

The Ghetto Gulls

by Matt Gillick

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Been a long time since I'd seen Corey and it'd been a while since I'd seen someone spaz out the way his brother did.

I was on Jetty Side Beach in Chatham smoking a cigarette in the late afternoon. I used to be the maintenance guy, pick up some trash, fix the dune buggy. Stuff like making sure the lifeguards had their supplies. That was all me, and I was shitty at it. It's not going to work out, I mean come on, Ruck, you don't even do inventory for the first aid—Chatham was an underbellied tourist town. I'd be sleeping in my van and some townies'd walk up and piss on my wheels. I wouldn't do anything. Not taking the risk of a dirty needle to the neck—There'd be another town, another beach. Just get me a half-tank and I'm like a first-world survivor man. People always need bus boys and bar backs.

I looked at all these families coming from New Hampshire, Boston, even the bo-punk hills of Vermont; walking through the parking lot, dropping and picking up their coolers and beach chairs and again dropping and picking up their coolers and beach chairs, forgetting to lock their cars with the license plates that made their aura *so* New England: Vineyard Vines, ZooMass Slamhurst bumper stickers with the arrogant red print on black Audis and silvery sheen mid-sized SUVs. Half-expected a clown car full of chain smoking soccer moms with metal water bottles filled with chardonnay to come tumbling out. These breeders blocked the ocean, my view, but at least the wind calmed down enough to light another Parliament with just two Bic clicks. A nervous dad came up to me, saw I was still wearing the standard blue Jetty Side collared t-shirt with my name lazily stitched in red letters on the left breast: *Rucker*.

“Excuse me, son,” Good God, his teal green polo was giving half the beach a migraine, “I know you must be on your break but there are some fellas throwing trash all over the beach and—and I think they might be on drugs.”

Dad of the Year making me aware of some muckery happening on the other end of Jetty Side? Good looks pops, but not so sure how I can help you.

“I should probably change this shirt. Just got fired, man.” He thought I was lying but after a few seconds of a can-I-help-you stare off, he looked lost through his Ray Bans and liberal use of tanning oil. “Let me see what I can do,” standing up, I gave him a quick pat on the shoulder like I was subbing in for a pickup game. I finished the Parliament in one long drag and the smoke might as well have been coming out my ears. The water was warm and the waves crashed with an unknown violence, sending a misty sauna to infiltrate the shoreline.

The Cape is a booted mass of gorgeous erosion. The hottest days have the greenest returns and the dunes give life to the wildest vegetation moving inland. The long fields of thorny grass and ivy stay all the greener in the hot summer sun. Storm season brought the rains and the winds, whipping up the salt and dirt clogged on the beaches while the dunes kept it from going too far inland. But that meant the dunes caved in quicker, their massive, grainy hills gracefully shielded the rest of life from the listless sea, digging deep into the sand. With the slightest disturbance they would collapse under themselves like the house built on the poor foundation of the parabolic landowner. A beautiful erosion. Unlike any other, man.

I saw a group of pale-red kids in their last high school summer taking trash out of the bins and throwing it in the air. Garbage launched into the subtle wind like it was confetti and they giggled way too much for their age. Mothers and their children quickly scattered away from the chaos. A floating plastic bag caught a seagull about to drop an oyster onto the shore. These boys

were on *something*, like the synthetic crap: K-2, whip-its, poppers and I remember high school when we'd have to see what we could do with dry erase markers and mom's stolen liquor. One of them in a blue striped tank top was watching the seagull fly blind, desperately searching for control, tumbling downward. He was the instigator telling his friends, Do it you won't, goading them on as he smoked some Marlboro Reds he looked barely old enough to buy. I was about to let out my best scolding dad HEY Kids! Whattaya think you're doing! But when he turned around and looked at me in anticipation, those eyes gave him away to memory. They were a big pale blue—Corey?—From school? but it couldn't be him. Too young and skinny-looking unless I'd thrown myself into a limbiatic time-warp of new circumstance. His face caved in at his chin with his cheeks stocky and bloated like *that* Corey, who was a friend from school I hadn't seen in a while. Relative? Cousin? Had to be a brother. Relaxing my shoulders and swallowing my pissy papa act, I approached him. He was a bit nervous but had the Masshole come-at-me-buddy vibe going for him.

“Do you have a brother who went to Coastal College?”

“Huh?”

“You had a brother who went to CC, right? Corey Bastion?”

“Yeah, and...?” kid was thrown into a sobering comedown when I mentioned his older brother. His friends were jumping around playing with a brown paper bag, it rode through the air like a stringless kite and they laughed like a giddy clan of Patrick Stars. I went on.

“I was boys with him back in the day. You all live around here? Oh and what's your name, man? I'm Rucker.” Extending my hand. His eyes shook a bit, his pupils dilated from the whip-its. He didn't take my hand.

“Name’s Connor, and yeah Corey works the bar at a dive in Wellfleet. Called The Last Port,” he paused, noticing my blue Jetty Side shirt with the red letters and his guard tensed up again, thinking my approach was a tactic to off-put him and get him in trouble.

