afternoon sun. Austin can't see too far into the kitchen, but the front sitting area is triangle-shaped with a lunch counter running along a glass window that overlooks the Jiffy Lube. Those redneck homeboys are passing by slow. Austin wonders how a guy with a fuse that short hasn't gotten pissed off by somebody else by now, shooting at the next poor bastard instead. But there he is. Ace isn't in the passenger seat anymore. That fucker couldn't possibly see this far, Austin thinks, could he? Through a window? Past the Jiffy Lube, across a lane of traffic at fifty yards?

"Hey, buddy. Can I help you with something?"

It's the Chicken Guy, and Austin knows it's not really a question, because the guy's wearing that face. Austin notices the glaring eyes beneath that plain black baseball cap. Behind the Chicken Guy's head, all Austin can see is a wall of rotisserie chickens rolling downward, their brown skins beading up clear sweat, and God, it's a heavenly odor. He can't help but lick his lips. Everyone in that little brown triangle is staring at him — an elderly couple, some old guy with a cane sitting by himself, a pretty teenage girl, and a UPS driver. All eyes on Austin. He looks back out the window. The Corvette's still creeping by.

"Give me a minute," Austin says. "I need a second to decide."

"Decide, what? We sell chicken. Did you come in here to buy chicken?"

"I'm just — give me a second, sir. Please."

"You're bleeding from your ear," Chicken Guy says.

Austin puts his hand to his ear. It isn't much blood. A trickle. Almost nothing. He turns back to look at the Chicken Guy.

"Somebody shot at me. The guy that shot at me, he's out there. Please, sir."

"You can't be in here, bleeding like that. Go and get yourself cleaned up. You got blood and dirt all over you."

"Can I use your bathroom, sir, please? Just to clean off the blood?"

"Are you here to buy chicken?"

Austin looks back outside. He doesn't see the Corvette anymore.

"Buddy?" Chicken Guy says.

"I don't have any money with me."

Chicken Guy comes around the counter and starts walking toward Austin.

"Look, you're welcome to come back when you have money and you're not bleeding in my restaurant causing a public health hazard, but till then, you need to go, buddy."

Chicken Guy opens the front door. There's no Corvette out there, but Austin's sure it'll be circling around again.

"I've been shot," he says. "He shot me."

"Sure he did," Chicken Guy says, still holding the door. "On your way, fella."

Austin steps past him, into the afternoon heat. "If I get murdered, I hope you hear about it on the news."

"I don't watch the news, buddy. All bad news," Chicken Guy says. "And do the world a favor and jump in the river. You smell like you haven't showered in a month."

"I hope—"

Chicken Guy slams the door shut.

Austin starts creeping along the front of the building. It's a strip mall. He looks in the windows, keeping his back to the street, looking for the reflection of anything red behind him. The first shop is an insurance agency. The next looks like a realtor's. There's a convenience store. Austin thinks about going in. It'd probably buy about as much time as Chicken Guy gave him. Could mean the difference between life and death.

"Hey," Austin hears a voice behind him. "Was that true? Somebody shot at you?"

He turns around. It's the girl from inside the chicken place – the teenager, looks about sixteen, Austin figures.

He peeks over his shoulder to the street again.

"Some assholes in a red Corvette," Austin says. "They tried to take my head off with a shotgun."

"We should call the police," she says.

"I don't need to get caught up in anything. I doubt the police would believe me anyways. I just need to get out of town. Keep moving."

She comes closer to inspect his ear. "Will you let me fix up your ear at least? I could help."

"Are you for real?"

She smiles. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know, I guess. It's just the first time anyone's said a kind word to me in a long while."

"I'm for real," she says, extending a hand. "My name's Megan."

"You're not gonna like, try to convert me to some crazy cult or something?"

“No,” she laughs. “Of course not. It’s just, I feel bad. You’re bleeding, and you got shot for God’s sake, and that guy back there was such a dick.”

“All right then, Megan,” he says, offering his hand. “I’m Austin. I sure appreciate the help.”

Megan takes Austin’s hand in hers and shakes it. Such soft hands, he thinks.

“Nice to meet you, Austin,” she says. “Hang on, just a minute and let me get my stuff. I’ll be right back.”

She starts walking back to the chicken place and stops when she gets to the door. “Hey, are you hungry?”

