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Twisted Jowls

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Andrew Young is an English major, with minors in Writing and Film Studies. When he graduates this spring, Andrew would like to “live the dream” and pursue a career in writing, publication, or modeling. On campus he’s an active member of Lambda Chi Alpha and Gettysburg College Choir. Andrew enjoys reading, naked walks on the beach, margaritas, and Jack Bauer.

Twisted Jowls

1.

It was three hours before he saw the first police car. Streaming south on I-95 through North Carolina, Donald noticed the trooper sitting behind a clump of trees and parked in a U-turn lane that ran between the two sides of the highway. Instinctively Donald took his foot off the gas in an effort to slow his car before the trooper clocked him. But Donald had not been speeding. He had been very careful about that and painstakingly kept his cherry apple red Thunderbird convertible at a steady seventy miles per hour, five miles above the speed limit, enough to keep up with the traffic but not fast enough to warrant any notice from state troopers. Troopers like the one he had just passed and at whom he now nervously glanced in his rearview mirror. The convertible was noticeable enough, but that too was what he'd been aiming for. Blend in by sticking out.

The police force that had been growing larger and inching closer in the back of Donald's mind would not be looking for a gentleman of his age sporting Bermuda shorts, an open Hawaiian shirt and exposed tank, cruising along in a red convertible. They would be looking for an old decrepit geezer who wore meticulously ironed pants and black shoes with black socks and hideously patterned sweaters even in this late September heat. That was at least what Donald had been wearing for the past ten years and was exactly what he'd been wearing on the day he launched his southward flight. His rationalization was not, however, just about changing his appearance. The Hawaiian shirt was just as hideous in its own manner as the brown moldy sweaters he used to wear every day. It reminded him of something raw and American, something he had read once in a dime novel or seen frozen on a movie poster, not young but simply alive, just like the car he was driving and the unfiltered cigarette he unconsciously lifted to his lips for one last drag before flicking it onto the highway.

He glanced in his mirror again. In it he could still see the front of the trooper's car as it receded into the background and could not be sure if the image was simply vibrating with the rest of the Thunderbird or actually inching forward. As the threat finally began to curve out of sight, the police cruiser undeniably pulled into a gap in the rushing traffic. Shit. Once again Donald lifted his foot off the gas. He could continue his safe clop and hope that he still had at least a day before they caught up with him, or he could hit the gas and put into motion the fantasy he had been imagining for the past three days and three hours of this morning. His foot hovered for only one second longer and Donald watched as the speedometer fell minutely before he eased his foot on the gas, lightly at first, and then confidently. The engine groaned and Donald felt the acceleration pin him against the hot leather seat as the wind thundered over the frame of the windshield.

2.

Cecelia had determined twenty minutes ago that the driver of the car she was in was an asshole. There had been hints from the moment he had picked her up: the khaki pants, the pink polo, the brown boat shoes that manipulated the gas of his luxury sedan.

"You on the way to a meeting or something?" she asked, trying to gauge him. Did he have money or was this a compensation issue? Did he earn his fortune or was he spoon fed? Had he picked up a girl at the last rest stop as a form of charity that made him feel better about his pampered existence, or was he hoping to fulfill a hopelessly unoriginal sexual fantasy that he could brag about at the frat house? This was a game Cecelia played with all the men who gave her rides since she had left her halfway house three weeks ago in New York. They were always men. Women never stopped. And they were always alone. Some drove pickup trucks and some drove monstrous SUVs and some drove sleek sports cars. This one drove a luxury sedan. They were all the same, they all wanted the same thing, and they all were as boring as the one that had come before them. So she played little games with herself, guessing where they came from, who they were before and after the highway, and whether daddy hugged them too little or mommy too much.

"Why would you say that?" he said, responding to her question as he smiled at her, raising one eyebrow. His words dripped with suave, erotic resonance, as if she had inquired about his favorite sexual position.

"You seem dressed up. Not many men wear pink."