“Don’t worry kid. Not gonna go all angry-dad on ya,” and we looked at his frolicking idiot friends. There had to have been some inbreeding. They lived life wearing cheap sunglassed blinders. No ambitions, even for a dreamy beyond past their ten-mile radius. Just work the clubs, work the dock, (if they got lucky) maybe a gig as a tennis pro at the hotel, cash the check, and hit the bar on Friday. That was the ideal but they had their own wisdom activated by the salt-air that brings a new vision of myopia, knowing they were stuck but what a place to get stuck. So maybe I’m mistaken. Maybe watching a bag float through the air and laughing at it was the realest you could get. “Your buddies really are something, you know?” Connor sighed in a laughing manner.

“Don’t you work here?” still suspicious as his humor waned, I lit another Parliament.

“Nah, just got fired this morning. Couldn’t give a fuck. You said Corey was in Wellfleet?”

“Yeah, Last Port. A couple miles from the Comber. Real hole. Nothing but daydrinkers. Why would you want to go there?”

“Your brother and I’ve been through it.”

No reply.

“Thanks, I’ll check if he’s there. Stay out of trouble.”

Dad of the Year watched us the whole time. I lit another Parliament and he came up to me in tempered fumes. Exasperated in breath as he saw these hooligans jump around and fuck more shit up behind me he proclaimed, “I thought you were going to do something.”

“Like I said, I don’t work for this beach anymore.”

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The Last Port was dark but the bar shined light from itself. The Cape's afternoon sunshine crept into even the darkest corner. The place had a levitation to it, wasn't mugged down by any stillness in the air from a hot evening like an unwashed undercarriage. A Kansas track played on bad speakers as the TV showed a minor-league game. The Wellfleet Waves were down 2-1 at the top of the 6th. Corey was leaning over the bar having a rum and coke with me.

"Where the hell have you been, Ruck?"

Corey'd grown older. No longer was he this backwards baseball cap wearing smooth face with a firm but slender build. He was a man, full grown. Tall as before with a bushy but well put together beard contrasted by some long, brown-banged bed-head. He had a bit of gut pushing through his black Last Port T-shirt, name stitched in red letters: *Corey*. I felt like I hadn't seen him in years—and I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him. He looked pretty pissed at my absence and you never wanted to get on Corey's bad side. You wanted weed, ecs, Adderall, coke? Back at CC he was the one with it or knew someone who had it and if you got on his bad side you were screwed, even if you're friends. He knew every candy man down the corner. A wildman of chemical experience. Poetry set to a performance art manifested outwardly like a shadowed tapestry weaved time and again. But back to his question, Where the fuck had I been?

"Connor told me you'd be here. Kid takes after ya," and Corey waved his hand at that remark, "Yeah so, damn well I mean, after a while I got tired of school. Wasn't learning. So I left with about a year of credits on the table. Went abroad for a bit. Got a ticket and just went. Stayed in the Western part mostly until it got too weird. I don't know why I went. Looking for something maybe. Learned a lot though, you know, how people act and what they do with boozy honesty. But once I ran out of cash, I had to scrounge something together and get back here. And

I did. Eventually saved up and got my Bachelor's from a community college. Not much but I don't want to be a maintenance guy forever. Then the woman I was squatting with—calm down, nothing happened—she kind of left and soon after the landlord found me. So, here I am.”

“Hey, man whatever gets it done. Where you at these days?”

“That's a pretty loaded question. Past few months, my car. Worked for Jetty Side Beach as a maintenance guy, till today.”

“Bro, why didn't you find me? I've been here almost six months!” He was surprised and even more angry, like I didn't trust him or have faith that he'd help me out.

“I didn't know you were here, chill. Been off the map for a good while. I haven't found anyone from CC. *No one*. You been in touch with any of the old crew?”

“Kind of, Gav's been down in Connecticut. Last time I saw him, he was pretty worn out. Grew his hair long...I barely recognized him. Heard there's been some strange shit going on down there by the coast. North Port-Hampton is what they call it. People going missing n' shit. Told me a few of his buds disappeared and no one's saying anything about it. Says something is taking them. Sounds crazy to me. Yeah, and Ponz was inland working for the state, if you can believe it. Remember back in school with that massive day party and every dorm had enough snow to cancel school? Remember how Ponz got all those charges: indecent exposure, public urination...it was some B.S. if you ask me. He didn't change much after that. Joel told me he was on probation for a DUI and lost his job at city hall. Oh yeah, Joel's looking to go to law school in Long Island this fall. Antoine is—”

“Wow, Antoine.” Hadn't heard that name in a while. Used to be a duo, the two of us. After a Friday of one-too-many, we'd wake up on Saturday and crack open another but, he had ambition and I didn't. Guess that's where the separation started. I saw him a couple years back at

a bar before jumping across the pond, he seemed happy. Thinner but happy, and with a girl. Looked on the up and up but man his face just escapes me. What does that say? Having vivid memories of our times together—running from frat stars after stealing their half-keg, peanut buttering campus security's patrol cars—but no face to put it all together. What does that say about me? These people had moved on and Corey went on.

“—Yeah Antoine. I couldn't tell you what he was doing, Ruck. Reached out but got no response. Settled around CC, I think, it all seems blurry with our time there. I couldn't tell you for sure, the guy never really spoke about himself. He was seeing some girl, blonde and a bit chunky, at least that's what it looked like on Facebook. Looks like he's calmed down. Probably changed because you weren't around to encourage the bullshit you both used to get into. I thought you would have kept in touch.”