Austin hesitates, shrugging his shoulders. She looks over at him again, nodding her head.

“I’ll get you something,” she says, disappearing inside.

Austin looks back toward the road, realizing that in the time he was speaking with the girl, the Corvette could have been a thousand miles away—in a different universe. It’s hard for him to imagine that she could be real on this day. He hears engines and the sound of tires on the road outside the strip mall. They seem real. Each minute she’s gone it becomes harder for him to believe that he’s not conjuring her out of some hazy withdrawal—some subconscious survival instinct. How long should you stand here waiting, he asks himself.

She appears again. She’s carrying a backpack over one shoulder and has a white paper bag in her right hand. Her eyes are clear and bright. Her hair looks dark and new, like something brought fresh into the world in the springtime.

“I got you a sandwich,” she says. “I hope you’re hungry. They make a really big chicken sandwich. It’s really good.”

“I didn’t want to ask,” Austin says. “I’m starving. Thank you so much.”

Austin sits on the rim of one of the strip mall’s large wooden planters, between the parking spaces and the storefront sidewalk. He nods at her as she sits down alongside him.

“You want to tell me what happened to you?”

Austin pulls the sandwich out of the bag, and she’s right. It’s gigantic and beautiful and smells heavenly.

“This sandwich is the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me,” he says, and she laughs.

He’s already inhaling the first half of the sandwich when she asks again, “How did it happen? That ear? It looks so gross. You sure you don’t need to go to the hospital?”

“It’s just a scratch,” he says, trying his best not to choke on the chicken sandwich. “I was out on the highway by the river, just minding my business. And they pulled up and took my backpack, my clothes, my wallet, my money. I was just, you know —” He chomps down on another huge bite.

Austin can tell she sees through the lie. He looks into her eyes and knows that she knows somehow — the way she nods at him. He has a sense that she even knows why he’s lying to her.

“I’m just lucky it wasn’t worse,” Austin says, after swallowing. “He wasn’t trying to scare me. He was trying to kill me.”

He can tell she believes that.

“What were you doing out there all alone on the highway?”

“I don’t know, passing through I guess. That’s kinda what I do, you know. Camping, backpacking. Travel

around. I move around a lot. I don't bother nobody, though."

She looks at him skeptically again. Ausin's pretty sure she knows he's not a camper. A quarter of the sandwich is gone, and she's smiling at the way he's devouring it. He's not sure what to think. He wonders why this beautiful girl would have any interest in him when the whole rest of the world couldn't care less if he was lying dead by the side of the river.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone eat so fast," she says.

"Been a long day. A long string of them, actually."

"After you finish that, I'll take you somewhere to clean up that ear."

She pauses, as though considering something. Austin's still chewing too fast to break the silence. He chews, and swallows, and he takes a deep breath. There's not much more than two good bites left of the first half of the sandwich.

"You're thinking about something," Austin says.

"Well, it's just. I was going to take you across to where I work, but the quickest way's through the woods."

"I don't mind going around if you're not—"

"Well, I mean. You're still worried about those guys coming back, right?"

"I don't care anymore. If you don't feel comfortable walking in the woods with me."

"You wouldn't?"

"I'd rather get shot to death by those assholes than make you feel uncomfortable, Megan."

She pauses for a moment to consider.

"You wouldn't hurt anybody, Austin. I can see that."

"I've never hurt anyone," he says, taking the last bite of the sandwich's first half. Austin closes up the bag, keeping the other half of the sandwich for more desperate times.

"Come on," she says, and the way she looks up at him, her eyes seem to be smiling.

She leads the way to a path behind the strip mall. There are a few little trees and a grassy grove. It looks like the type of place kids'd ride their bikes and build jumps, smoke their first cigarette, hang out with friends and make out with girls until one of them gets their first car. Seems like that kind of town.

"What's this place called?" Austin asks.

"We just call it the back woods, you know, because it's behind the mall."

"No, the name of the town, I mean. I don't even know."

"Oh," she laughs. "I forgot you aren't from around here. This is Milford."

"Like I said," Austin says, "I travel around a lot. Been moving from place to place ever since I finished high school. Must be like two, three years now."

"You must've seen a lot of places."

"I've seen a lot."

"You know, I'd like to travel someday, Austin. I'd like to see the world."