"It's not pink. It's salmon." The smile disappeared and he looked back at the road. His fantasy went limp. She looked forward again, adjusting her position in the warm leather seat and inhaling the pungent smell of recently butchered and chemically processed cow that covered the car interior. Outside the typical Carolinian scenery passed by. Rows of trees, lush in their summer greenness interrupted by rolling mounds of earth through which the highway had been carved back when Eisenhower connected America and destroyed small towns. A hellishly clear blue sky sparkled above, shattering sunlight and reflecting it off the metal bodies of the passing cars. She tried to roll down the window to inhale the thick, humid, morning air, but couldn't find the button.

A red convertible rocketed by them on the left, well outdoing their speed of eighty. She saw a blur of red and white and caught a glimpse of a flapping hula shirt and straw hat before the sun bounced off the blazoned trunk and blinded her. The sedan rocked gently when the air between the cars compressed and the young man jerked the steering wheel, attempting to steer clear of the car that was already receding into the approaching distance.

"Jesus," he remarked. Another blur, this one white, shot by even faster, and Cecilia clearly saw the blue and red lights flashing brighter than the streaming sunlight outside.

"Fuck yeah," the asshole asserted smartly, "Pigs finally show up when you need them." He glanced at Cecilia as if he expected her agreement. She returned a look that said what the fuck would you know, the only trouble you've ever been in was when you got caught using a fake ID at the yacht club. He looked back to the road with an expression of resignation.

3.

Even though the wind was roaring around Donald, whipping his shirt and making him constantly check his straw hat, he was somehow sweating. His tank and his socks were soaked. He looked in his mirror. The trooper was still there, lights blazing fiercely and siren blaring like a dying rabbit. Donald pushed on the gas harder, but the car had reached its maximum velocity and began shuddering violently under the strain he was pushing it to.

Dot's voice suddenly popped into his head, from their trip to New Hampshire when he let gravity take them down Mt. Washington in their old Ford sedan. Jesus H. Christ, Donald! Slow down! You trying to kill us? Maybe he was. She was dead now, either way, and he was not. Not yet, not if he could help it.

Ahead a wall of traffic loomed, both lanes crawling to a halt, brake lights igniting and screaming at Donald to stop. He swerved into the right lane, cutting off a minivan and entered the shoulder, speeding past rows and rows of slowing traffic. The minivan had panicked, following him onto the shoulder and stopping. In his mirror Donald watched the cars behind it follow suit, all of them swerving and braking, blocking the entire highway and shoulder. The trooper was there. He tried to follow Donald but ended up spinning off the shoulder and through the mud on the side of the road before his back-end slammed against the base of a tree, swinging the car around and coming to a rest like a crippled beast, lights still flashing. Donald floored it along the shoulder and barely noticed the sign he passed. Rest stop: two miles. Texaco, Burger King, and hopefully a hostage.

4.

The gun was hot from sitting in his glove compartment. And heavy. Heavier than he had ever imagined a gun would be. John Wayne made it look so damn light and easy. He was still sweating and now he was shivering. A car pulled in front of the window he was sitting by in the rest stop and a fat middle-aged man got out, followed by his wife, just as old and just as fat, who seemed to have more hair on her upper lip than her husband had on his scalp. No good. He needed someone young. Someone alone. A woman, preferably, with an imagination. He needed someone just as desperate as he was to run away, from what he was still not sure, but to run simply for the sake of not standing still. His body ached and another wave of pain swept through him. He winced.

It was again the physical pain he had known since his retirement. The pain that had actually forced him to retire and required him to swallow green pills and white pills and red pills in different combinations ten times a day. The pain of a warm blanket that enveloped him entirely and smothered him for so long that he accepted and forgot about it and lived with it like a stain on his favorite shirt. But on Thursday that physical pain had disappeared. He began moving again, for the first time in over ten years, and as long as he kept moving he'd be able to outrun his pain. Until he swerved into this crappy rest stop and extinguished the engine of his Thunderbird.

This was not part of the plan. The pain of stillness and age was pulsing through him, stifling him, screaming at his subconscious that he needed to get out of this hell hole now or once again face the horrifying pain of defeat and resignation. He no longer needed his pills or his therapeutic bed or his arthritic braces; he needed his car and he needed the road. But he also needed a hostage before he could continue. The cops would inevitably force him off the highway, but a hostage protected him and gave him coverage.