“Can't disagree with you there,” and Corey left the issue where it laid and poured me another. He signaled me while another Kansas song played, the boozers at the end of the bar stared at us like we didn't belong with pocky, crinkled scowls. The shadowy youth, or what we had left of it professed that we, even their bartender, hadn't the right to settle in to a place so easily where others came to hide. Passages of Time had to write itself on our faces, the elder locals were the worst. Both of us glanced at each other, still carrying that contempt for the judgmental and we chuckled loud enough for them to notice. Funny, since we were right on these cucks' heels.

“What have you been up to, buddy?” I asked.

“Been keeping myself afloat. Job here's a good one for now. Using my uncle's rental until I save up to get my own place around here. Thinking of opening up a bar. You know, just trying,” and then he got an inkling, an idea triggered by my presence. Like how you act that

same level of goofy when seeing old friends from high school—a pleasant reversion. He hadn't lost a step. Just gotten better at hiding that inner animal, his eyes lighting up with a familiar quickness. He leaned in close, "Few friends and I are trying to make a night of it back in Chatham. Evan, if you remember him—"

"Jesus do I!" Biggest smile on my face, "When we went to Pilgrim U for the concert, right? Evan gave us all the good shit. Molly, some coke..." But my voice faded out when I saw Corey look downward and get reflective like I catalyzed a second-hand depression.

"He's fallen pretty hard, if you get me. Been trying to get back to normal but you know. Like anything, it's a process. We've been watching after him to make sure he stays away from certain parts of town. Hasn't relapsed but he drinks too much and gets himself tied up in the wrong situation like when he goes to Friar Tuck's, forecast says: 70-percent chance of a scuffle. So we're here making the rounds, pushing him forward, wobbly and all," and he stopped out of consideration for not wanting to be a buzzkill, "He'll be stoked to catch up with you. Anyways, my buddies should be around with Ev and we'll still make a night of it. Let me give you my boy's number. Call them in 30 minutes."

Got the number and a firm handshake later I sauntered out with the sauced up pudding night crew staring me out the door. Had a smoke out front. I needed to quit, but not yet. The sun was active but you could tell the afternoon was ready to draw to a close, the warmth not being as intense. Summer was changing already. There wasn't a shift in the weather, the days didn't get shorter. Nothing changed except the biosphere of the general attitude. Like, yeah, everyone beginning to dread the beginning of the end unlike the carefree days of early June lighting up the faces of the weekend Capers. A car sped by on the thin, two lane road, blasting a 90s throwback. After another smoke I picked up my phone and gave Benjy a call, yeah, Benjy was his name.

“Hello?”

“Hey, this Benjy?”

“Yeah and you’re Rucker?”

“That be me. So Corey said you guys were up to some mischief. Mind if I tag along?”

“Of course, jus’ go—yeah Evan I’m talking with Ruck, yeah that Rucker, should be joining us soon—Yeah sorry, just park at Fish Harbor and we’ll meet you on the dock.”

I heard a humming in the background and the general ruckus of young men with no responsibility. Go to Fish Harbor, simple enough. They’d meet me at the dock and we’d get into whatever we had available except for percs and H with Evan being around and all. Maybe one of them had an extra bed and a real shower, not like the moldy tap I was using in the locker room at Jetty Side. Those early mornings when the transient Capers came in, they’d see me and then they’d see my bag, filled to the brim with the zippers ready to rip open. My whole life was in there and they’d raise their eyebrows like they were going to propose separate water fountains at the next town hall. If you didn’t have a roof over your head you were an animal, worse than any taught prejudice. But that’s just how it is. The ones who never bore down their roots: whether it was in friendship, romance, anything. I was one of them: too fuck-all with my go at life. Didn’t mean I wanted to change but you know, it can get lonely as the days pass when you’re stuck bouncing from odd jobs to trailer parks. Seeing Corey was like returning to a village well that was fresh and still brimming. I saw myself the same way from when I first looked into that water. We were adults now, Corey and I. Making our own waves just like everyone else. Our mistakes were our own, the days of Ah they’re just kids being kids were over. Putting my van in park, I went down to the dock and waited. The harbor smelled like submerged death and motor oil.

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The water orange from the sun and the tide had a distinct taste of raw oyster, but that's how we know the process still works. The moon and the tide did its fair shake for us. The way the water swayed so calmly, rippling just like a pond, it reminded me of a dark afghan rug abandoned on a city street, too much smoke damage, dusted out too many times, the wind sneaking underneath to carry it, flowing up and down the avenue. Pick out any disruption to the serenity and you'd be able to see it in full orangey highlight. A figure poking through the surface, a seal most likely, but with such a shapely head—it could be the slick outline of a siren saying to come into the water, you know you'll finally be happy if you just dive in. I thought of Gavin sitting on another beach on a day like this, on another lonely bench taking in the afternoon breeze with no one else around, too wary of North Port-Hampton's terrorizing prowler, whatever that was. His buddies, scraggly like himself, were gone and he vigilantly looked to the calm Connecticut waters, seeking out the creature he believed took his friends. Where was he?