He doesn't have the heart to tell her it isn't what she thinks it is, all Eiffel Towers and Grand Canyons and shit. It's mostly like this little dirt path — all nondescript, littered on, and surrounded by strip malls. And he sure as hell doesn't have the stomach to ask her what state they're in. What the hell would she think about a guy who doesn't

even know what state he's in, Austin wonders. Milford, Maryland? Milford, Kentucky?

The path opens to a small group of houses – residences, with the backyard lawns stretching all the way back to the woods. No fences. Three nice little houses. Toys out on the grass like all the neighbors' kids play together. Austin marvels at the picture this place has conjured in his mind, of some faded memory, of a distant lifetime he believes to be foreign and yet familiar. You can't realize how precarious it is – how fast it's all gone. Even though it seems to be stagnant, it's moving, and you can only sense the movement when you're in it, looking back at some fixed point on the shore.

Megan leads the way right into the three backyards like she's walked there a thousand times before – like she belongs. Austin doesn't realize it, but he hesitates at the edge of the first property. She turns around toward him. "Come on," she says. "It's okay. They don't mind us passing through."

He follows her when she begins to walk forward again. Austin asks himself when he stopped thinking he could be welcome in a place like this. Those three houses – they look like cathedrals to him now. He stops at the second house to stare. Big clear windows, white siding, the deck looming over the green lawn beneath, big stainless steel grill.

"What is it?" she asks.

"I grew up in a house that looks a lot like that house," Austin says.

She doesn't say anything back. He just stands there looking at it for maybe twenty seconds before he realizes he must really be weirding her out.

"I had a brother once, you know," he says. "I think he's in the Army now."

She looks at him all funny, all sad and all funny. Austin recognizes that look too.

"C'mon," she says, and she offers him her hand. Austin remembers how soft her skin was when he shook her hand earlier at the strip mall. It's hard for him not to be breathless. He gives her his hand and she carries him away with it, and there's this sudden feeling welling up inside him and he doesn't recognize it. For the longest time, he hasn't felt a God damn thing except hunger or pain or some kind of intoxication. Austin can't remember what this incredible feeling is, and for a few seconds he wonders what the hell it is he could be experiencing, before deciding it must be happiness. It's all he can do not to cry and scare off the girl forever, and he knows she'll go. She'll go. She'll go soon. But Austin wants to hold her hand for as long as he can so he doesn't forget this feeling when she's gone. So fucking soft.

They walk the rest of the path in silence for a good five minutes before it opens to the parking lot behind what looks to be a typical shopping mall.

"You can let go if you want to," Austin says as they approach the edge of the parking lot.

She stops walking. She's quiet for a moment before she looks up at his eyes.

"You have beautiful eyes, Austin. Sad eyes."

"I'm sorry about back there," he says. "It's just—"

"It's okay," she says.

He can't take his eyes off her now, and he wants to cry again. That feeling, God. So beautiful. Her skin, and her hair.

"You know," he says, "wanting to travel and all that. It's great. It's wonderful, Megan. But if you have a house like that to go home to. Don't ever forget how great that is, you know."

She nods. "I know," she says.

She looks more beautiful every time Austin looks at her, and younger somehow. Younger, he fears.

"I work at Banana Republic," she says, "and we have a first aid kit in the back room, but you can't come in the store with that ear all jacked up like that. You'll have to wait on the bench by the fountain."

"That's all right," he says.

"I can fix you up there."

She pauses. It's that moment, Austin feels it coming now, when she decides to let go of his hand and lets hers dangle by her side. But she doesn't let go. Her hand is so soft. They've stood there a little too long, and all he can see is the clarity in her eyes, a goodness, and perhaps even a longing to see something good in him. And there's a gnawing question Austin cannot shake from his mind, and if you ask her, he tells himself, you know the answer will be fifteen and your life will be over again.

"What time is it, Megan?" he asks instead. "Shouldn't you be in school or something?"

She smiles. She laughs. She looks up at his eyes, and with her free hand, she reaches up and touches the hair above Austin's wounded ear. She inches closer and lets him touch her hair in the same place. He feels her breath-

ing, and for a moment he can believe that she wants nothing more in this world than to let some strange person from a distant place lean in and kiss her back into oblivion. Some pure, unspeakable bliss.