A state police car sailed past the rest stop, lights revolving. Number three. Donald glanced nervously across the food court, past the sunglasses kiosk and the pretzel stand, out the opposite windows where his Thunderbird sat, hidden from the highway traffic. As he looked back out the window a grey BMW pulled in a few spaces away. A young man got out dressed in a polo shirt and khakis. Some rich prick. A young woman followed. She wore an oversized hooded sweatshirt, torn jeans and a backpack slung over her shoulder. He guessed that she was in her early twenties, and

despite her worn out apparel, Donald recognized her striking attractiveness immediately. She had a face that was not typically gorgeous but uniquely pretty to her and her alone, framed by stands of curly, tangled brown hair. Donald felt something stir in him, many things. Rage and hunger and hope and vitality; this girl was everything he had once lost and was now trying to desperately win back. She was perfect.

The young man pulled out his wallet, exchanged what seemed like blunt words with his partner, and handed her some bills before heading into the rest stop. The girl remained. Donald stood up and walked outside. The girl still stood there, scanning the rest area as if she were at an amusement park and not sure which ride to choose next. Donald approached her.

"Excuse me miss, this may seem a little forward, but do you need a lift?" he tried to ask as calmly and politely as possible. There was no point in forcing her. Whoever the rich kid was, it seemed obvious that he had given her a ride and that she needed another one. Why not ask nicely?

She turned and looked directly into his eyes. Donald stared back into her blue ones, and quickly diverted, examining her slightly round face, void of makeup, making its raw distinctiveness all the more prominent now that he stood in front of her. She stared at his face for a few moments before moving up and down his figure, analyzing his build and odd clothes. She seemed to be fighting with herself, weighing her odds and pros and cons, eventually giving the impression that she had somehow lost.

"Sure," she said, her face breaking into a polite smile. "Cecelia," she said, extending her right hand towards Donald's.

"Donald." He grasped her warm, soft flesh, squeezing it lightly and realizing he had not touched anyone since Mary on Wednesday. He hid the sudden nausea, smiled back and led the way. They rounded the corner of the building and walked into the state police car.

Donald froze. The trooper, who appeared to be mid-sentence on the radio, stopped talking, and Donald could only guess that he glared back at him from behind his aviator sunglasses. Donald understood this man. He had seen him on television shows in which cops used excessive force to quell drunken idiots and poor people. He was the kind of man who had once been a bully and humiliated others for compensation and now wielded a gun for the very same reason, along with a big black club which he used primarily to beat the life out of rambunctious hillbillies who chose to dance on the line of law and order. But Donald was from out of state, and the trooper reveled in capturing and humiliating these rich, Yankee outsiders as not only a break from the normal white trash bash but to somehow inflict retribution on the North for all the trouble they had caused his kin in the great war of confederate independence.

Donald glanced at the stranger next to him and she looked back. Her smile was gone and he saw it replaced by fear and understanding. She was just as concerned with this run-in as he was. Perhaps she was running, too. But he also saw recognition; not that she knew what he had done or why he was running, but simply that she could relate to his predicament and understood that he needed to keep running immediately. She looked determined, down to business, as if she had been with Donald from the beginning and this interruption was as much an interruption from her own flight as it was his. Grabbing his hand she led Donald around the back of the building. She saw the Thunderbird, released his hand, and walked towards it. Donald reached into his left pocket and fished for his keys, pulling them out and dropping

them. He bent over to pick them up and as he stood, felt a firm grip on his shoulder. The grip spun him around.

Donald fired the gun. His hand had never left it since he began fingering it inside so it was easy for him to pull out of his pocket. It was still too heavy for him to fully raise, so the bullet exited the barrel at a downward angle, entering the leg of the trooper, opening the knee cap and expelling blood and bone onto the pavement and Donald's Bermuda shorts. Nobody screamed. Not Donald or the girl or the trooper who fell with a look of alarm, fidgeting with his gun holster as he hit the ground. His aviators thrown aside, Donald was now able to look him in the eyes, which were small, watery and grey. He watched as the trooper hung on to one last moment of consciousness before the pain of his wound registered in his brain, numbing his senses and settling him into shock. As the trooper closed his eyes and collapsed in relief, Donald took a step backwards and felt the pain drain from his body. He sensed the girl by his side. She knelt next to the still trooper, pushed aside his hands and removed his gun from its holster. She placed the gun in her tattered backpack, walked around the front of the Thunderbird, opened the passenger door, sat down and stared at Donald, waiting for him to get in and start driving.