In my peripheral I saw a boat breaking through the serenity, replacing it with reckless sloshing. The captain, I guess, waved at me as I stepped forward onto the dock. I saw Evan taking a swig from a bottle and he moved to the bow waving his arms like a castaway.

“Ruck, my brother! Get the fuck on! Take the leap.”

They were pulling beside the dock but they weren't stopping. I had one chance and I hadn't done this much athletic activity since running from a bouncer back in Providence. I bounded through the air, using every splinter of the dock I could to get a headstart. The boat moved under me and everyone on board stared with anxious surprise and faded worry. I slid onto the main deck and grabbed a metal pole by the steering wheel to stop myself from falling over the other side.

There were four of them on the boat: Benjy, Evan, Tony, and Brad. Benjy looked odd and beyond his time for a twenty-something. He had a young face with streaks of grey hair on the sides. Clean shaven but his eyes were baggy. I learned later he wanted to get a college moving company off the ground but investors were light. There were five empty PBR cans stacked on the desk of the steering wheel. Evan wore a raggedy black hoodie and a baseball cap that said Young Mob on the bill. He cradled a pregnant bottle of Hennessy and had an unlit Marlboro Red dangling from his mouth. Tony was this thin-haired fellow, his Benny's Auto denim shirt had a patch with his name on the left breast, stitched in red letters. His right arm was a sleeve tattoo of a landscape in Montana's Big Sky National Park. Blue water wrapped around his whole arm with a small island centralized on his bicep but carried around the muscle. A bear wandered on the shore near the painted isle's outskirts spreading across his long elbow. Moving up Tony's shoulder was a snowcapped peak, thin clouds loitering around the icy chill of his deltoid. Tony made trap beats when he wasn't working in the garage and didn't talk much. Brad just graduated college and didn't seem to be handling it well. His hands were shaky. My guess is he skated by the commencement address on the heels of a mental breakdown and was still feeling the reverberations. Trying to roll a blunt, the calm surf gave Brad the opportunity to make it fat and sticky if Benjy didn't want to go full throttle and have the green fly into the surf. Tony moved to the bow after throwing me a nod and Evan was the first to greet me by reaching into the cooler and tossing me a beer.

"Ruckus, himself. How the hell are ya?" Evan was white sheet pale and his eyes looked like he'd been in the sun drinking all day.

"Unemployed," I answered, brushing it off with a laugh, "Good to see you." Benjy was driving the boat. They'd all been drinking but in the way people drink to maintain a buzz

throughout the summer day, except Evan. Guy was gone'd and somebody would have to babysit him. The sun was going down and the boat glided across the calm surf while *we* were the interruption. Brad finished rolling and came back to the main deck. Tony plugged his phone into the stereo and started playing a Lil Yachty mixtape. The boat went faster.

The track started off like a drop of water into a voided ocean. And the keyboard bounced in like a Bermudan hotel bar heard through a seashell followed by an auto-tuned, heavily mixed voice, not singing but mumble moaning into an echo, like the boat was a sonar bleeping the Morse lyrics:

*I know you want this for life
Taking pictures with all my ice
But I can't have no wife
I just want you for the night.*

And the chorus repeated with a droning harmony akin to a slurring Alvin and the Chipmunks cover band. A self-aware vapidly propelling us through the water, the lyrics encouraging a smooth but violent wake, to disturb life as if that were the purpose. Tony unbuttoned his denim shirt and bobbed his head to the odd, new, but ignorant beat as the wind lifted the shirt like a sail. Evan leaned on me as we felt the gaining gusts pass through us and hold our hair in windswept suspension. He smelled of cigarettes and Hennessy.

“Good to be reconnecting wit’ya, Rucky.”

“Dude, always.” And then came the question of the day: *What have you been doing?* What do you do now so I can refer you to the superficial labels meant to define who you are forever? I didn’t want to ask Evan the question, I wanted to shoot the shit with him and drink, that’s all, not further the gap of our lives coupled with anecdotes and time we couldn’t get back. We’d landed in different spots while on the same trajectory. Drinking’s what kept Evan and I connected and having fun *as himself* with a boozy pick-me-up in order to make the charade of

heys and how-are-yous tolerable was better than the velvet dark corner of a Chatham shack disguised as a weekend love nest. I didn't want to ask the question but I couldn't just be fine with drinking and listening to Yachty grumble about his hoes, "Evan, what've you been up to?"

He laughed and took a big swig, "Heh what haven't I been into? You know just trying to ge' myself together."

"Graduated from Pilgrim?"

"Nah, I got a year and a half under me but I don't think I'm going back. Got myself in some sticky, sticky trouble. Actually, ah, not too long after tha' weekend you came up with Corey. Few months later I was out. Oh shit I love this part, *We spent four seasons at the Four Seasons twice.*" He joined Tony at the bow and they both bobbed up and down to the trappy drums as Tony bummed a generous gulp off Evan's bottle. Brad handed me a lumpy blunt and stuttered for me to light it up.

I had to bend behind the steering wheel to light my Bic. We were going so fast. When the song ended, Evan came back and hopped the rotation to get a quick drag. Just a quick little drag before it landed on Benjy.