5.

Jesus H. Christ. Jesus H. Christ. He shot a cop. This was all part of it. Everything he had seen in his life plastered on billboards and television shows and war propaganda posters and the big drive-in movie screen he went to with Dot and Rachel. The bad cop, the dirty good cop, the villain who won in the end, the fearless gangster right before his fall from the top of the world into the hands of God and American law. And everything they represented; the guns and the drugs and the sex and the blood and the booze and the cigarettes that Humphrey Bogart so nonchalantly lit up, sanctifying the image of what was young and masculine and heroic and alive. He was searching for it and found it when his bullet and that fat hick met. Christ, he just shot a cop. Donald was reeling as he pulled out onto the highway and floored it. It had been an accident, he hadn't really meant to do it, but the trooper had surprised him. It was instinctive.

It was exhilarating. All the anxiety that had been building up in him on his long trek, and boiling over at that rest stop, had been siphoned by that shot. His pain was gone and now all that pumped through his ragged veins was adrenaline. He inhaled the fresh, noontime air and glanced up at the sun streaming overhead. He was moving south again, running as far from the place he had been as he could go. The Florida Keys had always hung in his mind, a tropical fantasy out of a Jimmy Buffett song that now had been crystallized in his escape. That buoy and the sand and gulf promised him the furthest south he could go without leaving American soil. He looked at the green and black scene before him and floored it.

6.

Cecelia had not taken her eyes off Donald since he had entered the car. He seemed to have forgotten she was there. He was definitely old. Mid if not upper-eighties. He had the face of a bloodhound, saggy bags on either side, pulling down his eyes to reveal the watery redness beneath. His face kept flickering between a solemn blankness and smirks which ignited a light in his worn, drooping features. The straw hat he wore covered a bald, white head. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, taking one out and tilting the pack towards her, his first acknowledgement of her presence.

She took one without answering. He picked a lighter up that was wedged between the leather seats and lit her cigarette without taking his eyes from the road before lighting his own. Cecelia suppressed a chuckle. He looked out of place, cartoonish, like the clothes he wore were too tight and too young and the cigarette he smoked something not a man of his age should be doing in such a cavalier manner. Cecelia inhaled the sweet nicotine into her lungs, paused, savoring the raw feel before exhaling into the rushing wind.

She had recognized his straw hat and hula shirt immediately outside the rest stop, and she was more surprised about someone already offering her a ride than she was about the strange coincidence. Did she so obviously look like a drifter? She thought long about Donald's offer. She had seen him running from that trooper, but he had somehow escaped, and although he tried to convey a look of calm politeness, there was a certain panic in his words, and an anxious plea for help. She needed a ride and would be using him, but he also would be using her, not for self-esteem or for sex like all the other men, but for assistance in going wherever he seemed he needed to be going. After all, she was on the run too, and knew well what it was like to be in that place alone for so long.

She saw him unconsciously fingering a gun in his pocket and that made her nervous, not for fear of him shooting her because he obviously was asking her nicely to come with him, but rather shooting himself in the foot or the leg and leaving her without a ride. So she accepted and stuck by her decision, even when a stupid pig with a brain the size of his pecker let his guard down and confronted a man as obviously desperate and clearly armed as Donald. He got what he deserved. And that was it for her. Once the cop caught her with Donald they would bring her in with him and eventually figure out who she was and she'd be shipped back to New York state as quickly as it had taken Donald to solve that problem. She hesitated only a moment when the cop was shot, before throwing herself fully to Donald's side, wherever that may take her, it sure as hell was better than where she had come from, and certainly got a lot more interesting when Donald fired that gun.

"So, where you from Donald?" she asked him.

He smiled, glancing towards her for a second before looking back at the road. "Connecticut."

"You retired?"

"I was. I still am, in a way."

"In what way?"

"In the way that I don't have a job but I did once." His words came frankly and matter-of-fact. There was no play in them. A few moments of awkward silence passed. Donald began to fidget in his seat. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"New York. Outside the city."

"Yankees?" he asked smiling

"Red Sox. My mother was from Boston."