"You seem well, Evan. Corey said you were in kind of a bad spot."

The black hoodied booze goblin looked around, twinged his shoulders, and had a sad strain in his puffy, sunk eyes. Benjy looked at me with an understanding for my honesty but the gaze also carried disappointment at my lack of tact and sensitivity. It was quiet. A little dose of the Real crept into Evan's psyche to which he rolled his head around and got all nonchalant like he was a horse bucking off my trigger.

"That's what dope does to you. It gets in ya then it always wants to be in ya...But I don't need that shit anymore," breathing out the joint drag.

The shore was lined with houses, their lights shining through the trees. These homes, many of them full of healthy families here for a summer weekend; they were the visiting GDP of escape and sand castles. But there were also noisy shacks with the shedding shingles. They didn't look much different, only more tired. Filled to the brim with people who dulled their want for escape by crushing up their ambition on a rickety coffee table and cooked it over some tin foil. Those who wanted escape when the soft breeze and the calming surf wasn't enough. I stood up next to Benjy and we looked at Evan who'd turned to the darkening water, the light laminated on the sloshing surf.

I talked soft so only Benjy could hear me, "Sorry, not trying to butt in, but you been keeping a good watch on Ev?"

"The best we can, he's stayed clean but *sober* is totally different."

"Better this than H, right?"

"Totally, but man...it's been hard. We can only give him so many talks and we're no saints either. I mean I don't know you too well but I figure from what Corey's said about you..."

"Yeh, I get it. Not the moral compass club we got here."

"Yeah but me n' Corey n' Evan go way back. I actually watch out for Connor, his little brother."

"Like to make sure he doesn't get bullied or some shit?"

"Nah man. So he doesn't end up like Evan. When Corey goes out of town, I'm here. For now," and we saw the black hoodie ironically doing the Bernie dance with Brad and Tony who was politicking the joint, "We left him and we're not letting that happen again. It's hard though. I mean, we're not from the straight n' narrow."

"That's something you're born into."

“Church.”

Benjy slowed the boat to a crawl as Evan nodded in and out of the zone and took another swig of Hennessy to get him out of that zone. The skipper went on, “Yeah, we’ve all been involved in trying to get him back on track,” Evan had such a slight frame it was a wonder where all that liquor went and how he was still able to stand. In many ways Evan and I were of the same ilk. A premature, flashing breed taking in every substance, every drink we can like it’s the last key bump, last shot, last perc but we got nothing to show for it other than a wobbly demeanor and poor decisions. Or maybe we’re just too fucked up too often, running down the street like some hill people at the city gates, ignoring our rotting insides, letting our syphilitic minds lie to us. The signs we saw along the way, the nights of What did I just do, How did I get home, Who’s house is this; we ignore them because the come-down is too hard and we prefer the slow fall. Evan knew, in a way, why he went down his road. And there he danced, blending in with the night, trying to bum a cigarette off the Scythe himself. He did his best to keep the feeling of Time standing still. But that only led people like Corey and Benjy to pick him up as they themselves were playing the fences of their own lives, looking for that medium where they can tolerate their existence beyond the comradery of shore wanderings and balance the days where they get back from work and try to piece together what the next day will hold. A stocked fridge was never too far away except it didn’t have what we really needed, only what we pretended to need.

“We all wash up somehow. I mean, hey, I washed up here and now I’m on a boat with you all. You’re doing a good thing keeping him around. Making sure he stays right. And with Connor too. Good looks.”

I didn't know if that was truthful. Maybe I said that to encourage Benjy to keep fighting for him. I don't know. The sun was setting and I thought of Joel some months from now in his childhood bedroom, packing his last suitcase for law school while the sun went down, thinking, no, hoping the sunsets of Mineola had the same clementine tint of welcome arms offered to the night. Where was he?

I got a message from Corey that said he was on a dock in Orleans. Night descended the way a wall-cloud disappears an island.

Corey looked free without his Last Port getup. His Red Sox cap fit him perfect. When he came aboard he shut off his phone. Said we should all do the same, Gotta learn how to turn off. Why not? no one was going to call me. Benjy kept his phone on but we were far out enough on the water to the point where there wasn't a signal. We lounged around the main deck and railed through two packs of cigs and a case of PBR with a half-bottle of Don Tito's. As Benjy steered, the night's prospects were addressed like we were a marine council plotting a colonial conquest of Friar Tuck's Tavern where we'd take their booze, then their women, maybe meet up with Corey's little brother Connor at the witching hour and we'd head to a house party and hang around some cardboard, cutout college freshman's summer home and play the old men in the corner, like messengers of Fate, avoided on the whole because our vibes were of a different generation. Connor'd be down for whatever. Kid was young but had the hustle of a boozy veteran. Corey looked at all of us, happy. He was happy to see Benjy, Brad, Tony, and Evan all back together after such a long time. I'd like to think he was happy I was there too, a bridge, an excuse for old friends to tie one off and not have me as a sympathy ridealong.

Out in the water, I wondered about what we couldn't see under us, skimming the hull: an unknown conglomerate of water wanderers sloshing just below the surface. They could have

pulled us under if they were there but it was only an apathetic reference. There was no reason to waste energy on worry. Now on land, that's where worry festered.