"You should tell that to my daughter, Rachel. She lives in North Jersey and is the same way. Hates the Yankees. Big Red Sox fan." He smiled for a moment, the lines of his sagging features twisting into a grin before they suddenly faded, as if he just remembered something completely different. He nervously glanced in the rearview mirror and Cecelia did the same in hers. She paused a long time, taking in the scenery.

"So what did you do?" she asked.

"I worked as a traveling salesman for most of my life before I retired. I sold

books and paper products. All over New England," he said.

"No, what did you do? Why are you running?" she asked, correcting the mistake. He stared at the road while he answered.

"I killed someone."

"Who?"

"It doesn't really matter much. She's dead. I'm alive." Silence. Clouds had begun to move in, casting long stretches of shadows on the road ahead of them.

"It was like waking up from a drugged sleep," he began softly, not directed towards Cecelia in particular, "like I'd been drowning for years and suddenly found air. I lived in that retirement home forever. My wife, Dot, died ten years ago. Rachel is my only child. I tried living with her but that didn't work so she sent me to Shady Maples Retirement Home, a state and a world away. Seems like years and only seconds. People my age check in, linger, die, someone else replaces them. My daughter dropped me there to die, out of the way and organized. I was old. It was what I was supposed to do. My wife had. It was simple."

"Until you killed somebody? Who? Male nurse? Doctor? Your daughter?" she asked, sarcastically. Cecelia was playing her game again, and Donald was proving to be a very interesting pawn. He ignored her, or at least did not respond, instead taking another drag from his now-short cigarette butt.

"Why did you shoot that trooper?"

"He surprised me. It was an accident," he said, but once again Cecelia saw his blank face flicker with a smile and then fade again into his saggy jowls. She waited.

"Are you on a killing spree, Donald?" she joked, "Am I next?" This was quite fun. Whatever Donald was hiding must be something big. She wondered if it could compare to her. It certainly did not to the other men she hitched rides with. They were all looking for trouble, and although this guy was extremely old, he seemed already neck deep in it. Just like her.

"What are you running from?" She already knew the answer, but there was something else here, something else that was driving this man to flee not just from his act but from some greater threat.

"Shit," he said, looking in the rearview mirror. He tossed his cigarette over the side and pushed on the gas. The engine groaned. Cecelia twisted around and looked out the back of the convertible, where she could see the first police car closing in, lights flashing. She looked back at Donald. He looked at her.

"I need your help."

7.

Donald thought of the day his daughter had dropped him off at Shady Maples Retirement Home. No matter what name you could spin on it, it was still a place where people were stored before they died. Dot's death had shocked him deeply, putting a fog around him that numbed his senses. He always thought they would go together. And now she was gone and he was waiting. Waiting in a beige fifteen by twenty hole that had been allotted to him. His possessions were stripped down and sold, his food delivered three times a day to his room where he chose to eat alone, his medicine stocked weekly in his tiny cell of a bathroom. All his affairs were in order. All he had to do was die, and he waited patiently for ten years.

Donald woke up every morning because he had not died in his sleep. He ate his breakfast, put on his fresh chinos and brown sweaters, watched the Price is Right and Passions and Dr. Phil and did his crossword puzzles. Every night he'd go to bed,

sleep fitfully since you can't sleep if you never really are awake, and get up the next day, not dead. Until the day that he helped Mary Moffitt, his next door neighbor, jump out his fourth story window.

Mary was a sweet lady. She seemed to have nobody, like Donald, who cared much about her. She moved in next to him two years after Rachel had dropped him off. They became friendly at first, exchanging hellos in the hallway and sitting next to each other on Bingo night. They rode the shuttle to CVS together on Tuesdays and eventually began watching evening television, World's Greatest Police Videos being one of Donald's favorites that Mary somehow tolerated. She reminded him a lot of Dot. Same hair, same soft-spoken manner, same silent resolution yet overt manipulation of his habits and ways.

8.

Donald was shaken by the appearance of the second state police vehicle that pulled into line with the first, lights revolving but sirens silent. They had made their presence known but were not engaging. It was because of Cecelia. World's Greatest Police Videos taught him some valuable lessons. In most cases, the lone nut job would be caught up with and rammed off the side of the road by the pursuing officer of the law. But, if the crazy driver had a hostage, the police would hang back indefinitely because they couldn't risk the hostage's life.

Another car zoomed up and took over the shoulder. Donald figured they must have cleared the highway because there were no longer any cars up ahead. He settled into a nice speed and watched as the cars behind him fell in line, their number growing to four, their silent lights flashing at him. Cecelia spoke up.

"Am I your hostage?" she asked, smirking.

"Yes," he smiled, "Right now it seems to be working just fine. If I need you to scream I'll let you know." He laughed. Behind them a siren broke the humming silence of the convertible and a loudspeaker cracked into life.

"Sir, pull over your vehicle immediately," a high-pitched southern drawl demanded. The voice continued to bark orders at Donald. He lit another cigarette and adjusted himself in his seat.

"I think you're making them angry," Cecelia said, a little more seriously. Donald shrugged, his wicked smile warping his jowls again.

"Donald, did you really kill someone?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, who was it?"

"What about you? What are you running from?" he paused. "I thought I'd have to persuade you a little harder to come with me at the rest stop. And then when you took that trooper's gun?"

"I broke parole a few weeks back. I've been heading south ever since."

"Why were you on parole?"

"No. You first," she asserted. He paused for a second, inhaling on his butt.

"Mary Moffitt was my next door neighbor at the retirement home. We watched TV together on most week nights. Last Wednesday she was over. Jeopardy ended and we were just sitting there. She got up to leave, and then walked over to the window. She asked me if I could open it, since she couldn't because of her arthritis. I opened the window. My room was four stories up and I had a nice view. Then she asked me for help." He stopped. He remembered Mary extending her hand, as if he were helping her into a car or down a stair. "She took my hand, stepped up onto the

ledge and dove out." He stopped. Cecilia was silent. "I killed her."

"Donald," she waited, "That sounds like an accident. That wasn't your fault. Is that why you're running? Is that it?" Her words jolted Donald out of his trance and filled him with anger. Is that it? What the hell did she mean? He had killed that woman, helped her politely step out his window. And he felt absolutely nothing. She had the nerve he did not to stop waiting and simply end it, and he was totally indifferent.

Until he woke up in the middle of that night screaming and sweating and violently kicking his sheets off himself. The air cleared and he saw everything around him, the plain beige walls, his brown sweaters, his daily-labeled pill box, his left-over microwave dinner, and he wanted to vomit and kill it all. He had resurfaced. The water and the fog were gone. He was still alive. And all those years, all those years waiting like a gentleman for Dot because she went first, filling those excruciatingly long ten years with nothing but daytime television because that is what his doctors and daughter and all the other blank faces at Shady Maples told him to do. No more.

That very night, sweating in his wet bed, Donald made his decision to leave for good. He got dressed in his usual old man attire. He needed to go shopping. He went down to the front desk. The night clerk was absent, probably away on a call. Mary's flight had upset some people. Perfect. On the wall behind the desk was a board with hooks, on each hook was a set of keys for each senior who still drove. He saw the ones he wanted, ones with a little red bottle opener attached to them. He grabbed them and walked outside into the night air. He looked to his right, to the place cordoned off where Mary hit the ground. He nodded a salutation, turned and spotted the Thunderbird, under its canvas cover in the corner of the lot. He ran over to it, pulled off the cover and looked at the cherry-apple red gleaming metal and fiberglass that he had envied since the asshole who owned it moved in two years ago.

He sat in the cool leather driver's seat, turned the car on, felt the roar and vibration of the engine ignite his senses. He rolled down the top and inhaled the sweet, cold night air. The stars shone brightly on him. He was free at last. He was alive. He was hungry. He wanted a cheeseburger and a beer and a cigarette. And the pain was gone. It was too cold here. The south flashed in his mind. He placed the car in drive, eased it out of the quiet parking lot and left Shady Maples behind without hesitation, heading south.

Is that it? Who the hell did she think he was? He had stolen this car. Right after his exodus he stopped at a nearby Thrift shop and purchased new clothes. Flamboyant Hawaiian shirts and summer shorts and the straw hat that he was still wearing. Anything that would make him stand out from what he had been. He knew the police were coming to investigate him for the homicide. She was thrown out that window. And now he had committed grand theft auto.