To think that there were thousands of people ashore: addicts, prowlers, runaways, drunks, all wandering narrow streets that hadn't changed since their cobblestone origin, searching the dark beaches for any loose cash. Maybe even stalking an unassuming couple down an alley to get what he needs, to fill the track marks on his arms or between his skeletal toes. Hiding the digging, veiny digging that makes him want to float so free by these muggy shacks if only for a moment, to see himself floating from that mattress and back into himself. I knew Evan missed it. Who wouldn't? H doesn't kill you for being a so-so high.

I watched as they spoke of their onshore endeavors. Whenever Evan brought up someone who screwed himself up worse than he, Corey changed the subject to a steady equalizer: Women, and talking shit about how many we got with. Never say no to a good idea—at the time—but the courtship thing never worked out for me. Brad's girl had been talking to Corey without Brad knowing and Evan was unsuccessfully pursuing a townie girl who was a senior in high school. Tony fixed drinks for everyone and refused to talk about his girlfriend in Rhode Island. Eventually I just sat back and enjoyed the waning view, it was soon too dark to see the shore except the firefly orchestra of lit windows sprinkling the shoreline in weathered shoreline homes. The water moved beneath us and I tried to forget where I was in the sense of where I thought I was *going*. Fucking around didn't do me too good but eventually you own up to the bad habit and try to water it down with other habits you hope actually reach temperance—I can control it, just take the edge off—Reaching my hand down, the cool water made my skin shoot to chills.

We took the boat in closer to Chatham Harbor and Benjy's phone blew up once it got a signal, vibrating along the desk of the steering wheel. After a moment, he screamed to Corey, "You need to take a look at these. Connor and his friends are deep in it."

Huddling around Benjy, we all read the texts thinking Corey's little brother had gotten himself into some innocent trouble.

7:30: Yo, Benjy it's John we're at the beach with Coreys brother and he wanted some blow and this guy overheard us. Told us to follow him...

"Dammit Connor, I already know where this is going."

...and we ARE just to let u know...got me?...okay?

7:43: Dude u and Corey should be close by. Can u let me know where u are? Guy's sketching me out. We're in Harwich and this some bullshit. Like never been in this part of Harwich. Now i know why. Connor still wants to get it but I'm not feelin it.

Benjy turned to Corey, "Why doesn't your bro just ask you for some?"

"Because he's an idiot and doesn't want his big brother to do him a solid. Shit!"

7:52: Okay were inside his place. Mad sketch here. There like four of them. Address is 25 Wallace St. Im getting some bad vibes about this. DUde we're afraid.

That was the last text and the time was now 8:15 as we pulled with faster deliberation into the Chatham Harbor dock. Corey jumped off the boat before we tied up and I ran after him with a wobbling Evan zigzagging behind, Hennessy in hand. Benjy, Brad, and Tony followed soon after. We cut our feet on broken oyster shells riddled about the parking lot. Night had fully come.

"We need to get there now! We gotta find my brother. Ruck! I need you to drive."

And we ran to my car. All of us squeezed into the van with the backseats stripped out and they messed up my blankets. I took the seats out so I had more room to sleep. Corey sat in front. Evan made a drunken declaration, unaware of the situation, saying my car smelled like musk and we should get drinks at Friar Tuck's and where the fuck are the seats. Benjy was still looking furiously at his phone, dialing and texting away. Brad put the address into his phone's GPS and dropped it in my cup-holder. Ten minutes away.

Corey got no answer on his line. We flew through the quiet neighborhoods with people in their weekend homes wrapped in their knitted blankets drinking peached ice tea out on the patio while we were trying to find a shithead highschooler looking to score some blow. I thought of Ponz, thinking if he was in one of these shedded shingle homes, working the block for anyone looking for a bag. Or if he lived back home with his moms, taking daily verbal lashings about how royally he screwed up. Going to the basement and reaching under the couch, nipping from a cheap rum bottle where he'd watch T.V. and spectate the sit-com daydream with the laugh track putting him to sleep, drowning out the echoes of mama speaking to his abuela on the phone upstairs—*Sé que la abuela primero para graduarse y la más rápida de vuelta al sótano*—Where was he?

Evan tugged his Hennessy bottle close to his chest. With each swig, some amber dribbled onto my makeshift cot. Corey looked worried but only in his eyes. The rest of his body emanated an internal, angered soliloquy of I'm going to fucking kill him, right after I save him, I'm going to make sure he's alright, and then I'm going to kill that little shit. He didn't say anything the whole ride. The car swerving left and right, Evan tried to light a bent cigarette. Tony smacked it out of his mouth.

Evan blurted, “Damn, C. Yer little bro’s as dumb as you were,” but Corey didn’t react. Just looked up, looked at his phone, typed a message, dialed Connor, no answer, repeat, “Yo after we sav’ hissh sorry ass, les’ ge-some food.”

Evan tried to take out another Red but this time Brad grabbed the whole pack and told him to shut up. It was quiet, if the engine wasn’t moaning along like a sad whale, I swear we could’ve heard the soft water lap onto a thin sandbar just offshore with children running up and down that sandbar crunching the sand crabs. Even the dunes shifted in the silence, but it wasn’t silent. The Cape was waiting for what we were going to do next. Benjy got another message which he read out loud.