After the clothes, he went to the first all-night diner he found. He ordered a cheeseburger and fries with a Coke. The beer would have to wait, but he was able to purchase three packs of Marlboros from a machine inside the door. He inhaled the greasy food when it arrived, savoring the explosion of taste that he had missed for so long. His doctor had told him to cut out red meats and dairy and carbohydrates. Screw it.

He continued south through dawn, passing across New York and into New Jersey. He headed for Rachel's home and arrived on her sunny suburban block around ten o'clock on Thursday morning. He used the spare key that he still, for some reason

unbeknownst to him since he could not remember much of his recent past, carried in his wallet. He headed up the stairs of the richly furnished house that his son-in-law Tom had paid for through his career as an investment banker in the city. He walked into the master bedroom, and into the walk-in-closet that was filled with Rachel's clothes, dresses and hordes of shoes. He had overheard her talking to Tom once about where it was. He headed to the very back of the closet and pulled out a stack of empty hat boxes that sat on the floor. Underneath, the door to safety sat waiting for him.

He tried his daughter's wedding anniversary. No luck. He tried her birthday. Nothing. He tried his grandson, Thomas Junior's, birthday. The lock clicked and the door opened. A wooden jewelry box, a red velvet bag, some official looking documents bound with rubber bands, a xylophone organizer, and white, thickly stuffed envelope. He removed this last item and opened it find a hefty stack of hundred dollar bills. He pulled one of Rachel's handbags off a shelf in the closet and stuffed the envelope into it. He didn't feel guilty at all. It was payback, a stipend rewarded to him for all the life and prosperity he had given his ungrateful daughter and a fine for what she had done to him after her mother had died. All those years with a roof over her head and she couldn't provide one for him. But enough. He had his reward for his suffering and had given his daughter her due.

He walked across the room to a smaller closet used by Tom. He needed a new pair of shoes and began pulling out boxes that lay on the floor. He found a pair of loafers in the back, one size too big, but that none-the-less worked. As he tried to put the box back as it was, he knocked over a Nike one on the bottom and the gun fell out with a box of rounds and a warranty card. Real nice hiding space, jackass. He placed everything back in the box along with the handbag, closed the door to the closet, and left the room with the Nike shoebox. He passed his grandson's room on the way out, on the door of which hung a poster of some rock band that Thomas probably worshiped. Donald promptly ripped it off, tore it up, and left the house.

And now he was a man on the run with stolen goods in his possession and shot cop in his wake. But nothing compared to that first act, that exhilarating murder, because it had set him free. He saw all those wasted years lined up and now he was shooting them dead and throwing them out windows. He was escaping from those cold nurses and his daughter and everything that told him his only purpose left was to die, and he was making up for lost time by running as fast he could toward oblivion.

"Donald, pull over," Cecelia said, surprising him. "Pull over, Donald. You haven't done anything wrong. That woman was demented, and whatever you've done since then can be chalked up to old age. They'll understand, even about the trooper." Her words cut through everything he was trying to accomplish and infuriated him. She didn't understand at all.

"It's not old age," he said, trying to feign confidence.

"Donald, pull over. I thought you actually did something."

"What did you think exactly? Did I look that desperate?" he asked angrily.

"You looked like you needed help. And I've been there. And I was bored."

"So this is just some fling. You don't get it. You're young. You have plenty of time. I've wasted my life." And it was true, and a hollow emptiness filled him. This was more than these past ten years. If his life were a book he was in the final chapter and it was as boring as Sunday service. He was changing that. His ending was going to blow off the roof. He was not going to die in some convenient allotted room. No, he would continue this race as far as it would take him, and if he exploded in a blaze of glory at

the end so be it, at least he'd felt something again. Is that it?

9.

This was it. Just another asshole on the run from nothing but his own mediocrity. What did he honestly know? Nothing.

Her father was the same way. A belligerent drunk that beat her mother until she left and kept it up with Cecelia until she lit their row home on fire with a sparkler on the Fourth of July which burned him alive while he was passed out in bed. She had not meant it, but she always saw it as a sort of liberation, more for him than for herself. She felt pity for her father. He was trapped by his alcoholism and his job and his wife, her mother; trapped by a working class hell in which nothing new or exciting ever came his way. She detested that place, that sameness, and even after the fire took her father out of it and placed her in a foster home she never could really shake it. She tried her hand at many things, eventually getting caught for conning her foster family out of a substantial amount of money supposedly being used for college.

She had to get away from that mediocre life, whatever the cost. She fled to the road, but there she met nothing but more men all experiencing the same thing as her father. All of them trapped in whatever role and station society had assigned them, and all seeking novelty by picking up a strange girl on the side of the road. Donald had already found that. She thought he was different, and she saw in him the same freedom she so desperately sought. But Donald was no different; he had just lived longer than anyone other man she knew, and he tried the hardest to break free of the stereotype the world had prescribed for him. In reality his crimes were nothing. He was completely full of shit. Men always needed a woman to get them out. She had killed her father. She knew what real was. And it was time for this ride to end.

10.

Donald had not noticed the police cars behind him, now ten strong in a V-formation.

"Cecelia, I need your help" Donald said.

"I know." She began fishing in her backpack and pulled out the trooper's gun. She aimed it at Donald.

"Stop the car."

"I can't."

"The police will understand."

"I stole this car. I robbed my son-in-law."

"It's excusable."

"I shot that trooper. You helped me."

"Not anymore."

"Cecelia, please." It was a command. Cecelia was trying to play a role even she wasn't completely familiar with, and no matter what happened Donald had the upper hand because he was the one behind the wheel. The gun shook. She looked out the windshield.

"Donald." Up ahead there was an overpass. Below it four state police cars were lined up, with eight troopers standing in front, all sporting aviators and shot guns. Donald took his foot off the gas.

Fifty years ago a line had been cut through this forest, the earth churned up and black asphalt painstakingly compressed over it. Since then the road had been ripped up, laid down, tarred, patched, painted and filled in, but always with the same precision as that first time. The symmetry of highways fascinated Donald. The curves

of the lines, the sheer length of them all planned and plotted and lain perfectly. All that work for something that was only a means to an end: a line between two places that contained no point of reference or importance of its own, like a staircase. Donald was an unnatural force on that road, and he was inevitably colliding with the law's response to him.

This was not about death. It was about his life. He still had time and in that time he would make up what he had wasted. But he couldn't stop. He had to keep moving. He looked at Cecelia, whose eyes were locked on the road block ahead of them and he felt only rage.

Donald hit the gas for the last time. He forgot about Cecelia. She had served her purpose. The troopers jerked to attention, aiming their shotguns at the car but too impotent to fire. He floored it at the barricade. Closer. Cecelia was waving the gun, screaming words he couldn't understand. When he could see the sweat gleaming off the moustaches of the fat troopers in front of him, he jerked the wheel right. The Thunderbird groaned and creaked under the strain. His momentum threw him against his door and Cecelia, who had not been wearing her seatbelt, was thrown against him. The gun went off. Or maybe a tire blew. He couldn't tell. The wind made a deafening screech as it whipped around the car and the tires spun, desperately grasping for traction. The Thunderbird left the highway and veered onto the shoulder, up the grassy embankment, and towards the road that connected to the overpass. At its speed the car's front dug into the incline, but its momentum and girth pushed on through. A crunch, an explosion of sand and grass, the roar of the car, a scream. Donald never took his foot of the gas, even when the earth had finally released the car like a sling shot and it hurtled into the air pointing toward the clear blue sky. Donald felt weightless for a moment. He wondered if this was the same feeling Mary had when she jumped. She was dead, though, and he was not. He looked right into the sun as the Thunderbird soared. His straw hat flew off and his hula shirt whipped him in the face. The weight leveled out the car in the air, bringing the tip down faster than the rear was rising.

Donald was pleasantly surprised when the car landed on all fours. He heard a tire blow out but that certainly would not stop him and the great beast limped on. He swerved right again, leveling out on what was a normal country highway, lined with tall dark spruces on either side. The air was silent and thick with the smell of living green and the sound of sirens receded into the distance. Cecilia was gone. Donald looked at her empty seat and smiled. He would need a new car and he had to figure out which way was south. And he would probably need a new hostage when the time came.