8:19: Where th fuck r you guys! Connor’s trying to lowball and they getting pissed.

Two of em standin up.

“You got t’get there now,” Benjy told me. I looked over at Corey. He looked at me and in that moment we knew we had to outrun new demons in place for our tired ones—we had to break the definition of devil-may-care, it was time to redeem our Survive-Through-The-Bullshit cards and not pass ‘Go.’ I floored it and the tires screeched, smelling of burnt bark and salty dust. The back wheels had trouble keeping up, wobbling back and forth. She righted herself and I got ready for another drift. Pass a stop sign, then another. Almost swerved into a drunken hookup couple wandering into the road. They didn’t seem to notice. A cat dodged my right front wheel that spun like a corkscrew. A father and son walking their dog heard the engine in the distance and stared with confused fear that we were taking over the town like outlaws in *High Plains Drifter*. Five minutes away.

This time we got a call and Benjy put it on speaker.

“John! Where you at?”

“Yo we bolted. We’re in Connor’s station wagon. They wanted more money but we rushed through. Connor’s driving, I don’t think they’re following us—”

“John, tell me where you are right now!” Benjy was losing it, whenever Corey was away at CC Benjy was the one who was supposed to look after Connor. He felt he’d let Corey down and was desperately pining at redemption even though this wasn’t his fault at all.

“Wait-what? You snagged a bag, Connor—Oh fuck that’s their car. Drive faster...What? Well floor it! Lose them!”

“HEY! Where are you guys!?”

“Fuck fuck fuck, uh-um, Kennedy! We just took a left on Kennedy. Haven’t lost them yet and—wait is that another car—”

We heard the quick screech of the breaks before the call disconnected. Corey looked back at Benjy and Benjy looked at all of us, helpless. Corey turned around and smashed his closed fist onto the dashboard. Thought the airbag would come flying out at him but no, just a bloody hand and mangled knuckles. Brad redirected the GPS to Kennedy Avenue as Tony bummed another nip off Evan’s bottle while he was having a spacy episode.

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West Harwich was quiet but the stewing prowlers and dealers and white collar pharmacies boiled just beneath. Decrepit, salt-printed houses. Would’ve made good break homes for college kids on summer weekends but the booners of the boonies had taken over and repurposed them as cookhouses and cloudy meth beakers. We came upon Kennedy, a thin stretch of two-way road. The moon was out from behind a cloud patch. Two cars zoomed away leaving Corey’s dad’s station wagon in the middle of the street, headlights on, engine running.

We couldn't see Connor. Corey practically jumped out of the window and ran to the front of the station wagon as the rest of us got out. The headlights silhouetted our bodies like we were coming off the mother ship. Corey stopped dead when he looked down on what the rest of us couldn't see. He let out a loud Huaahhhhhhhh like he didn't know what he was looking at but it wasn't good. Three pale-red boys levitated around the scene. Connor's buddies, the ones from the beach, were each in their own sphere. One of them paced around with his hands on his head, he had a swollen lip and stressful tears. Another was standing stone still against the grill of the station wagon, jaw agape. He had a thin but bloody cut across his face like someone nicked him with a broken bottle. The last one was John with his phone still in his hand, leaning over Connor who was lying on the ground. I couldn't get a good look but the kid's legs were shaking and I heard gurgled breathing. Corey knocked John out of the way and whispered, "Connor I'm here, I'm here. C'mon don't go. You see me? Look at me. Don't shut your eyes. Try to breathe easy."

"How did this happen, huh?" Benjy turned to the pacing one who could only say Ahh-ahh... So he turned to the statue stuck on the rumbling car grill of Kennedy Ave, he might as well have been an exhibit: Man Watches, No Comment. He put his hand to his cut face and stared at the blood. Grabbing his tank top and shaking him out of his shook void, Benjy growled, "What happened, man?"

I came around and saw the little brother. Corey cradled Connor's head as his body convulsed. He was in a frozen look of shock, unbelieving to what was happening, jaw ajar, twisting, and his body tried to turn over on its side but the shakes were too strong with bouts of unfinished breathing. Connor's eyes were wide open as his head vibrated. I could barely see the bloody cut on his temple. There was a thinness in his face unfilled by Time with pimply bumps on his forehead. So young.

The bloody statue finally answered Benjy's question, "We were about to lose them and and this other car came around with with the other two and they blocked us in. We tried to stick together but they got Connor against two of em' and and those...those motherfuckers knocked his head against the car, he stumbled and..."

Tony approached the pacing one the same way a rustler approaches a skittish horse. After a moment, he embraced him. There were whimpers. Connor kept convulsing and Corey kept whispering. I grabbed Connor's closed and contorted hand. It was like holding a violent stroke survivor at a nursing home. Evan stood above us and stared ready to slug back his Hennessy to make sure the Realness wouldn't shake him back. The way the wind moved through the trees, fuck man, it didn't move through us but it coiled us in a hot trap of helplessness where we could only watch the other slowly lose breath. All one big white noise.

"Connor," Corey whispered, "come back. You little shit, don't let this be that one. Come on." Benjy knelt down next to Corey and stared at the older brother and tried to say I'm so sorry. John began to cry. Then the convulsions stopped.

Connor closed his eyes, he was still breathing, shallow, quick, but still breathing. Not moving. But breathing, still breathing. Quickly. Like he was making up for lost memories, desperate to breathe life into the past. There were convulsions to his breathing, still breathing. John snapped his fingers in Connor's face, as Corey felt his brother's forehead. Turning his brother's head to the stars, he saw that Connor had sustained a black eye. No response, but still breathing. Corey looked at me, a kind of knowing of the choice he had to make but not wanting to go too far for fear that it would make matters worse. Call 911 or not, C'mon man tell me what to do. I saw Evan standing by the hot lights of the station wagon with the engine running and

stared oddly at Tony and the pacing one in a tender embrace, unaware of the context. The wind came back. Sound returned to the breezy coast and I saw his bottle of Hennessy.

Ripping off a part of the silent statue's tank top (he didn't react at all), I then grabbed Evan's bottle who noticed for a moment and drifted off. Tony ushered the pacing one to where we all surrounded Connor and Corey.

John looked at me real funny, "Um, what you doin'?"

I doused the sweaty fabric in the smooth cognac and took a gulp for myself shoving the bottle back into Evan's caved in chest cavity where it belonged. He had an idea of what was going on but he was too far gone, far gone enough to where he forgot where he was, looking past the streetlights that paled his pale skin in dumb curiosity. Then he was back and it was like he forgot the whole thing happened and his face was reliving it with skittish realizations like a goldfish-memoried ghetto gull.

I took the wet fabric and panned from Benjy to Brad to Corey to John to Tony and said, "Make sure he leans to his side."

They nodded. Corey and Benjy got in position. "No clue if this'll work. Whatever, just make sure he leans over." They nodded again. I placed the rag under Connor's nose and wrapped it around his mouth. One deep breath, then the beginnings of another but it stifled. The brother opened his eyes wide and tried to take a deep breath but cocked his head and gagged. We leaned him over and he chucked his grits onto the dusty black street. One bout, then another and after a few spits, he looked up foggy-eyed and confused.

"What happened?" Connor's face must have lost ten pounds. Color came back into his eyes. It was like he could taste the wind again and there was a taffy breeze, we could all feel it.

Brad shook at his long hair and let out a long sigh as if he hadn't been breathing the whole time. Tony took off his denim shirt and swung it around with inexplicable adrenaline.

"You got fucked up and were spazzing out on us. Ruck over here took you out from under," Corey trembled and pointed to me.

The little brother looked at me with the headlight hitting my face like a DeMille.

"The guy from the beach."

"Yeah," I mumbled, "and it looks like you're having yourself an early night."

"Jesus my head's like a, like a—"

Evan chimed and leaned over, "Was it dark?"

Brad pulled him back and lit up a joint he pulled from behind his ear and handed it to the Henny hound. I joined Evan and Brad leaving Corey to see to his brother. They were exhausted and happy that they had at least one more day.

...

On the car ride to Corey's uncle shack by the Wellfleet shore I listened to the piercing air through my cracked window that wouldn't shut all the way. I thought of Antoine and his habit of leaving his dorm window open while he slept. He wanted to feel the morning air every day. And I wondered if he kept that habit waking up to his girl, smelling her hair with a smile thinking that he could ask her to spend the morning if she wasn't busy, maybe start leaving her toothbrush. I hoped for him. But where was he? We kept Connor's feet elevated because it seemed like the right thing to do. Corey was doing some version of the concussion test.

I told you I'm fine—Would you just be quiet and answer my questions and tell me how many fingers I'm—I'm fine, all I want to do is go back and sleep, is my car alright—Dad's car you mean, and yeah the boys'll say you're spending the night with me, one too many and all that

shit, and you're not going to sleep at all—But—unless you want to get checked out at—Fine, fine, I see three—Good, now can you tell me why you didn't ask me for the *yay*—Corey, I don't know—You're too young for that shit—Look who's talking right now—I didn't start at your age, Connor, and you could've gotten seriously hurt...I know you know I'm right—Yeah, I know but—Had me worried, man—I'm sorry—It's okay.

We got to the shack. It had a little deck looking out to the darkness. Corey and Connor went inside, said they would join me in a bit. A seagull cawed out there, alone. I sat down on a lawn chair and imagined what lay beyond, what stirred so close to me but couldn't see. I wanted to smoke another Parliament but the pack was empty, it was okay for now. Nothing but the true zero visibility. But I still heard the lapping of the shore, the beautiful erosion. The only light came from the houses sprinkled across the beach and they floated through the air like Chinese candle lanterns.

Looking out and listening, I tried to imagine what the rest of us, those I remembered most, were doing after our paths were no longer laid out for us, what Gavin did in his shoreline wanderings looking for his missing friends, with Antoine and if he finally settled into a clean apartment with a nice girl, my imagining of Ponz's imaginings in his mama's basement of when his next break would come after just one more drink, and Joel with his empty stares out to the Long Island skyline of purple unnatural sunsets, thinking on what we were going to do tomorrow and slowly forget the days where we had less to do and less to worry about.